

THE JOHN ADAMS INSTITUTE

AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE NETHERLANDS

Introduction of Robert Putnam by Casper Thomas

November 16, 2015

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very warm welcome to what is surely a very special event here at the John Adams Institute. Not only do we have eminent guests here tonight, the discussion will also go straight into the heart of national politics. My name is Casper Thomas. I am an editor at *De Groene Amsterdammer* and your host for this evening.

There are few academics who command such global attention as tonight's speaker. When Robert Putnam, speaks, the world listens carefully. And with good reason. As societies move forward, Mr Putnam draws our attention to what we may lose if we are not careful. In the early 2000's communities all over the world were engaged in public debate about the decline of social capital. This term, 'social capital', can be used casually, and that is thanks to him. Mr Putnam's groundbreaking work *Bowling Alone* drew our attention to the fact that although we are wealthier than ever before, the ties that bind society may loosen at the same time.

Now, Mr. Putnam confronts us with a shattered American dream. His latest book, and the focus of tonight's discussion, is titled *Our Kids*. It shows that the United States, for many, is anything but the land of opportunity. In fact, two America's have emerged, as Mr. Putnam shows. One of 'haves' and one of 'have-nots'. And this gap affects children in particular. Those who grow up in a world of haves possess more of everything: a stimulating home environment, the opportunity to partake in sports and societies, good schooling. Those who are unfortunate to be born on the wrong side of the tracks lack all this, severely limiting the possibilities to escape the conditions they were born in.

The future of our children is a timely topic. We live in an age of growing inequality in all spheres of life. This is worrying, but recently we seem to have entered a time of increasing *concern* about inequality as well. The great gap is an issue that is increasingly becoming a priority issue on political agendas around the world. The work of Mr. Putnam, amongst others, is the driver of this. He does so by shifting the focus. His story is not about an anonymous top one percent, but about the real lives of the percentiles at the bottom.

When we spoke earlier – I interviewed Mr. Putnam for *De Groene Amsterdammer* – he admitted something he was slightly reluctant to draw attention to, for fear of sounding immodest. So let me say it for him: there isn't a presidential candidate who does not want to pick his brain in the run-up to the US presidential elections. And as the presence today of Lodewijk Asscher, Minister for Social Affairs and Employment, attests, the interest in Mr. Putnam's analyses and solutions extends outside American politics.

I am especially happy to be able to welcome Mr. Putnam here tonight because the American dream guides not only the United States. The conviction that social mobility is important and everyone should have a fair chance of improving one's life, is deeply rooted in Europe as well.

It is often said that in many ways, Europe trails the Anglo-Saxon world with a delay of about ten years. True or not, this is at least something to consider carefully. Is the opportunity gap between two classes of children something that this country is heading towards? This is a question we will discuss with Mr. Putnam and the Minister tonight.

Mr. Putnam's work is grounded in rich data sets, which are a point of continuing further investigation both inside and outside academia. He also has a unique talent of picking a cogent image and using it as a vehicle to tell a story about society as a whole. Mr. Putnam's earlier classic rested on the powerful mental picture of a man alone on the bowling alley, and another man right next to him. They could have played together, in a league. Instead, they were indeed bowling alone. For *Our Kids*

he tracked the lives of his high school contemporaries. This is a smart way of capturing social change. It is the reason why people attend, or avoid, school reunions: record children when young and hopeful, fast forward a few decades and see what has become of them. Comparing them to today's children immediately reveals the stark contrast in opportunities available to different generations.

There is, I think, a recurring theme in Mr. Putnam's work that draws crowds of the kind that are assembled here tonight. His inquiry into the changing social patterns of the United States show that society's achievements are never permanent. Look the other way, and the good things that have been attained can rapidly disappear.

When we spoke earlier, Mr. Putnam said without hesitation that he wanted to change America. We will hear from him in what way shortly. But before that, let me invite to the stage Mr. Lodewijk Asscher to give his thoughts on the future of our kids.