



Toespraak

van de voorzitter van de Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, prof.dr. J.A. Bruijn
ter gelegenheid van de lunch met ambassadeurs van landen in Azië en Oceanië

datum 29 november 2019

Honorable Ambassador XU Hong,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great honour that I speak to you during today's Asia and Oceania Ambassadors' Luncheon. I would like to express my gratitude to Ambassador XU Hong for inviting me to this luncheon and for hosting this wonderful event.

Our countries share a rich, and at the same time painful history resulting from the 17th century expansion drive of the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, the VOC. I believe the Netherlands have had some relation in one form or another with each of the countries you represent. From Iran to Japan, and from Pakistan to New Zealand, you will find Dutch traces, in for instance architecture and language.

Names such as Abel Tasman, Hendrick Hamel and Willem Janszoon still resonate in the Phillipines, South Korea and Australia. Here, in the Netherlands, the VOC introduced elements from your countries and cultures as well. Tea from China, rice from Indonesia, sugar from Bangladesh and – true! – elephants from Sri Lanka. And in the same way some Dutch words have become part of your languages, we on our part have adopted quite a few from yours as well.

In those days the relation between our countries – unfortunately – was usually not built on equality. Those Dutch traces are also painful reminders of that past in many countries. Today, four centuries later, I am glad to say that our relations have certainly changed for the better. The relations between our countries are still strong. The presence in The Hague with a



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representative on high diplomatic level by all of your countries is living proof.

Maintaining bilateral and multilateral relations with other countries is of course primarily the responsibility of the government and the Minister of Foreign Affairs in particular, but the Senate also has a role to play.

Excellencies,

It has been almost five months now since I was elected President of the Senate of the Netherlands. In these months I have had the privilege of meeting some of you already. These meetings with Ambassadors from all over the world are of the utmost value to the work of the Senate in general, and of myself especially.

This parliamentary diplomacy as we call it, is useful and valuable both in view of the economic, social and cultural interests of the Netherlands, and from a peace and security perspective.

The Senate's contribution to parliamentary diplomacy complements traditional diplomacy – like yours – because it can be an additional, or even alternative, means of dialogue between countries. Furthermore this form of diplomacy helps to maintain good relations with other countries and facilitates the international parliamentary scrutiny of government policy.

This month alone,

- I was in Japan at the P20 meeting, the parliamentary counterpart of the G20,
- the States General received a delegation of the Vicepresident of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China,
- and a delegation of the Senate's committee for Education, Culture and Science met with Chinese parliamentary representatives to discuss cultural heritage.



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These meetings are exemplary for the day to day proceedings of the Dutch States General and its members. Of course the core business of the Senate remains to reflect carefully upon the legality and practicality of bills. In doing so, it particularly examines the feasibility and enforceability of the bills.

Excellencies,

Let me give you some insight in current developments in Dutch politics, especially in the Senate.

Since the elections for the Provincial States earlier this year, the Dutch government no longer holds a majority in the Senate. This means they need support from opposition parties if they want bills to pass. At the moment it is hard to tell whether this has already effect, since little bills have been sent through from the House of Representatives the past months. But I expect that in the new year we will discover what the change in composition of the Senate will mean for the political process.

Another topic that will keep us busy in the coming months is the discussion on the future of the Dutch democracy. Last year, the so called State Committee Parliamentary System, led by former Minister of Interior Affairs and current Mayor of The Hague, Johan Remkes, presented its findings.

The committee concluded that the added value of the Senate comes into its own insufficiently. To change this, some distance is needed between the Senate on the one hand and the government and day-to-day politics of the House of Representatives on the other hand, according to the committee. In their report they give recommendations to reaffirm the added value of the Senate.

In two weeks time Mr Remkes and the other members of the State Committee will talk to the committee for Interior Affairs of the Senate about



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their findings, and their recommendations. In the meantime the government has reacted to some of the recommendations. We are still waiting though for their reaction to the full report.

The Minister of Interior Affairs, Mrs Ollongren, however, did submit two draft proposals. One of the proposals concerns the Senate directly, since it involves changing the way in which the Senate is chosen. A remarkable step, as this proposal goes against the advice of the State Committee.

The proposal means that 50% of the Senate will be elected every three years: 37 new Members for a period of six years, 38 new Members three years later, also for a period of six years. In this way, the minister argues, the election of the Senate will suffer less from electoral volatility.

In a formal reaction to the proposal, the Senate has asked the government to put a temporary hold to the procedure of these two proposals, until both Chambers have discussed the final report of the State Committee. We are currently waiting for the government reaction. A deadline is set for next week.

Discussions like these show that democracy, and suffrage in particular, is never a finished end-product, but always in motion, always developing, and always in need of maintenance.

Excellencies,

Thank you for your attention. It is a great privilege to be here today and I look forward to our discussion.