

**Speech of
the Minister of Transport, Public Works and Water Management of the
Netherlands, mrs. Tineke Netelenbos,**

Amsterdam 20 June 2000
World Bicycle Conference *Vélo Mondiale 2000*

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the World Bicycle Conference *Vélo Mondiale 2000*. Many of you have come a long way to be here and talk about bicycle policy and the bicycle's potential as a means of transportation. You represent the interests of cyclists, and you want to see people make better use of bicycles. You believe bicycles are an important way of getting around. And I agree.

I am proud that you have chosen the Netherlands as your venue. Our country is a prime example of a modern society which has struck a harmonious balance between walking, riding bicycles, driving and public transportation. Of course, there are still plenty of ways we can improve our transportation system. But in comparison with other countries, the Netherlands has fairly accessible cities, a relatively low number of traffic fatalities and reasonably clean, peaceful neighbourhoods. We should not underestimate the contribution that our 16 to 17 million bicycles have made to this achievement.

The Dutch took to their bicycles in the first half of the twentieth century, when many people had no other option. But what often impresses foreign visitors is that we *stayed* on those bicycles, even when automobiles and public transportation became real alternatives for many people.

We generally take it for granted. To the Dutch, bicycles seem like a perfectly ordinary part of everyday life. The vast majority of Dutch people have a bicycle and use it. More than one in four trips takes place on a bicycle. In most cities, that figure is even more impressive, and in some we reach for our bicycles for as many as half of our journeys. And that doesn't even include bicycle trips to and from railroad stations or bus and tram stops. For short distances of less than seven-and-a-half kilometers, the Dutch use bicycles more often than cars and public transportation put together.

If you look around our streets, you will see for yourselves how important bicycles are to us. Everybody rides bicycles, even here in Amsterdam. From the student on his worn-out wreck to the mayor on his well-made, typically Dutch bicycle.

The Dutch love to ride bicycles. And we'd like to keep it that way. In fact, we're trying to encourage people to use bicycles even more. With cars gradually taking over the streets, we hope that people who are traveling short distances will use their bicycles whenever possible. And not just for their health, though riding a bicycle regularly is a great way to keep in shape. My main goal is to make sure people can reach their destinations easily, whatever they may be. Bicycles are already helping us achieve that goal, and they will remain crucial to our efforts.

In order to encourage bicycle use, cities and towns, provinces, ministries, businesses and public transportation companies need to incorporate bicycle policy thoroughly into their plans and activities. Since 1990, my ministry has helped steer them in the right direction by

pursuing an energetic bicycle policy of its own. With the Bicycle Master Plan, which I am sure you have heard of already, we gave them the instruments, arguments and knowledge they need. And we have subsidized the bicycle infrastructure, providing funding to expand and renovate new bicycle paths, bridges, tunnels and parking areas.

The point of this whole effort was to make riding bicycles even more attractive and safe. And it worked. In the past decade, the bicycle has managed to hang on to its special place in our society. In the major cities, the situation has even improved somewhat. It has also become safer to ride a bicycle. And local governments are giving bicycle policy higher priority than ever before.

The Bicycle Master Plan is now a thing of the past and bicycle policy is subsidized from other sources. But we will keep encouraging the Dutch to get on their bicycles! These days we're hard at work on our National Transport Plan, which sets out our policy for the next few years. One new feature of this plan is that along with central government, local and provincial governments have a say in its contents.

Multiple levels of government making policy together – this is a perfect example of decentralization, a process that has already been under way for some time. Responsibilities, tasks and budgets are shifting from central government to provinces, cities and towns. This means the authorities most directly involved with bicycle issues will have more influence in the future. And that's a good thing, because local and provincial governments also benefit the most from easily accessible cities and towns that are pleasant places to live. In the past few decades it has become clear that they are also better tuned in to cyclists' real needs than central government. Not only that, but local and provincial governments are better able to strike a balance between the interests of different kinds of road users in specific situations. The National Transport Plan will include firm agreements about how those specific plans will be carried out. The end product will be better results and more efficient use of the resources available. And that's in everybody's interest.

Of course, this doesn't mean central government no longer cares about cyclists. There's still a lot happening on the national level. I'll give you a few examples.

- First, let's talk about **bicycle theft**, a thorn in the side of many cyclists and one of the main reasons you see so many people riding around on old, cheap, badly maintained "tenth-hand" bicycles in our major cities. Not something you would expect in a rich country like the Netherlands. Until recently, however, the problem of bicycle theft didn't make it onto the political agenda.

Now, finally, it has. The government recently approved an Integrated Public Safety and Security Program. This program identifies bicycle theft as a major social problem. Several ministries, including my own, will be involved in fighting it, in cooperation with the bicycle industry and interest groups.

- Let's discuss a second example in more detail.
I'm thinking about our traffic safety policy.
Our slogan is "**sustainable safety**".
Cyclists are an important part of this policy.

To move closer to a safe, sustainable transportation system, we are concentrating motor traffic as much as possible on a limited number of traffic arteries. Cyclists will also be able to follow these routes, but on separate paths. The traffic on the arteries, including bicycles, will have priority over the traffic crossing them. All other roads will be treated as residential areas. At potential trouble spots in these areas, we need to keep speeds down and make sure that drivers stay alert.

This policy is now being put into practice all over the country. In a few years, most of the roads within built-up areas will have speed limits of thirty kilometers (or 20 miles) an hour. Out of town, residential areas will have speed limits of sixty kilometers (or 40 miles) an hour. Cities, towns and provinces are enthusiastic about these measures.

In short, we will soon have more and more traffic arteries and residential areas where function, design and the conduct of road users are in tune with one another. This development has opened the way for another, one which pleased the Cyclists' Association in its anniversary year: from the first of May 2001 onwards, cyclists will have the same right of way as motor vehicles at all intersections. This will bring an end to a half-century in which the Netherlands' system deviated from the European norm. And it will underscore the equality of the cyclist on the road.

- My next example shows that central government is also doing its part to ensure **adequate parking for bicycles**. My ministry has earmarked four hundred and sixty million guilders to be spent on improving and expanding parking areas for bicycles in and around railroad stations. My hope is that this will make it even more attractive to take longer trips by a combination of bicycle and train, rather than driving.
- Sometimes, it's necessary **to close local or regional roads temporarily** while constructing expressways or waterways, or laying railroad tracks. This usually means long detours for cyclists. Sometimes so long that travelers decide to leave their bicycles at home. I want to put a stop to this situation. A method has been developed for assessing the effects of major infrastructural projects on cyclists, pedestrians and recreational traffic. This method is now a required part of route studies for expressways, so that cyclists will never have to spend more time than necessary *en route*.
- My last example has to do with my proposal in the draft version of the National Transport Plan to set up a **Bicycle Council**. Now that more and more responsibilities, tasks and powers have shifted from central government to provincial and local authorities, proper coordination is crucial for activities like acquiring knowledge, distributing it and keeping it up to date. Making reliable data available for local, regional and national use is also important for processes like benchmarking, monitoring and policymaking. A Bicycle Council to coordinate these activities, with policymakers and people from the cycling world, can count on my full support.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The cyclist has a very important and highly esteemed position in traffic. But we must not lose sight of the fact that it is also a very vulnerable position.

I hope I've made it clear that the Dutch government encourages bicycle use as much as it can, and in all sorts of ways. The results are: safer traffic, a better quality of life and easily accessible cities. These issues continue to demand attention from all of us.

Once again, I urge you to take a good look around outside the conference halls this week. In and around Amsterdam, you'll see how important bicycles are to daily life in the Netherlands. And hopefully you'll discover ways of encouraging bicycle use back home. I wish you an enjoyable and informative conference.
Thank you