

Opening remarks by the President of the Senate of the Netherlands,

Ms Ankie Broekers-Knol

Session 2: *"Bringing the parliamentary agenda closer to citizens in the modern era"*

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

I want to thank the National Council of Slovakia for putting the topic of 'Bringing the parliamentary agenda closer to citizens in the modern era' on today's agenda. It is certainly a very relevant issue for us to discuss. In a number of countries, parliamentary democracy as we know it, has increasingly come under pressure. The dissatisfaction with traditional politics is growing and the outcome of parliamentary elections has become harder and harder to predict. I am sure we are all following with great political and personal interest the elections in France and the upcoming elections in the United Kingdom and Germany.

In many places, the gap between politicians and citizens seems to be widening. Electorates have become more and more volatile. The question for our discussion today is: obviously there is a gap, but how do we narrow the gap - or even bridge the gap between politicians and citizens? How do we bring the parliamentary agenda closer to citizens?

There are some who believe that a referendum is the perfect instrument to bridge the gap. I am not one of them.

The recent **referenda in Turkey, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands** have shown us that referenda actually tend to emphasize - and to increase - divisions in society.

Referenda seem to be driving people further away from each other, instead of bringing them closer together. I am not only referring to the gap between politicians and citizens, but also to the gap between young and old, the gap between employed and unemployed, the gap between the well off and not so well off, the gap between rural and urban areas.

All too often, the outcome of these referenda leads to frustration amongst voters, who rarely see the change they desired. Referenda boil down very complicated issues to a choice between a 'yes' and a 'no'. In fact, the reasons why people vote 'yes' or 'no' in a referendum are often very diverse and often not related to the issue at stake. For many it is some sort of outlet; a way to voice their dissatisfaction with the current government and the current policies. This makes it difficult to find one clear message that citizens want to send to their Government and representatives in parliament. It could present politicians with an assignment they can hardly fulfil. It may even be a 'mission impossible'.

In order to truly bridge the gap between citizens and politicians, it is important that we tackle the **issue that is causing the gap**. And that issue is: the **lack of trust**. How can we restore the trust people have in politicians and in democratic institutions?

Although there are no ultimate answers, I think four things are fundamental to gaining trust.

The first is: **taking responsibility for your actions.**

All too often, political leaders make a political compromise - either in Brussels or at a different negotiating table - which they distance themselves from once they are back home. This sends a confusing and misleading message to the population.

Walking away from the responsibility to be open and frank about the compromises you made, or shying away from advocating what you stand for, breaches citizens' trust. It broadens the gap between politicians and citizens, which is exactly what we do not want to happen. Therefore: politicians should take responsibility for their actions.

Since the **general elections in the Netherlands** last March, there are currently four political parties that are negotiating a coalition agreement for a new government. In a multiparty democracy like ours, compromise is inevitable. Once political parties reach an agreement, they will have to be able to explain why and how they came to their compromises. The risk of losing credibility looms when they cannot publicly take responsibility for the ultimate results of the negotiations.

So next to taking responsibility, the second fundamental part of building trust is: **being as transparent as possible.** At a timely moment politicians need to explain what steps they take in the decision-making process. Once decisions have been taken they should explain what these entail and on what grounds they are based.

At the Dutch Senate we have a **website that has widely received praise** for its clarity and simplicity. In addition to explaining our rules and procedures, we summarize the basic information on every piece of legislation in process and we update the status of every bill and the timeframe for decision-making constantly. That way, the people who want to know when and how a bill is dealt with are always kept up to date.

Nowadays of course, our plenary debates are broadcasted via a livestream. But we do something more than that: once the debate has ended we upload a summary of all its highlights. This is very useful for the press and interested parties. And should anyone wish to go back further in time, then they can find the full parliamentary archives of the last 200 years via their computer or tablet. Recently, we have also started to make a series of short videos where we explain the Senates' work. We are always looking for ways to make the legislative process as transparent as possible.

A couple of times a year, the Dutch Senate literally opens its doors to the general public. This gives thousands of people a chance to visit the Senate building and to talk to Senators and the Senate staff about the role and work of the Senate.

That brings me to what I believe is the third element for building trust: **include citizens when and where you can.**

This starts with **educating** children and young citizens at different ages about democracy. As we all know: *'tout savoir, c'est tout comprendre'*.

It is important that we try to expand the involvement of citizens of all ages in democracy and that we broaden the foundation of knowledge on which our democracies are built. We must continuously strengthen the awareness of our core values.

In this context, the Dutch government has set the objective that parliament should receive 100.000 children each year and that every child should visit the parliamentary buildings at least once in his youth.

The Dutch Senate has also designed various educational programmes to help young people (and their teachers) understand how our parliamentary democracy works.

However, including citizens does not stop with education. The next step is **including citizens in the process of decision-making**. In the Netherlands, we have public consultations on draft laws at the beginning of the legislative process. This is a two-way flow of information where we actively seek the opinions of affected and interested groups. In the final stage of the legislative process, when the bill is put before the Senate, we hold expert meetings with various representatives from society. This gives experts, implementing agencies and interested parties a last chance to explain to parliamentarians where the 'kinks' are in the bill and it enables parliamentarians to make their final decision as well informed as possible.

Including citizens also means that politicians must promote public engagement and really relate to citizens, not only in election time but in all phases of agenda setting and delicate decision-making processes. To listen is the key word.

Listening to what people have to say, having citizens participate in discussions on vital societal issues, and establishing open communication is paramount in gaining trust from citizens.

The fourth and final fundamental element of building trust has to do with **evolution**. Mark my words: I didn't say revolution. In order for a parliamentary democracy to work, it needs a solid constitutional foundation. But constitutional democracies also need **to be able to evolve, to adapt to modern times**.

It is vital that parliamentary democracies are not averse to looking at themselves critically. From time to time, they should reflect broadly on questions such as: Does our democracy represent the population adequately? Is there sufficient consideration on a national level for democracy at a local level? Should we revise or develop new structures or instruments to increase representativeness or public participation? Parliaments must keep their eyes and ears open for developments in society and they must have the willingness to adapt and be flexible. After all, what doesn't bend will break!

Last year, the Dutch parliament asked for a State Committee to investigate the workings of **our parliamentary** democracy. The State Committee, which started its work in March, must answer the question whether or not the current parliamentary system is sustainable for the future, for instance in view of EU legislation, referenda, ICT developments, etc.. We expect a solid report and a vivid debate, and maybe the outcome will be that we will get convincing arguments to make some constitutional changes.

Dear colleagues, to summarize, building trust means:

1. Taking responsibility for your actions.
2. Being as transparent as possible.
3. Including citizens when and where you can: starting with education and then giving citizens the possibility to participate in the decision-making process.
4. And last but not least: keeping an open mind, always be willing to evolve with the times.

If we manage to keep these four truths in mind, I am confident we can bridge the gap and we can restore trust between citizens and politicians: both on a national and on a European level.

But last but not least, let us not forget this home truth: **trust is a two way street**. If we want citizens to trust politicians more, we have to trust our citizens in return.