

**Speech by Henk Pröpper, Chair of the Board of the Prince Claus Fund, on the occasion of the 2017 Prince Claus Awards at the Royal Palace in Amsterdam on 6 December 2017**

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, dear Laureates and friends of the Prince Claus Fund

As every year, it is my pleasure to welcome you all here, once again, in the Royal Palace for this festive moment. This is the fifth time now that I am standing here to express a word of welcome to you, and when I think of everything that has happened in these five years, it almost makes me dizzy.

It's not only the geopolitical situation that has changed dramatically, it's also the way we perceive it. It is under the bombardment of information that we try to uphold and conceive a clear idea of what's happening around us, but sometimes, I think, we should wonder whether we are really able to do that. Not long ago people were discussing the possibility of producing, as a journalist for instance, an objective perspective on news, and at least many journalists were aiming at that, now almost every piece of information is seen as untrustworthy, received as partisan, belonging to the one or the other party.

In the history of writing and literature a wide range of authors stated that reality is in many ways more dangerous, more inconceivable, than any piece of fiction, than the work of our imagination. I would say: that was in the good old days when people believed that there was a clear frontier between fiction and reality, fiction in the end being far more secure than the dangerous world outside. Now fiction and reality are totally intertwined, they are part of the same set of multiple stories that are not really willing to inform us, not willing to give us the opportunity to find our own way of finding a truth that goes beyond what we know, of finding our path to the other, who is in the end not so different from us.

It's in that turmoil that also the PCF is trying to find its way, strongly believing, as ever, in the freedom of speech and the need to protect it. When the years go by, in a world that is so swiftly changing, we sometimes tend to forget the original inspiration of the PCF, that in the mind of Prince Claus, culture and development were strongly connected. It may be that this idea of development has changed a little. Let's be honest: most people tend to think that it is other people that should develop themselves, that should create communities, that should change the course of their society.

More and more we feel that there is everywhere a need to develop ourselves, to use the freedom of speech not only to denounce, to blow up differences, to install a minefield in between borderlines, but to find words to overcome differences creating a bigger picture in which we can feel common ground.

We live in a time of loose fingers: people produce opinions, not ideas, they would rather attack or defend than connect. People sustain partisan behaviour instead of a sense of community and the idea that we have a shared responsibility for the future of our society and our planet.

It's art and culture that are in my opinion still the best medicine against this overkill of one-sided, more and more polemical information. It is art that shows that things are not simple, one dimensional, but complex. Art shows that we can go beyond the idea of being partisan of this or that, it shows instead an overall idea of reality, and the diversity of forms, perspectives that people can have. In art we find ideas, messages, references that bring people beyond the simplicity of right and wrong from a certain, but blurred perspective.

That is why we celebrate today this year's Award winners, all of them working day after day on this greater perspective, sometimes under difficult circumstances, on frontlines that we can't imagine.

Being on a frontline is not a position to be envious about, although it seems thrilling or even fashionable. From far people tend to underestimate the dangers of the frontline. From far it's sometimes easy to demand engagement, to ask for explicit language, or what we call 'positive' action, but what do we do in our own environment: are we courageous when it matters? Do we stand up for people we need to defend even in a relatively safe situation? I often hear that the word courage is linked to the philosophy of the Prince Claus Fund. To be very clear about this, I don't think courage is the right word for our mission.

On the other hand it is true that the Fund stands for those that choose to create on the frontline, but for many of them it is not so much a matter of courage, more a matter of the need to respond creatively to things that are happening, with the idea of informing, connecting people. Maybe we can call this civil courage.

It's this, that we like to honour today, and it's my great pleasure to see all our laureates gathered here, and to be able to show to you all the inspirational force of their work.

I will end this short introduction with a special word of thanks to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and especially the former Minister Ploumen for her, for their faith in our work. I would also like to thank the Postcode Lottery for its support and all our sponsors, the Luxury Hotels of Amsterdam, the torchbearers and network partners for their engagement. Let me finish by thanking our staff for all the good work you do. Last year I said, we are living in interesting times. I don't think that will change quickly. It seems the need for our work is only growing.

I wish you a splendid afternoon.