

Leiden University's Dies Natalis traditionally begins with our professors in their robes in a procession from the Academy Building to Pieterskerk. Today, our 446th Dies Natalis, we regrettably have to miss this tradition.

From Rector Carel Stolker's final interview in *Leidraad*, our alumni magazine, I quote: 'The Dies, the day on which I was presented with the chain of office and stood in front of a church full of professors: it felt as though I had been sucked into a massive black hole. I looked at so much scholarship and intellect and thought: what am I doing here?' The image of our Rector leading the procession of professors reminds me of a cartoon of the march of the penguins: that long trek that penguins on Antarctica make to their breeding grounds every year. In the cartoon, the penguin at the front is saying to the penguin behind it: 'I think you should keep this to yourself, but I have no idea where I'm going.'

Dear Rector Magnificus, esteemed scholar Stolker,

It is a great honour for me to be able to deliver the *laudatio* today, at the end of your impressive career at Leiden University, a career that began in 1974, on the eve of the 400th anniversary of the oldest university in the Netherlands.

Founded by William of Orange as a gift to the people of Leiden for their resistance to the Spanish, the University was supposed to serve: '*als een vast stuensel ende onderhoudt der vryheyt ende goed wettelicke regeeringe des lants*' ['*as a firm support upholding the freedom and good legal governance of the country*']. By attracting renowned scholars such as Lipsius and Scaliger, and with its Hortus botanicus, library and anatomical theatre, Leiden soon made a name for itself.

Stolker has been linked to his alma mater for almost half a century now, and has proven an exemplary custodian of this piece of our heritage. He was student-assistant to Wim Kleyn, and obtained his PhD in 1988 based on a dissertation on medical liability in comparative law. He was appointed professor after publishing his book *Van arts naar advocaat*.

At the start of his academic career, Stolker helped many students understand the finer points of civil law through the workgroups that he taught. Many of our contemporaries, dear Carel, have confided in me that without your patient

explanations, they would never have graduated at all. These include people who went on to be ministers and CEOs. From your stories, however, I understand that not all the students you attempted to help possessed the requisite intellectual baggage.

This reminds me of a poem:

'Der weise Schopenhauer spricht –

Und gern betret' ich seine Spur:

Ein jedes Menschen Angesicht

Ist ein Gedanke der Natur.

Es folgt daraus das Eine nur,

Wenn man dem Worte Glauben schenkt:

Daß auch die ewige Natur

Mehr Dummes als Gescheites denkt.'

['The wise Schopenhauer speaks -

And I gladly walk in his footsteps:

Every human face

Is a thought of nature.

Only one thing follows from this,

If one believes the word:

That even eternal nature

Thinks more foolishly than wisely.'

Stolker became Dean of the Faculty of Law in 2005. At the time he was also director of the E.M. Meijers Institute for Legal Studies. In 2009, a mediator at heart, he was able to resolve a conflict between Professor Buikhuisen and Leiden University.

Stolker has sat on assessment committees for Dutch courts, is a deputy at the Court of Harlem and the Court of Appeal in Den Bosch and was Vice-Chairman

of the Asser Institute. He also sat on the Hoekstra Commission, which conducted an enquiry into the Bijlmer plane crash.

That is not all: Stolker has also served on the supervisory board of the National Museum of World Cultures, been Chairman of the Municipality of Leiden's Ombuds Committee and sat on the boards of the Rijnland and Sanquin hospitals.

As Dean of the Faculty of Law, Stolker took up the cause of the 30% of first-year students withdrawing early from their programme at that time. 'It's awful for those students, for their parents, for the lecturers and for society – and it costs society a lot of money. We started assigning our law students to tutor groups of 30 and providing intensive supervision,' Stolker said at the time. The tutor groups were such a success that they were introduced throughout the University.

Stolker has the grace to praise his predecessors Breimer and Van der Heiden for what they achieved for the University, improvements that he could build on. But I would add: 'Vision without execution is hallucination' and Stolker, too, has achieved so much!

His main focus has been on building an academic community: during Stolker's rectorship the University has become more of a community at all levels: between the Executive Board and faculties, and within the faculties and institutes. The University's work is now based on a shared vision. 'We are one university in two cities on three campuses,' Stolker has said.

There has also been excellent collaboration with the municipalities of Leiden and The Hague during Stolker's tenure. The Supervisory Board can but admire how constructively the deans and scientific directors of the faculties have managed to work together. The master hand is in clear evidence here. In his own words: 'As a member of the Executive Board you're a bit like the man with the oil can. You make sure the cogs are greased, so that the University doesn't grind to a halt.'

In Stolker's opinion, Twitter is 'a useful way of getting things on the societal and political agenda, particularly in The Hague, where new decisions are made at a rapid pace and MPs have short memories : take subjects such as the loan

system, the discussion on research output, the binding study recommendation and internationalisation. Politics is more fickle than universities.'

Stolker has made a significant contribution to the League of European Research Universities, and it is due to him that Leiden is a prominent member of this organisation. He has also been pivotal to the Leiden, Delft, Rotterdam alliance. Academic ambition and rivalry may lurk here, but it is thanks to Stolker's observation skills, well-timed interventions and the respect he has enjoyed as the doyen of the board of rectors that frictions have never culminated in conflict. He believes if the three can come together rather than compete with one another, they will be a match for any of the top universities in the world.

As a born connector, Rector Stolker has used tact and determination to make a smooth-running machine of the private Leiden University Fund and the University's own fund.

Anyone who has experienced Carel Stolker in his role as Rector will have been struck by how approachable he is. Carel has been available 24/7 to the whole academic community: to PhD candidates and their families at graduation ceremonies, to students in Barrera and to people seeking advice when hazings have gone wrong. There he was riding his bike or wandering through the Hortus, along the Rapenburg canal or around the Saturday market.

With his genuine interest in all of his colleagues and his open-minded attitude, Stolker has proven deft at preventing or resolving conflicts. This has only increased the respect that he had already earned from the Leiden academic community.

Stolker isn't one to make snap judgements:

*'Hij minacht mij, wiens eigen wezen min is
en hij spreekt goed, die zelve goed van zin is.*

*Wie anderen bespreekt, bespreekt zichzelf,
er komt niet uit de kruik dan wat er in is.'*

*['He scorns me, whose own being is less,
And he speaks well, who is himself well meaning.*

He who discusses others, discusses himself,

Nothing more comes out of the vessel than what is in it.']

For him, it was particularly important to create a safe environment because dangers such as groupthink and abuses of power can lurk in the closed groups at the faculties. By forging positive relationships and intervening personally if need be, Stolker has managed to avert such danger.

If the University's reputation or its motto *Praesidium Libertatis* were ever at stake, Stolker was resolute: he was all too aware of the Rector's duties as the figurehead of the University in its hour of need.

His much-praised leadership style was useful here: *'remissius imperanti, Melius paretur'* was how Seneca put it ('He who commands the more gently is the better obeyed.')

On behalf of the academic community I would like to thank Rector Magnificus Stolker for his vision, his sense of duty and the inheritance that he in turn leaves Leiden University. We have experienced him as: visionary, unifying, friendly, erudite, inspiring, a moral authority and witty, but never crossing the line.

We would like to thank the Rector for his exemplary role at our University. A tower of strength, who wouldn't hesitate to make a decision in a crisis, as now during the pandemic or when the University community has become mired in controversy.

'Tenslotte,' wrote Justus Lipsius, *'biedt rampspoed een voorbeeld, omdat de kracht en de weerstand van goede mensen bij tegenslag een lichtbaken vormen voor onze duistere wereld. Door hun voorbeeld roepen zij anderen tot een zelfde houding op en geven als het ware de weg aan.'*

['Finally, disaster offers an example, because the strength and resistance of good people in the face of adversity are a beacon of light in our dark world. By their example, they inspire others to have a similar attitude and, as it were, show the way.']

Carel, you have shown us the way.

I will miss the conversations in your cosy, messy office. You once told me an anecdote about a scholar who was reprimanded for this with the words: 'A cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind.' His answer? 'What is an empty desk a sign of then?'

Carel, you are undoubtedly going to miss the University. Try, like Winnie-the-Pooh, to think: 'How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard!'