

Speech on behalf of the Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment Jan Pronk

delivered by Nico van Ravesteyn, Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment of The Netherlands, Amsterdam, 21 June, 2000.

Ladies and gentlemen,

[Introduction]

I am glad to see so many people from all over the world have gathered here in Amsterdam to talk about - at first sight - such a simple subject as bicycles. In my opinion, however, the bike has been one of the most important inventions of the last millennium. In this city I can hardly imagine a street corner without a bike. Or an intersection without special traffic lights for bikes. As minister Mrs. Netelenbos mentioned yesterday: at distances shorter than 10 kilometres people in Holland use their bikes half of the time. With this, among first world countries, Holland ranks on top of the list. Of which I am proud.

But like other Europeans, apart from bicycles Dutchmen love their cars, too. And I am afraid we don't use them less than people in other countries. Which - as everywhere else - causes environmental and spatial problems. Problems such as congestion, air pollution, high emissions of carbon dioxide and streets and public places packed with cars.

I recognise that more bicycle rides alone are not sufficient to tackle these environmental and spatial problems effectively. But I do think a higher use of bikes can substantially contribute to solutions. Problems for which we all - as participants in the current world society and economy - are responsible. And problems, therefore, which can only be solved if every individual, municipality, province, national government, social organisation or company is aware of these problems. If we all are willing to contribute to solutions.

As far as bikes are concerned, I would like to focus on two questions: which factors and policy instruments can be distinguished to encourage the use of the bike as a means of personal transport? And, secondly: who is going to do what?

[Policy instruments to encourage the use of bikes]

Before elaborating on the policy instruments, I wish to stress that local and regional measures to encourage bike use have to be taken at the local and provincial level. Since we are talking about short distance traffic, there is no such thing as a national bicycle road network. Cycle paths and local safety measures are not the subject of national spatial planning or transport policy.

This does not mean the government has no role in the encouragement of bicycle use. National policy frameworks have to take account of factors that influence the use of bikes. Three factors in particular are important in this respect: good cycle infrastructure, population densities, a mixture of functions and avoidance of obstructive infrastructure. I will now elaborate on these factors.

[Population densities]

Without areas with high population densities, extensive bike use is impossible. Social services, shops, schools and so on need a minimum number of clients to make a profit or to be efficient. If these clients are living close together, distances from client to function will be reduced. And bike use will be more attractive. For this reason bikes are more often used in Amsterdam than in the countryside. And therefore in the Netherlands we concentrate new houses and functions as much as possible. We build them close to existing housing areas. Of course not only to make bike use more attractive, but in general to save open areas and to reduce mobility.

[Mixture of functions]

For the same reason a mixture of functions is highly desirable. If you find your supermarket, your children's school, your library and your sports centre within a range of 5 kilometres, you are willing to ride your bike more often than if you have to travel 10 or more kilometres. Therefore, at a government level we encourage municipalities to pay attention to the location of social and economic services. We contribute to initiatives such as 'Verkeers Prestatie op Lokatie', a programme developed by Novem, which helps us to carefully plan locations of houses and social and economic functions in new living areas. And the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and my own ministry are co-operating in a project called 'Short distance rides'. This project discourages car use over short distances and it encourages walking and cycling. Hence, we prevent excessive carbon dioxide emissions by cold starts of cars. And bicycle rides become more attractive.

Another policy instrument is influencing behaviour. It turned out that people are more willing to bring their children to school by bike if there is less traffic. But this only works if everybody is prepared not to use their cars. Thus, through communication and publicity we try to change people's behaviour.

[Avoiding obstructive infrastructure]

Another important factor, which my colleague Mrs. Netelenbos also identified yesterday, is the blockage of secondary roads as a result of the construction of motorways, railways and canals. Cyclists are hindered by such infrastructure, have to ride many more kilometres than before and consequently often choose other means of transport. In planning infrastructure we try to avoid such blockages as much as possible.

[Factors important at the local level]

Apart from these factors at the national level, I wish to identify some factors important at the local and provincial levels. First of all safety. Unless you want to risk your life, you don't climb onto your bike in Brussels or London. Apart from the fact that local car drivers are not used to seeing bikes crossing their roads and turn left or right without looking over their shoulders, cycle roads simply do not exist in these towns. The lesson is: people only ride their bikes if they have a chance to survive the traffic jungle. And for that they need cycle roads, not only within cities but also between cities and their surroundings.

Secondly: not too many cars. Too many cars cause air pollution. Would you ride your bike with a nose cap? The lesson is: discourage the use of cars in cities, encourage the use of public transport, especially underground trains, trams and trolley buses.

Thirdly: places to properly park your bicycles.

[Who has to do what?]

I already mentioned that most of these spatial and infrastructural measures have to be taken at a local and provincial level. But this does not mean other organisations can rest on their laurels. I elaborated the role of the national government. And I underlined that mobility is a concern and responsibility of all of us. Of individuals and of government institutions as well as of private companies. The latter can contribute too. Through transport management policies for instance. Policies that encourage employees to refrain from using their cars to travel to work. Which means subsidising train tickets and bikes if used to travel to work. We have positive experiences with such a policy at our own ministry, since many employees are coming to work by bike, by public transport or even on foot.

[Conclusion]

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is a lot to do in encouraging the use of bikes and there is a lot to win. Cycling is good for both our personal health and the health of our cities. We all play our own role from our own position. Governments, social organisations and companies can offer good facilities. I appeal on them to grab these opportunities. And I wish you all good luck.

Thank you for your attention.