

## Passion for Peace with Ambassador Annemieke Ruigrok, The Netherlands

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**To mark the end of WW1 a Chorus of Women presented a 5-day Festival for Peace. Dutch Ambassador Annemieke Ruigrok explains why she was invited to speak at the opening of one of the three performances of A Passion for Peace, a new oratorio by Canberra composer Glenda Cloughley, which were the centrepiece of the festival.**

*[Q] You were there because there was a "Dutch connection"?*

I was present because the concert was part of a festival remembering that 100 years ago that week marked not only the Anzac landings at Gallipoli but also the women's peace conference [International Congress of Women] at The Hague, called together amongst others by Dr Aletta Jacobs, the well-known women's activist in the Netherlands. The women gathered because they wanted to take measures to stop the fighting and violence of the First World War that had just started. There were more than 1200 women from around the world. A group of women in Canberra, A Chorus of Women, together with a woman composer [Glenda Cloughley], have used the occasion to organise the Festival for Peace and to prepare an oratorio [about the International Congress of Women] that was performed yesterday.

*[Q] What was it like?*

It was a great experience, the oratorio lasted 1.5 hours and didn't only reflect what happened at the congress – in form of song – but also the events surrounding it, so also that women and mothers from many countries around the world, including Australia, had to watch their husbands and sons going off to war possibly to never return. The fear, the violence, it was done very beautifully.

*[Q] Impressive?*

It was very impressive, certainly

*[Q] So it was an international congress, what about these women [performing], where they of various nationalities as well?*

The women were all Australian residents, but there were some with different roots, and the nice thing was that Maartje Sevenster, a Dutch singer who has lived here for a while, also had an important role in the oratorio.

*[Q] Did you have the opportunity to address the audience, as ambassador?*

Ahead of the performance, I spoke a few words, pointing out the role of Aletta Jacobs, how she was convinced that if women had more power there would be less violence in the world.

I also pointed out that this congress was the 'birth', so to speak, of a movement of women that has now existed for a century and is celebrating this in The Hague with another congress to reinforce the events of 100 years ago. [The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom]

[Q] *It has taken a long time, but there are women that have managed to get to important position in politics, like Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Maggie Thatcher. What is your view of the development of the role of women?*

I think that slowly but surely there is more interest and more 'room' for women in politics. I know women in high positions in several departments, both in the Netherlands and here. I know that in the Netherlands there is a specific effort by the government to make sure that more women get to fill leading positions but you notice all the time that there are still barriers. Not so much flat out discrimination, but issues in the work environment that mean women feel less free to take up certain jobs, because they feel they have lots of other duties as well.

[Q] *So Aletta Jacobs would have liked to see the end of WWI and that more women would get a bigger say in things. Do you think that women more inclined to find peaceful solutions?*

That is a difficult question, because there are many examples of very militant [women]. I can't say... What I do think is if you are having peace negotiations, if you try to solve conflicts, and there are only men at the table, so in a situation where half of the population is not involved, that is not good. You have to have a situation that a full representation of the people is involved in decision making. And so that means involving women.

[Q] *What is your biggest hope for the future, in regards to women?*

My biggest hope for the future for women is that at some point we will no longer look at whether someone is a woman, but at how they do their job. No longer judged by what she looks like, or whether she is wearing a beautiful dress or not.

[Q] *Sometimes I get the impression that women see themselves as unequal?*

Yes, I think there are women who think like that. But that is very often related to culture and education and the way they were raised. I know that in our department, there are targeted training and coaching sessions to get women to overcome those thoughts and attitudes, because they are totally unnecessary.

[Q] *So it must be a problem, or there would not be any such courses?*

Yes, it is something that women struggle with.