

# Government be our first customer

On Friday the thirteenth, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) announced that growth had levelled off in the third quarter to almost zero. Disappointing natural gas revenues and a weak export position were all over the newspapers. And, actually, that's no great surprise.

Natural gas revenues have been falling since 2009, and in fact it's crazy that we have made our welfare state so dependent on the 'gas'. Today we could have been sitting pretty on a fund of € 360 billion, but we've used the income from 2700 billion cubic metres of gas to finance projects such as the Eastern Scheldt storm surge barrier and the HSL high-speed train line – and we're still spending it in the form of grants and benefits. And all the while the gas tap is closing ever more tightly.

So, we need a new revenue model for the Netherlands. Based on our strengths: providing creative, integrated solutions to major urban developments throughout the world. After all, we have our own country as a great example of a green and healthy 'city' with all kinds of smart, effective and integrated solutions.

Last week I was in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Both of them are metropolises, of which Africa has over fifty. And there is a great need for healthy food for the growing middle class. For smart logistics, for efficient use of water and for sustainable energy solutions. All as local as possible. All as decentralised as possible.

We therefore need to generate new revenues from the 'green, circular and low-carbon' developments in the big cities, as a boost for our exporters and international companies. So what are we waiting for?

Well, I'll tell you: the only innovation that the Netherlands needs right now is administrative innovation. The Netherlands is ageing, older workers are relatively expensive on account of all sorts of provisions, the labour market is far from flexible and attracting talent from abroad is still a bit of a drama because of the current regulations and high costs. And we desperately need young talent. And we need the room to innovate.

To put the Netherlands on the map as an innovative, green, circular hotspot, we need a 'launching customer', and the government could help us out enormously: the first paying customer is the basis for subsequent orders and funding opportunities – and thus for further growth!

But, instead of that, the government is focusing keenly on public procurement rules, and there is a prevailing fear of state aid. As a result, projects for making the construction industry more sustainable are being outsourced to foreign companies, even though we have that knowledge right here in the Netherlands. Aukje Kuypers of Kuijpers Installaties told me that current developments in public tendering procedures are leading to the destruction of knowledge and skills, a wasting of (public) money, an unnecessary increase in the risks for bidders and the loss of talent and creativity. They make absolutely no contribution to a world that should be 'future proof', 'circular' and 'socially responsible'. In fact, according to Aukje, the effect of these rules is to promote short-term thinking and to impoverish our economy.

So what should we do? We can turn the Netherlands into a breeding ground for international, up-and-coming creative talent, a test bed for sustainable initiatives! We're going to be entrepreneurial! And being entrepreneurial is not something you can do on your own – it's something you do together, across sectoral and national borders. In this way, we can give our country a vision of the future and something to be proud of again.

And what about the government? It can help us by playing the role of launching customer, with officials with guts and politicians with vision. And we don't have to wait too long, because we can start right now!

*Meiny Prins*