

## **Welcome Address of the new Director General, Johan Verbeke**

After a 35-year diplomatic tour of duty all around the world, I am happy to be back in the cosmopolitan city that Brussels has become. And I am particularly proud that Egmont was willing to welcome me as its new CEO. I have always been attracted to places that provide the conditions within which hard thought, robust disagreement, independent judgement and the questioning of stubborn assumptions, can flourish in a climate of great intellectual freedom and genuine mutual respect. Egmont is such a place.

We live in a complex world, a world in “flux”. Many speak about “turbulence and disorder”. “Strategic unease” is perhaps the expression that best captures the mood of diplomacy today (I think that the expression originated with our Brussels friends at the ICG). Trying to make sense of the uncertainty and unpredictability of this world is a challenge. But it is a challenge that we, at Egmont, are willing to take on.

If Egmont’s continued progress in international rankings for the last few years is any indication, it shows that even in the competitive Think Thank environment that Brussels has become, Egmont can make a difference. It is the difference you make when self-confidently you dare think new thoughts.

But not any new idea will do. What I have learned through my past experience is that new ideas can only fly when they are clearly articulated. And only then can they forcefully be defended. I have also learned that ideas must be tested on their real meaning and practical value. Ideas, to be fruitful, must make a difference in the facts.

And since we are at it, let me share some other lessons learned over the past years:

-First, I have learned that diplomacy is not primarily advanced by grand schemes or great visionary constructions. Although intellectually challenging, great architectural debates most often end up having a rather limited impact.

-Second, I have learned that institutions are instruments and that their significance rests in their operational value. Institutions have no sacrosanct character *per se*. They must work.

-Third, I have learned that diplomacy is about problem-solving, and that each new problem asks for a new solution. Old recipes generally won’t do the business. Creative and indeed daring thinking is what is needed.

-Finally, I have learned that an effective way for doing diplomacy is to go public. Contrary to an old-fashioned formula that equates diplomacy with secrecy, a sound method for influencing others of the rightness of your ideas is simply to tell them what they are.

Johan Verbeke