



Toespraak

van de Voorzitter van de Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, prof. dr. J. A. Bruijn, tijdens de P20 bijeenkomst in Tokyo (sessie 2 - 'Utilization of Innovative Technology towards a Human-Centered Future Society')

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Your Excellencies, dear colleagues,

It is a very great honour to be here today and to speak to you about this important topic: the future of our societies in the context of technological innovations.

It is a great privilege for the Dutch Parliament and for me personally to participate in this meeting. We are grateful to the Japanese Presidency of the G20 for the invitation to our country. More specifically, I would like to thank my colleague from the Japanese House of Councillors, Ms. Akiko Santo, and the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Ms Gabriela Cuevas Barrón, to allow us to join you here today. I believe that our parliaments can and should deliver valuable input to the G20 deliberations, so I truly welcome this initiative.

The fact that the Japanese House of Councillors managed to successfully organize this meeting in this extraordinary year, marked by the enthronement of His Majesty Emperor Naruhito, the beginning of the Reiwa era and elections for the House of Councillors, deserves our deep respect, gratitude and admiration. In addition, I would like to express my heartfelt condolences with regard to the victims of the hurricane Hagibis. I hope and trust that the Japanese people will find strength to overcome this tragedy, as they have done many times before.

Your Excellencies, dear colleagues,

I also welcome the efforts of Japan as Chair of the G20 this year to contribute to the discussions on the society of the future. It builds further on the concept of what is sometimes called the 'fourth industrial revolution', in which digitalisation, robotisation and big data will change the way we work, the way we interact and therefore the way we live.

In that context, I share the idea of a technology-based, but human-centered future society, an idea that is being promoted by Japan as Society 5.0. A society where Artificial Intelligence makes our live more comfortable. Where innovations in the medical field make us more healthy. Where technology increases our standard of living.

Innovation is a product of imagination. You probably all have heard of the song 'Imagine' by John Lennon, the husband of the famous Yoko Ono and also one of the former lead singers of The Beatles. The song is historically innovative, as was the band. In all its simplicity. It calls for our imagination and it points to its innovative and creative power.

The Beatles changed music forever with their total and ground-breaking innovation. That innovation came from the combination of well-known ingredients, combined with the cultural and political constellation of the sixties.

In arts as well as in science renewal or innovation often comes from an unexpected mix of ingredients. Innovation brings us forward, but together with innovation we also find new boundaries, mostly of a technical, ethical and legal nature.



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Innovation helps us to solve many challenges we face in our societies. But on the other hand, it is wise to realise that innovation at the same time might appear to be a challenge itself, or at least will confront us with new challenges. Challenges for our societies and for our democracies.

Innovation therefore also comes with responsibility.

As Speakers of Parliament, as representatives of the people, it is our duty to take these challenges seriously and to prepare our democratic systems.

In recent years we have witnessed several examples of the use of big data and the spread of 'Fake News' on the internet to manipulate election campaigns. In these cases, technology was used to interfere in a democratic process.

However, risks that come with the increasing digitalisation of our societies might also be more sophisticated, more complex and often hard to understand for citizens and politicians. This is for example the case with algorithms. We increasingly see Artificial Intelligence playing a big part in our day-to-day lives and important decisions being made purely based on data delivered by algorithms.

Algorithms are used by banks to determine who gets a mortgage and who doesn't. By insurance companies to determine the different insurance premiums between individuals. By governments to determine the probability of a person to commit tax fraud. By companies to determine who would be the best candidate to fill their job vacancies.

This again provides great opportunities, but also serious risks. At least, it raises some important questions. Who designs these algorithms? Who controls the input and the output? Who is accountable? And: are we, as parliamentarians, capable to oversee the consequences?

Let me give you an example from my country.

In the Netherlands, a court hearing was held last week about the System Risk Indicator (SyRi) that is used by our government. The System Risk Indicator is an automated system that is used to identify social security fraud: it links different government organisations, combines their data and uses algorithms to draw risk profiles based on the profiles of convicted fraudsters. Citizens with a similar profile are considered potential fraudsters and will be investigated further.

A coalition of civil society organisations decided to start a court case against the Dutch government over the use of the System Risk Indicator, as they have many concerns about the use of the system. They are supported by the UN Rapporteur on Human Rights, Mr. Philip Alston, who expressed his worries in a letter to the court. In that letter, he also criticised the fact that there has been virtually no substantive debate in the Dutch parliament on the bill that created the System Risk Indicator: it was adopted without a debate in both our parliamentary houses.

Dear colleagues,

Without entering into details, without interfering in this court case and without judging if our parliament did or did not do a good job in this matter, I just want to make the following point:



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As parliamentarians, our main responsibility is to control and scrutinize our government and to represent the interests of our people. Therefore, we should invest in our knowledge to be prepared for the society of the future. How can we scrutinize our governments and represent the interest of our people if we do not yet have the capabilities, the knowledge and the facilities to truly understand Artificial Intelligence, algorithms, big data and the way decisions are made based on these elements?

The society of the future needs also a democracy of the future.

I therefore call upon us all to invest in the abilities of our parliamentarians and our parliamentary staff to be prepared and to make sure that we remain able to exercise our parliamentary duties. And please imagine, like John Lennon: by combining our forces, we can learn from each other. By mixing our ingredients, by sharing our best practices, we can also innovate ourselves.

Your Excellencies, dear colleagues,

Thank you for your attention, it is a great privilege to be here today and I look forward to the rest of our discussions.