

Speech Servant Leadership  
April 26<sup>th</sup> 2012  
At VU, Free University  
Amsterdam

By: Joan Ferrier (speaker)  
Kathleen Ferrier

Servant Leadership: the example set by Johan Henry Elisa Ferrier

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by saying how honoured I am, by your invitation to speak at this conference on Servant Leadership. But not only honoured: I am also deeply touched,. Personally touched, by the fact that you are giving me the opportunity to bring forward the example set by Johan Ferrier, the last governor and first president of Suriname, who happened to be my father.

So, I want to thank you for the invitation. But not only that: I also want to congratulate you on your foresight when you decided to have this conference taking place on April the 26th 2012. How timely this conference on servant Leadership is, now that our country finds itself in the midst of a political and economical crisis that demands strong, and thus servant, leadership. In spite of all the negative consequences of the political crisis this also gives us opportunities. Opportunities for taking the necessary measures. And that requires political leadership -and today more than ever, SERVANT Leadership.

Before I am going to tell you more about the example of Johan Ferrier, I will have to explain a little bit more about Surinam. Surinam is part of the Guyanas, situated at the Northern Coast of South America, between Venezuela and Brasil. These three relatively small countries are the only countries in the continent that do not speak Spanish or Portuguese, but English (Guyana), Dutch (Surinam) and French (French Guyana). Actually, French Guyana still is a province of France. The language issue makes crystal clear the effect the history of colonization has had on this part of the world and how strong the influence of the colonizers have been. Any visitor of Surinam will immediately notice the strong Dutch influence in the capital, Paramaribo. Not only because of the language, but also the architecture and, tell me: where else in the world would you find separate bicycle paths ? But there is something else that defines Surinam as a unique country and that is the composition of the population. The native population, Indians as in the rest of Latin America, were colonized when in 1650 the British took possession in the country. Consecutive colonizers benefitted from the fertile soil and started plantations of coffee, cacao, sugar and rice. The colonizers needed workforce and the Indians were small in number and not keen to work for the Colonizers. So slaves (all together 500.000, of which in the end only 22.000 remained at the abolition of slavery were brought from Africa. After the abolition in 1863, people from India and Indonesia were brought to Surinam, under temporary contracts that turned out to be fake

(contracts) with very bad conditions. During the last two centuries large communities from China and the Middle-East also found their way to Surinam. In the last decades there has been a new migration wave from China, but also a large number of people from Brasil (gold diggers) and in smaller numbers from other Latin American countries have found their way to Surinam.

Johan Ferrier was born in 1910. When he was asked, once, about his roots he said: my roots are interred all over the world. And that is true, since his ancestors came from India, his grandmother was one of those who came with a so called temporary contract to Surinam. As a child he also listened to the stories his other grandmother told him about her life, not that long ago, as a slave on one of the plantations.

But also the Jewish roots are strong, one grandfather was a sephardic Jew, and belonged to the large Jewish community that migrated to Surinam since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Johan Ferrier was born into a hard working low income family. Being the eldest son, he was brought up with a strong sense of responsibility towards his younger brothers and sisters. Even more so, when his father died at an early age.

His parents were convinced that studying was the highest priority and the only way for their children to get a better life than their own.. But since there was not much money, there was no chance for Johan to make his dream come true, which was to become a doctor. He had to start working as he left high school at the age of 14, at the accounting office where his father worked. In the evenings he studied to become a teacher. At the age of seventeen he had all the degrees needed to start teaching at the highest level, but he decided to become a teacher in the district, a few days travelling by boat away from the capital .

These years did mark him strongly. Until his death, at the age of almost 100, and after having served his country in international positions and as prime minister, governor and president, he would always say that first and foremost: he had been a teacher .

In those remote areas of the district, and in spite of his young age, he was much more than a teacher. Heavy responsibility was put upon him as counselor in all kinds of conflicts or difficult situations. He learned the value of cultural diversity and he learned to deal with ethnic differences. He learned what it means to be a leader who never considers himself more or better than those who ask for his advice, but he learned also, to stick to his ideas and ideals.

He also learned by practice that his parents were right: education is THE key to success in every society. Education is basically the process for change as he had experienced in the capital and as he experienced in the district. Change was needed, badly needed!

Those first years as a teacher in the district have marked Johan Ferrier. He learned that people basically need three things to keep their human dignity: to know where they come from, what is worthy to them and what gives them

dignity. Human dignity, is the basis of all processes of change. Since human dignity gives freedom to choose.

He became a leader, not only in the village where he was working, but also in the Teachers Union. That is where he learned to speak up . For instance when the governor of Surinam decided that education in Surinam should be modelled like education in Indonesia, the so called “dessa” education. This was only a very limited and basic education, since children there had no choice: their destiny had been defined: they were going to be workers on the field. My father did not accept this, education was a process for freedom of choice, for developing all talents a person, a child, has. Not beforehand excepting that there is no way of climbing higher the social scale, no chance nor change. He achieved his goal and from his success as a union leader it was a small step into politics, where his main objective was Self Rule for Surinam: let Surinam take its own decisions. Freely translated from Dutch: “Boss in our own house!”

Later on, he was one of the authors of the Constitution (Statuut) of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, that indicates that all three parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands are equal, have their own responsibility but are united and obliged to assist each other.

And offcourse, it was a very special moment when, at the 25th of November 1975 Surinam became an independent country. A historical moment for Johan Ferrier who started with the idea of Self Rule in Surinam and who became the first President of the independent Republic Suriname.

In spite of his hard working, at several places in several districts, in the capital, as a union leader and politician, he kept on studying. A lifelong learning, what seemed to be something new for the Netherlands, was his way of life.

After he finished his studies in Surinam, he got a chance to study in Amsterdam in the mid fifties. He wrote a thesis that was so promising, that after a strong lobby from his professor to do so he decided to stay a few more months and write his PhD dissertation.

Subject of his thesis was, of course!, “The Surinamese society as a social pedagogical Duty

After returning to Surinam his political career took of again. His main message was: we should be proud of our country and not always look at and accept all what comes from the "mother country", the Netherlands. His main attitude for reaching these goals was servant leadership. Servant leadership to him meant: listening very well to what people want and then, not just repeating what they say, but clearly indicating the way ahead. And people followed him, since they trusted him because they believed him. They believed him because he really knew what their day to day challenges were and because he took everybody that crossed his path, seriously, regardless their religious or cultural background. There was never a distance between him and the people he wanted to serve. A serving leader is united with the people that follow him.

We as his children were taught that it does not matter what you look like, what clothes you wear or in what house you live. What counts is what you do and how you treat others.

We also learned that there are higher aims than our personal wishes. That when a higher cause makes an appeal on us, we can not withdraw. Since our task, -the task of all humanity- is to leave the earth a better place.

I remember very well when my father was the director of the Dutch aluminium company in Suriname, Billiton. We received the, then, crownprincess Beatrix and her husband when they were on their honeymoon. During that occasion Johan Ferrier was asked to consider becoming the governor of Suriname. We discussed this in our family, since no decision was taken without first consulting us, the children. The consequence would be that we would have to move from the village where we lived so happily with so many friends to the capital, and we would be living in a palace. We didn't want to do that. We said loud and clearly, we were about ten, twelve years old, that we preferred to stay where we were. But then, it was said to us, that sometimes there comes a request that is bigger than your wish, a request that is in the benefit of more people and that if such a request comes, your personal wish should not be leading. A worthy person is not interested in her or his own well being but has an eye on the well being of larger groups, of the total of society.

Ladies and gentlemen, when you hear me speaking on this exemplary servant leader, Johan Ferrier, you might ask, was there nothing wrong about him? He seems to be the most perfect person ever?. Obviouly, as his daughter, I will leave that question to others. What counts, and even more today than ever, is what his example meant to people, and especially to his beloved people of Surinam. ,

When I look at what is happening today in the world, in the Arab region, in Sudan, and more specifically in our country, and of course in Surinam, I can only begin to realise how important that example is. Servant leadership stands for: honesty, humility, a clear vision, steady principles and a strong will. It stands for valueing culture, giving respect but also making clear that there are rules to be followed. So that each and every one can develop her or his talents.

And in that way, I can only thank you once more that you have given me the opportunity to talk about my father, Dr Johan Ferrier, Servant Leader of so many!