

**24 October 2012, Handelingenkamer (Minutes' Room)**  
**Word of welcome by Mr. Fred de Graaf, President of the Senate of the Netherlands at the occasion of the visit of the President of Italy, Mr. Giorgio Napolitano.**

President, Sir, it is a great honour to receive you here in our democratic House, *the States-General of the Netherlands*. As President of the Senate of the Netherlands, I warmly welcome you, also on behalf of my colleague, the President of the House of Representatives, Mrs. van Miltenburg. And of course on behalf of my other colleagues present here today.

Mr. President, I am extremely pleased that we are here together today. As close partners and as founding fathers of several European and other international organisations, we have, without any doubt, a lot of interesting issues to discuss. Our cooperation is based on some bold agreements, most of them made shortly after the Second World War. Some state that indeed, our democratic and prosperous Europe is built on a graveyard. Our countries stood at the cradle of NATO and they stood at the cradle of the Council of Europe. Our democratic leaders signed the Treaty of Rome and later established the European *Union*. We embarked on a path of monetary unification and we ratified the Lisbon Treaty. Nowadays, we do not even shy away any more from talking about fiscal integration or the pooling and sharing of our military assets.

Over the past seven decades, on that graveyard, we built a different Europe. A Europe that cares about similar general objectives and whose reasoning is based on the same fundamental values. Europe, we decided back then, is a continent with a positive view on human kind. A continent that believes cooperation is better than competition - except maybe in economic markets. A continent that believes in development for the betterment of all. Your Excellency, the underlying values, I am happy to repeat them - human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and the respect for human rights - have shaped my mind. I take the freedom to assume that they shaped yours as well.

These days, we find ourselves somewhat struggling to keep up this image of Europe. The still lingering problem of the euro is the problem of all of us. So is the pressure of immigration. We are all looking for the magic button to restart our economies and to grow. Enhanced competitiveness is a necessity if we want Europe to remain to be associated with rising prosperity. But this does not come overnight. And while Europe tends to slow down, the world around us seems to be changing rapidly.

We all face large questions: do we opt for more integration, including on political and fiscal issues? Or do we opt for less integration, nibbling away on freedoms of movements of people as well as of capital? How can we enhance European solidarity? How can we prove our electorates that such solidarity is a

mutual good? I hope that in the next hour, we can exchange some constructive ideas on these issues.

Here, we have a chance to discuss our common, as well as our individual concerns. Naturally, and fortunately, even between the closest of partners differences of opinion remain. European countries after all retain to some extent differences in histories, geographical positions and endowments of natural resources. As a result, we have slightly different political systems, slightly different economic preferences and slightly different concerns. In my view, the bottom line should be that this variation should not, not even in difficult economic times, provoke inward-looking reactions. To prevent internal finger-pointing and to prevent atmospheres from turning sour, we should discuss our concerns. As I said, our common, but also our individual concerns. Only if we know about each others concerns, we can understand each others positioning.

To give the most obvious example: The Dutch could possibly perceive the North African coasts as rather "far away". Of course, for Italy, this is a very different story - only 150 kilometres away. I would be pleased if we could exchange some views on developments in our Southern neighbourhood and the consequences for European policies.

I will conclude. I will do so by expressing gratitude for the fact that the relations between the Netherlands and Italy are

excellent at all levels. Therefore, I would like to tell you once more how extremely pleased I am to have you here in our midst and I am looking forward to a fruitful debate.