

Speech by Prime Minister J.-P. Balkenende on the occasion of the unveiling of the
statue of Abraham Kuyper in the town of Maassluis on 5 November 2008

It is a special privilege for me to speak today in this beautiful church on the very spot where Abraham Kuyper was baptized by his own father 171 years ago. It was the beginning of a rich and productive life of a great statesman. A man who placed his mark on the fabric of church and society in the Netherlands. But also a man who has had a great influence on my personal development.

In case any of you should still doubt this: I am a Kuyperian in heart and soul. That is due to my upbringing, my education and the path of my career. But I am especially a Kuyperian from conviction.

I was raised in the Reformed tradition and studied at the Free University. I remember well that I read a paper on Kuyper to my fellow fraternity members. Later I wrote my doctoral dissertation in which Kuyper's system of thought was clearly and prominently present. I became a professor at the Free University in the area of Christian social thought, and later I worked in the Kuyper House, the former party headquarters of the Christian Democratic Party. A personal high-point in my life came in Princeton in 2004 when I was privileged to be the recipient of the annual Kuyper Prize. In short, Kuyper runs through my life like a red thread.

There at Princeton, as well as on many other occasions, I made no secret of the fact that Kuyper has been a source of inspiration for me personally. I admire his faith-inspired system of thought and appreciate his view on state and society. Although Kuyper's ideas are not one by one applicable today in the Netherlands, the essence of Kuyper's system of thought is still relevant for contemporary society.

The most important point Kuyper has taught us is that society cannot function well without a moral compass and a proper distribution of responsibilities. This is clearly demonstrated, as it were, in Kuyper's own life. Everything he accomplished—and it was a great deal—rested on four pillars: the anchor of faith, public engagement, the conviction that nobody lives only for himself, and the will to take on responsibility in society. Kuyper had great faith in the power of social institutions and “the resilience of the middle classes,” as he called it. Government had to create the conditions for that. Government also had to maintain a well-functioning judicial system, based on common values. In that way Kuyper gave government a limited but important role. That is how we should understand the doctrine of sphere-sovereignty. It is not a one-sided plea for separation or isolation, but a means to make sure that each group is empowered to make its contribution to society for the benefit of the entire community.

Translated for our times, this doctrine can guide us as we formulate ideas about “Unity in Diversity.” This is a basic theme for me personally. A multiform society can only exist by the grace of four elements: responsible citizens, a strong civil society, basic common values, and the rule of law. That is a foundation for a strong society. Without that foundation, tolerance quickly turns into disengagement or, even worse, alienation and estrangement. These topical views are very Kuyperian.

Today, Ladies and Gentlemen, we are adding a new chapter to the *Nachleben* of a great statesman. Two chapters in fact. A bronze statue and a pictorial biography. As far as I am concerned, both are

historically more than justified. There are few people who have accomplished as much as Kuyper. His energy and iron discipline are legendary. He did many things, and he did them simultaneously. So many, in fact, that it is hard to imagine, humanly speaking.

- He was a pastor in Beesd, Utrecht, and Amsterdam.
- Before he was fifty years old he established the daily newspaper *De Standaard*, the Anti-revolutionary Party, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, and the Free University.
- He was professor and university trustee, party leader, Member of Parliament and prime minister, editor-in-chief and journalist.
- He wrote an incredible number of articles, brochures and books. His theological works alone total more than 10,000 pages.

This imposing list of accomplishments can be explained in part by Kuyper's strong convictions and his strong desire to carry these out. One of the most delightful stories told about him is that as a nine-year-old lad in Middelburg (where his father was a minister) he tried to persuade a group of sailors to stop cursing by having the Bible text in one hand and a bunch of his father's cigars in the other. So already in his early life he was able to connect with people. In my view we see here something of the later politician Kuyper: motivated by ideals, but also pragmatic and geared to results.

Another factor in Kuyper's success is his unyielding character. His readiness to do battle and his sharp pen are almost as legendary as his zest for work. That is why Kuyper evoked emotions and also resistance. His first biographer, Piet Kasteel, expressed it best when he wrote, "Kuyper's personality cut like a plow through hearts and brains."

Kuyper has also been described as a man of conviction with three levels of courage. Courage to get to the bottom of an issue, courage to start, and courage to persevere. And so it was. The word "afraid" was foreign to him. Kuyper himself has described this well. When there was criticism about the serving of alcohol at the opening reception of the Free University, Kuyper wrote: "You do not raise a generation of strong Calvinists with a chocolate kettle and a water and milk pitcher." Calvinists like himself, in other words, who stood up for their convictions and were not afraid of fierce opposition.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my conclusion is that Kuyper personally demonstrated that it is precisely people with strong convictions who can accomplish outstanding results. Unquestionably these accomplishments have earned Kuyper a statute. The statue I am about to unveil has materialized in the best Kuyperian tradition: not without controversy and polemics, but without a penny of government subsidy. Kuyper would have approved!

Your new book, Professor De Bruijn, I regard as a bonus. Today we not only get a statue of Kuyper but also a very accessible pictorial biography. That is certainly a worthwhile addition to everything that has already been published about him. Many thanks for that. I look forward to leafing through and reading this fine book.

My compliments to you, Mr. Hogeweg, to the members of your committee, and to all the others who worked so hard to get a statue of Kuyper. You can be proud of your success. The statue is here. I thank you for giving me the honour of unveiling it. And I thank all of you present here for your attention.

(Translation by Rimmer De Vries)