

## **Interview with Ambassador Bruno van der Pluijm**

*In May, Bruno van der Pluijm took up his post as ambassador at the Embassy of Belgium in the UK, following diplomatic duties in Belgium. He has been active in the Belgian diplomatic service since 1991.*

### **Some 3 months ago you arrived in London in the midst of this Covid-19 pandemic. What are your first impressions?**

It is very exciting to arrive in this mega-city and represent Belgium in the United Kingdom over the coming years. Unfortunately, due to the current pandemic, it's been difficult to gather a clear impression of the city where I will be living for the next years. I'm sure in normal times London is a buzzing, exiting and stimulating place and even under the current circumstances it has a lot to offer. But unfortunately, I haven't been able to explore this metropole properly nor has it been possible to reach out to other colleagues and partners living here. Like so many others, I've been relying on Zoom, Webex, Teams and other virtual means to "meet" people. That is of course not the ideal way to feel the pulse of the city. Hopefully, we'll be able to turn this page soon and switch to a "new normal". I'll happily share my "second" impressions at that point in time.

### **What do you hope to achieve during your posting in London?**

I very much intend to continue along the lines of my predecessors. Whether "in" or "out" of the EU, the UK remains a very significant partner for Belgium and an important player on the international scene. Representing Belgium in that context means contributing to the realisation of our bilateral agenda in its various dimensions and making sure that we see eye to eye on the challenges that will confront both of us over the next few years. "Brexit", in whatever shape or form, will of course create a moment of disruption that we will have to manage carefully. By the end of the year, we should have a new UK-EU framework which in many ways will also create the context for our future bilateral relations. We all hope that framework will be an ambitious one. But regardless of the outcome of these negotiations, the laws of geography will still be the same on 30 December and 2 January 2021 and these laws obviously imply that Belgium and the UK are uniquely well positioned at both ends of the Channel to cooperate and benefit mutually from that cooperation. Making that happen will clearly require team work. Together with the representatives of the Brussels, Wallonia and Flanders regions here in London we will undoubtedly have exiting times ahead of us. Personally, I feel very privileged to be part of this undertaking.

### **How do you view the role of an ambassador?**

Certainly not as a consumer of endless receptions, dinners, champagne and Ferrero Rocher chocolates, even if networking is an essential part of the job and receptions and dinners are excellent opportunities for precisely that. Whereas in the past the focus was almost exclusively on an ambassador's role as representative in his country of accreditation with all the responsibilities that come with that, today we also, and rightfully so, focus on the responsibility as a manager in charge of human resources, a budget and objectives set by headquarters that need to be achieved. My role will cover both these areas, and just for the record, I don't mind a good (Belgian) chocolate every now and then either of course.

### **Personally, what have been the most interesting experiences during your diplomatic career so far?**

There have been interesting experiences in every single country where I have served. That's what makes this job so rich and fulfilling. Even if you end up working in a country that seemed to lack initial appeal, there are always positive surprises. Having said that, I personally look back fondly on my 5-year multilateral posting at the UN in New York. Being able to play a part, albeit a modest one, in an enormous parliament of so many peoples was a unique experience. But then again, all my other postings have been very rewarding in various ways. I have had the opportunity to meet fascinating people, and occasionally, have had the privilege to witness a moment of history in the making.

### **The life of a diplomat is marked by regular transfers to other countries. How does your family feel about these frequent changes?**

My children have always been very positive about this and seen these changes as exciting moments, especially when they were little. As they grew up, they also discovered the downside of course, having to say goodbye to friends every time we moved on. Until this day, they have kept a network of friends on various continents. Social media have made it a lot easier to keep these contacts alive.

For the partner who accompanies the diplomat, the verdict is probably more nuanced as each move creates an amount of stress since lots has to be organised. This implies a lot of teamwork and if that works well the transfer works well. I can only say that I've been very lucky so far in this respect.

### **Do you have a message for the Belgians residing in the UK?**

In normal times, I would have organised the traditional reception on Belgium's National Day and passed on that message to you in person. I regret that, for obvious reasons, that hasn't been possible.

Given the times we live in, I would say first of all "take care and stay safe". More fundamentally, the Embassy is here to serve, advise and assist you. Don't hesitate to call on us if you have a problem or wish to share information with us. I hope we can continue the existing positive relationship. The Embassy and I personally are here for you!