

“Politics is Rugby” says new LI President Van Baalen

On 31 October, Hans van Baalen MEP, VVD Member of the European Parliament and former member of the Dutch Parliament, was elected President of Liberal International in Cairo. Liberal International, the world federation of liberal and democratic political parties, is comprised of approximately 100 members and cooperating organizations around the world, including Dutch VVD and D66, Germany's FDP, the Liberal Democrats in Great Britain, and the Liberal Party of Canada and is related to regional networks in Europe (ELDR), Asia (CALD), Africa (ALN), the Arab world (NAL), and Latin America (RELIAL). Van Baalen is the third Dutchman to lead Liberal International since its founding in 1947. Others have included Edzo Toxopeus and Frits Bolkestein. His direct predecessors include: and Lord John Alderdice (United Kingdom), Annemie Neyts (Belgium), Frits Bolkestein (The Netherlands), Lord David Steel (United Kingdom), Otto Graf Lambsdorf (Germany), and Adolfo Suarez (Spain).

His first address as President of Liberal International was delivered to approximately 300 liberal delegates from all over the world. He called for liberals everywhere to abandon nuanced positions and to take a firm stance in defending wherever it is threatened. According to Mr. Van Baalen, the combination of civil rights and the free market constitute the core values of liberalism. “The free market is the solution to the current global financial crisis, not its cause”. Van Baalen stated to the assembled delegates, that the Arab world is preoccupied with Israel and that Arab states use this issue to foster an underlying belief that internal problems are caused by the nation state of Israel. “Set your people free”, was his message to Egypt’s President Mubarak and his fellow Arab leaders. “Give them an independent judiciary, parliamentary democracy, civil rights, freedom of the press. Encourage private initiatives and the free market. Treat women, homosexuals, political opponents and religious minorities as your equals. Do not just recognize Israel formally, but start regarding it as an integral part of the Middle East. Truly commit yourself to the faith of the Palestinian people, encourage peace between Palestinians and Israelis and stand against terrorist acts directly aimed at Israel.” According to Van Baalen, the Arab world has much to offer to the global community when it decides to embrace freedom unconditionally, and to stop characterizing themselves as victims. Liberal delegates of the Egyptian Democratic Front Party, El Ghad Party and Wafd Party supported Van Baalen’s words with applause. Van Baalen also shortly met with members of the Egyptian government, including State Minister Mofid Shehab, who spoke to the Liberal International Congress on behalf of President Mubarak.

Van Baalen showed his support for a strong alliance between liberals and democrats in the US, Europe and the rest of the world. “In Latin America the populist Chavist movement is gaining ground. In Asia, the power of authoritarian China is increasing and democratic Taiwan is under siege. Elections in Russia are being manipulated. Africa is teetering between progress and Chinese economic and political colonialism, while Europe and the US are withdrawing to protectionism and lethargy instead of defending free trade and the free market with united powers. Liberals have to be on the offensive in the rapidly expanding developed world. A lot will depend on the German FDP, who will be in the German Government, and the American Democrats, who have to live up to the promises of President Obama.”

“That nature of politics is not analogous to a friendly game of tennis – rather it is like a rugby match.” says Van Baalen. “Anyone who participates in such a game can expect to come away worse for wear. Liberals must not strive for acceptance by socialists, greens or conservatives, but must emerge as those best equipped to defend civil rights and the free market. Power politics are needed instead of an academic policy of political correctness.” Van Baalen’s first visit will be to Central America, where he will speak to deposed president Zelaya of Honduras and his successor interim President Micheletti. With this, Van Baalen shows that he will not back down from controversy and confrontation.