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AMBASSADE DE FRANCE AUX PAYS-BAS

Remise des insignes de Chevalier dans l'Ordre national du mérite à Florence Jeantet

(18 septembre 2018, Résidence de France à La Haye)

Discours prononcé par Philippe Lalliot, Ambassadeur de France aux Pays-Bas

Mesdames et Messieurs,
Chers amis, Chère Florence,

Je dois vous avouer d'emblée que ce discours a pour moi une saveur toute particulière et que je vais y prendre un plaisir tout aussi singulier. Je suis en effet très heureux de rendre hommage ce soir à l'une des personnalités que je juge, et vous en serez certainement toutes et tous d'accord avec moi, parmi les plus exemplaires de la communauté d'affaires française, et de la communauté française tout court, des Pays-Bas.

But to start, I would like to remind you, and especially our Dutch friends with us tonight, that the Ordre National du Mérite is certainly one of our most prestigious National Order, which rewards only "the distinguished civil or military merits to the French Nation", according to its creation executive order issued by General de Gaulle in 1963.

Dear Florence,

The cross that we will bestow upon you tonight rewards indeed an exemplary career and great leadership and, through this career, Excellence, Open mindedness and Commitment, three qualities you've shown from the very beginning, irrespective your modesty.

I won't start back from your early childhood, but you've approached Excellence, very early on, by graduating from INSIM, now Polytech' Montpellier, in 1991 as an agrofood engineer. Excellence fits your whole professional path during which you have shown eminent qualities in the fields of scientific research, business development and management as well.

For at least the last 25 years, you have embraced many experiences and many challenges. First and repeatedly, on an international scale. As soon as 1991, as a young graduate, you so joined an important multinational firm, a Dutch company of course: Unilever.

I must here underline the role played by Jean Martin, who hired you and was a great mentor to you. He was rewarded in this very same Residence by another French Ambassador in this country, Jean-François Blarel. Jean Martin was one of your predecessors as the chair of the Comité Pays-Bas of the French Foreign Trade Advisors, a group of business women and men who dedicate some of their precious time to help French government and companies abroad. By the way, the committee has recently welcomed Jean Martin's son in law as a new comer from London and I salute him here today. There is no repetition in History but sometimes, surprising bouncings.
Not long after being hired by Unilever, you moved to the Russian Federation in 1996. While others learn only German or Spanish at school, you were indeed studying Russian. At this time, five years after the collapse of the USSR, you may remember that Russia was undergoing a deep and painful transition. You have been a first-hand witness of the 1997 financial crisis there, which was a real trauma for the Russian people.

This crisis also had a direct impact on your career for it led Unilever to reduce its footprint in Russia and to call you back to the Netherlands. Your interest for international affairs made you come back later again to the Netherlands, for Danone this time, and you have lived here since 2008, for our greatest pleasure.

Dear Florence,

You have shown your openness by your many skills, the many experiences you have lived and the many opportunities you have taken throughout the years.

I must say your first position at Unilever was less exotic and very much rooted in the French provinces, in Poitiers. There, you were in charge of a new product, a revolutionary one, according to the group management, Microchef: the first soup ever that could be heated using a microwave oven. Thanks to your efforts, it was a technical success, but unfortunately a commercial failure.

But the most important thing to you was that it was a real innovation and despite this first setback, you have been convinced ever since that only innovation leads to long-lasting success. You've kept this conviction throughout the positions you hold within the company, as various as development, sales or R&D.

In 2004, you decided to accept another posting and you joined one of France's corporate flagships, the Danone Group. Doing so, you brought with you your whole set of skills, helping to keep the company at the forefront of innovation and development.

It is no coincidence if, when Danone acquired Numico in 2007 and decided to make the Netherlands the headquarters of its nutrition division, you were chosen to lead the R&D Department, a position that you helped develop before being appointed Vice President Growth Through Innovation in January 2017. Innovation, once again, is one of the key threads of your career.

Dear Florence,

Everyone who knows you and who is lucky enough to work with you underlines your tireless commitment. You need such a commitment to do the 2 or 3 round-the-world tours in total you perform every year to visit the Danone centers from Asia to America. You need such a commitment as well to oversee the key activities under your supervision or to monitor crises which occur always at the worst moment, in the middle of the summer or between Christmas and New Year Eve – and I'm talking by experience. Very often you must have faced such situations to keep at the highest level the needed, if not vital quality of research and production of Danone.

I must say this commitment is not limited to the professional sphere, far from it. Despite your overwhelming responsibilities, you have always been there for your loved ones: your daughter Salomé and your husband Jean-Claude, who I warmly greet, but also all of your friends and family. Despite or perhaps because of the distance, I am told you are still very much attached to Ariège, where you were born, which you left but where you like to come back and where you have kept many friends.

Chère Florence,

Vous êtes également, toujours sur un mode plus personnel, en tout cas très au-delà de ce que sont vos strictes obligations professionnelles, un pilier très respecté de la communauté française des Pays-Bas.

Chaque fois que j'ai eu besoin de vous, notamment pour les nombreuses délégations parlementaires qui viennent prendre le pouls de la relation bilatérale et qui demandent à voir les entreprises françaises qui prospèrent aux Pays-Bas, je vous ai trouvée, disponible, prête à donner de votre temps, à aider l'ambassade.

Vous avez ainsi à cœur de nous faire profiter et, plus largement, de faire profiter les entrepreneurs français de votre expérience pour développer les relations d'affaires entre la France et les Pays-Bas.

Depuis 8 ans, vous êtes une des plus assidues Conseillères du commerce extérieur français, malgré un agenda très chargé. Vous exercez même la présidence du comité Pays-Bas depuis janvier 2017. À ce titre, vous participez activement au dispositif d'appui à l'internationalisation des entreprises, travaillant étroitement avec le service économique, Business France et la Chambre de commerce. Nous vous en sommes très reconnaissants.

Votre portrait serait très incomplet, si je ne mentionnais pas ce qui est peut-être le plus important de vos engagements : celui pour les causes qui vous sont chères, à commencer par le rôle social de l'entreprise. Cet engagement, primordial, se traduit notamment, au quotidien, par les objectifs exigeants que vous vous fixez, avec vos équipes, d'amélioration de la santé par l'amélioration de l'alimentation, et particulièrement celle des enfants.

Cet engagement se traduit également par votre attachement à la promotion de la diversité, et en particulier à la place des femmes dans l'entreprise. C'est pourquoi vous êtes très impliquée dans l'initiative « He for She ».

C'est donc ce soir à une femme passionnée par l'entreprise, par l'innovation, par la transmission, par le partage, par la solidarité, par la promotion de tous les talents, que nous rendons hommage. Permettez-moi à nouveau, chère Florence, de vous féliciter pour votre parcours exemplaire et votre dévouement à la promotion des intérêts français aux Pays-Bas.

Florence Jeantet, au nom du Président de la République, nous vous faisons Chevalier de l'Ordre national du Mérite./.