



# Eerste Kamer *der Staten-Generaal*

**Address by Mr Geert Jan Hamilton<sup>1</sup>, Secretary General of the Dutch Senate (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal), on the occasion of the Meeting of Secretaries General of the EU Parliaments, 29 January 2018 in Tallinn, Estonia**

*Session: Future of the EU - organisation of debates in the parliaments*

Esteemed Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear friends,

Today we are facing a Europe that is trying to rise from the crises that we have been dealing with for several years now. It is safe to say that these recent years have felt as a kind of rollercoaster for Europe.

The Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, separatist movements, terror attacks, all have become new realities within the Union. The unprecedented and dramatic decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, Brexit, is still reverberating, but it also served as a sort of shock therapy for the 27 remaining EU-members and stirred a reevaluation of the fundamental significance of the European project. Also globally the EU has been confronted with insecurities, such as instabilities within neighbouring countries at the outer borders of the EU. And let us not forget the changing relations with the United States, the impressive further rise of China and other significant economic

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<sup>1</sup> Met dank aan Fred Bergman, Ilse VandenDriessche en Kim van Dooren

shifts, an ongoing digital revolution, and threats like hacking and cybercrime, and global warming. All of the above forces us to rethink the position of the EU in the world.

What was once taken for granted is now being questioned and all of this has fed the debate on the Future of Europe.

Now, the debate on the Future of Europe has many participants.

We have heard our heads of state and prime ministers speak about their visions for a stronger and more united Europe. We have seen a Bratislava roadmap and a Leaders' agenda set up by the European Council.

The European Parliament is voicing its point of view in resolutions and public discussions.

The European Commission has stimulated the debate with its White Paper, with five scenario's fostering ideas on how to shape, improve and stabilise our future Union, and this was followed by reflection papers on specific topics. President Juncker has even recently invited our parliaments to take part in the Task Force on subsidiarity and proportionality and to think about 'doing less more efficiently' (scenario 4 in Junckers' White paper).

Debates on the Future of Europe throughout Europe with the European citizens have been held (e.g. Citizens' Dialogues initiated by the EC).

It was only self-evident that the national parliaments would join the debate in their own ways.

And so they did. May I, to introduce the discussion and the exchange of experiences, elaborate on my own experience as head of the civil service of the Senate of the Netherlands. As chanceries or parliamentary civil services we are constantly in charge with properly informing, supporting, accompanying our political principals, the elected representatives of the people, and efficiently organizing their parliamentary work, also in European affairs.

My country, The Netherlands, is one of the proud founding fathers of the EU, but has a recent history – in this century - of more critical notes and waves of euro-skepticism. Contrary to assertions in international media shortly after the Brexit referendum there certainly is no big debate going on on a possible Nexit. There still is staunch support for the core values of the EU, the internal market and the four freedoms, and a strong conviction that several current problems, like security, migration, climate change, financial stability can only be resolved in close cooperation with the EU-partners. According to a recent poll the appreciation of the European Union has risen again in the last two years. 77 % of the Dutch population is in favor of the EU membership of my country and is convinced that the membership is beneficial for the country<sup>2</sup>. In our parliament the Commission's White Paper and reflection papers were discussed in the standing committees of the Dutch Senate and the House of Representatives (Eerste and Tweede Kamer). Senators met with President Juncker to talk about his vision

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<sup>2</sup> Parlameter 2017, European Parliament

and proposed scenario's. Meetings were arranged in Brussels and The Hague with Commissioners, with the European Parliament and with representatives of other Member States.

In fact, the debate is still ongoing in our Houses. As recently as December 2017 the House of Representatives organised a round table in Maastricht. Among the attendees and speakers were Commissioner Timmermans and representatives from civil society, as well as high ranking diplomats from France, Germany and Hungary.

And in March both Houses will hold their annual plenary debates on European Affairs, and the Future of Europe will undoubtedly be a major part of these debates.

I know many other Parliaments in one way or another have been giving a follow up to the Commission's papers.

What I have learned from all these meetings and debates in our parliament is that our -Dutch- politicians are less interested in a general view or grand scenario's for the Future. For most politicians in the Netherlands the broad visions presented by the Commission do not necessarily match the more practical way in which they approach the debate on the European Union. They are inclined to tackle issues in a more pragmatic way and look for concrete measures to try to meet challenges.

Let me illustrate this with two examples.

The representatives both in the Senate and in the House in the Netherlands have been engaged in the debate on the future of Europe, specifically the endeavour to regain trust of citizens and to strengthen European democracy, for more than a decade now.

You may recall that in 2005 the Netherlands was faced with a no-vote as result of the referendum on the ratification of the European Constitution. Over 60% of the Dutch voters then rejected the European Constitution. As in the Brexit-referendum, it was believed that the lack of involvement and trust felt by citizens towards the European institutions and the fear of declining influence of one's own county, loss of national identity, in the EU had lead to this negative vote.

This experience in 2005 moved forward an internal reflection on the Future of Europe in our Senate and specifically about what measures the Senate itself could take to involve and inform citizens better on European issues. Already in 2001 a European staff bureau (EBEK) had been created to better support Senators dealing with European legislation and in 2002 the staff of the Senate launched a portal website for European Affairs. This website did not only serve as an online archive for all kinds of European documents and relating parliamentary papers, but was specifically set up to inform the public on the scrutiny by the Senate. In this way Senators were made more politically accountable to citizens for how they deal with European proposals, while at the same time citizens were invited to

react on the proposals themselves. Since 2008 this European website of the Senate was also closely linked to the Senate's website dealing with the national legislative process, thus informing the public on the close link between European and national legislation. The Senate's staff also played a significant role in preparing for the political decision of mainstreaming European Affairs by making it the responsibility of all standing committees, not only of the committee on European Affairs. This mainstreaming took place in 2009 and implied on the level of civil servants that when recruiting new civil staff we require of them both profound knowledge of the national and of the European legislative process at the same time. The House of Representatives engaged in comparable activities.

But being more transparent about the parliaments' position towards European decision making was soon thereafter taken a step further. The aim became making the legislative process in European institutions more transparent and promote the timely publication of Council documents that are part of the legislative process. The Senate has been engaged in this endeavour since the Lisbon Treaty came into force (end of 2009) and put even more focus on the role of national parliaments in the legislative process in the EU.

The belief that transparency in decision making is beneficial for European citizens is supported by parties from left to right in both Chambers.

During the COSAC-meeting in November of 2017 here in Tallinn, the Dutch delegation presented concrete measures towards amongst others the Council, e.g. the systematic publications of legislative documents by the Council and requesting more insight into legislative deliberations in the Council. Their call for more transparency and openness was supported by many of your parliaments (26 Chambers of national parliaments signed a letter to the European institutions with their support for these concrete measures).

In brief the parliaments called for:

1. Legislative documents to be systematically made public without delay;
2. The Council to adopt more specific and detailed rules regarding reporting on legislative deliberations;
3. The European Council and the Council when meeting informally (for instance in EU-27 Brexit) and the Eurogroup to start applying the Transparency Regulation and to develop rules of procedure that are in line with the standards developed in EU legislation and case law.
4. Negotiations on the Transparency Regulation must be reopened in order to align the Regulation with the expanded requirements.

Parliamentary control on our governments and ministers regarding their actions in the European Council requires a maximum of openness and transparency. We await a formal reply to this initiative from the EU institutions and are happy to cooperate with all parliaments to keep transparency on the European agenda.

The second example of a pragmatic approach towards the Future of Europe-debate is the Senate's dealing with the Economic and Monetary Union.

After the publication of the interim report by Van Rompuy, on November 2, 2012, the Senate requested - instigated by the staff - the Council of State, the constitutional advisory body of government and parliament, to give an opinion on the embedding of democratic control in the reforms of economic governance in Europe to combat the economic and financial crisis. In the opinion of the Council of State the constitutionally enshrined national budget right of the parliament was under pressure in the proposals and the "Article 13 Committee" (now called Interparliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the European Union - SECG) could not be more than a kind of glorified support group. Nevertheless this "support group" is a forum where the parliamentarians see each other with great regularity and can exchange thoughts with senior officials.

So it was realized that parliamentarians should make the most of that forum: by discussing with each other, going a step deeper than exchanging statements, understanding each other's views and striving for maximum transparency of the efforts of Commissioners, Eurogroup presidents etc. and taking this knowledge back home and providing feedback there.



After each interparliamentary meeting, an oral feedback is scheduled - by the staff - in our committee meetings to catch up with those at home and the staff will provide a written report and a digital file with links to the European documentation of the interparliamentary meeting. This is how we try to ensure all the members stay "tuned in".

Reading all the recent proposals on the EMU, the democratic deficit does not seem to be really overcome. The Finance and European Affairs committees therefore will organize next months - with substantive support of our staff - an expert meeting on the future of the Economic and Monetary Union. Questions will be raised like:

- How do the European Commission's proposals relate to democratic accountability to both the European Parliament and national parliaments?
- What are the consequences of the proposals (for example a budgetary capacity for the euro area) for the budgetary rights of the national parliaments?
- How could democratic accountability in relation to EMU be improved?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of a European Minister of Finance?
- What does the inclusion of the fiscal compact in the legal framework of the Union mean for the process of democratic accountability?
- What is the experts view on setting up an EMF?

But above all, the members will also deal with the substantive proposals and also invite experts from outside their own Member State, such as authors of the recent Bruegel report who have attempted to bridge the gap between German and French economic insights. Finding common ground to go ahead.

The findings of this meeting will be used for a annual General European Debate of the Senate I already referred to.

Both examples - striving for transparency and scrutinising EMU-proposals and governance - show how the Dutch Senators and their staff are participating in the Future of Europe debate in a practical and pragmatic way. This approach may not be spectacular, but may help to bring about solutions for the EU and its member states in response to the challenges I mentioned at the start of my speech.

To conclude on a positive note. In the last ten years the European dimension of the work of the national parliaments has tremendously gained impact. Looking back at the last ten years we can say that the EU managed to overcome a number of crises. National parliaments and interparliamentary interaction certainly contributed to politically overcoming these crises. Digital contacts among parliamentary staff on how discussions develop in our national parliaments have increased tremendously since the Lisbon Treaty. That all contributes to a better fabric of our Union. Important steps forward require broad support in the European parliament and in the national parlia-

ments. We as Secretaries General of Parliament with the Staffs we lead, have a key responsibility in contributing to the organization of the debate of the Future of Europe.

In the words of Christine Lagarde: *'The European Union is work in progress, let's face it. And it's a huge work. But that is the challenge.'* Thank you for your attention.