

Speech General Debate 146th IPU Assembly
12 maart 2023

Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

This year, in Belgium, we celebrate a very special birthday.

Not my own, because that one appears to be coming around every year. Personally, I find it happens a bit too often.

No, this birthday is something quite special. This year marks the twentieth anniversary of same-sex marriage in Belgium.

We were the second country in the world to allow it nationwide. And it was a victory for two big reasons.

First of all, it was a moral victory for all Belgians.

In a free society where all people are born equal, all people must have the right to build their private lives however they want. Your love for one another can and should never be a reason to become a second-class citizen with fewer rights than your neighbour.

It should go without saying that equality implies freedom for all, not for some.

But secondly, it was also a victory for humanity.

I do not say this lightly.

Only last month, Andorra became the thirty-fourth country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage.

One of the more compelling arguments posed by those in favour were the positive evolutions in countries where marriage equality was already a reality.

People are happier, safer and more prosperous in equal societies, than in societies where laws discriminate.

That is only logical.

A recognition of same-sex marriage, which is merely a recognition that love is love, no matter who the people in love are, is a step towards an open and tolerant society.

In open societies, people don't have to be afraid to walk in the streets. They don't have to hide who they are when they apply for a job. They can be happy in their relationships, around their families and with their friends.

Same-sex marriage does this. It opens our eyes and shows that the rainbow community exists, and that there is nothing abnormal about it.

That is exactly what has the largest long-term impact.

Visibility.

Twenty years ago, we gave an example of what is possible if we allow people in the rainbow community to be themselves. To be equals.

Today, thirty-three countries have followed that example and many more are talking about doing the same.

Because our society did not collapse. On the contrary. We became collectively happier.

Simply because we see, and understand, and accept. Because we have grown accustomed to the sight of two women kissing, as we have been to the sight of a man and a woman for centuries.

Have we reached a perfect society? Of course not.

Every now and again, our country is shocked by savage acts of violence against the rainbow community. Both verbally as physically, and two years ago we even had to mourn a man who was murdered because of his sexuality.

We also know that suicide rates in the rainbow community remain terribly high. Much higher than in the broader population. Because acceptance of a different sexuality remains difficult in certain communities.

And even more heart-breaking; it often happens that elderly people go back into the closet when they enter a retirement community. Because they are confronted with people for whom sexuality is still taboo.

So yes, we have to keep developing initiatives to stimulate acceptance and integration of people in the rainbow community.

But most of all. Most of all, we cannot cease our fight. In the grander scope of things, equal rights have only just arrived, and only in some parts of the world.

It's our duty, as representatives of the people, to further the cause of our people. To fight for their freedom, to defend them, and to show them we care. Governmental acceptance is the first step towards an accepting society.

So this is my call to action, to you.

Let's talk about the rainbow community. Let's treat them as equals. Let's lift all the restrictions that past generations have imposed upon them, and let's liberate love!

You couldn't give me any gift more beautiful than that, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of same-sex marriage in Belgium, than to say "yes" to love.

I thank you.