



## Speech

### **International EuParl.net Conference 2013, words of welcome by mr. Kim Putters, First Vice-President of the Senate 30 May 2013**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

A warm welcome to you all. It is not often that I get to see this historical room filled up with such great historical knowledge. And I say that with the utmost respect for my fellow senators....  
It truly is an honour to receive you all here and to host the opening from what promises to be a very interesting and thought-provoking conference.

What better place to open this conference than here, in this historical building that is today home to the Dutch Senate and has housed Dutch democracy for nearly 400 years. We like to consider ourselves as relatively recent inhabitants in a long tradition. For this plenary hall dates back to 1655 and was built for the States of Holland and West-Friesland. In order to build this hall, the houses of the 'stadholders' (a medieval function that can be described as a hereditary head of state) were torn down. Thus space was created at his magnificent square 'het Binnenhof', which translates as 'the inner square'. We call it the inner square for a reason. We say that this country is run from one square mile on which both the houses of parliament are situated as well as the Prime Minister's office. This tradition dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

But let me refer a little more to this building and its rich history. For it has been home to stadholders Maurits and Frederik-Hendrik, but also to King-stadholder William III and his English wife Mary-Stuart. In 1806 it was home to King Louis Napoleon, the first King of the Kingdom of Holland. When he left for Utrecht in 1807 (apparently one year in The Hague was quite enough), an official proposition was submitted by the Treasury to tear down the inner court, since it was in such a bad state. Luckily for us, this proposition was rejected due to the historic importance of the site.



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If it had been accepted, the Dutch parliamentary history could have looked a lot different than it does now.

After the incorporation of the Batavian Republic with France, this very room was used to inspect army recruits. In that period of time a great amount of artefacts unfortunately were lost, most of them never to be found again. But the historic background of this building can still be found in its stained glass windows, its hand woven tapestries and its oil paintings. For me they form a constant reminder that the decisions that are made here today do not stand on their own but form part of something greater: the history of Dutch democracy.

This sense of tradition, of reflection, of 'the bigger picture' is to a large extend the core business of the Dutch Senate. We are not fulltime but part time politicians. We all have positions in Dutch society. Among the senators there are doctors, entrepreneurs, lawyers and mayors. For one day of the week we form part of a crucial system of checks and balances between government and parliament and also within parliament itself. Democracy is never a given, we need these checks and balances in order to remain transparent and critical.

When a bill is dealt with in this house we test it for legality, practicability and enforceability. In the current Dutch political climate that is proving to be a more and more complex task. For the first time in decades the reigning coalition does not have a majority in the Senate. They hold 30 of the 75 seats. This means that for every bill a majority has to be found through consulting, debating and persuading. Some say that this damages the position of the Senate because it puts the various parties - opposition as well as coalition - in an increasingly political position, away from their core business. One can also argue that it allows the Senate to fulfill its role as *chambre de réflexion* even better than before, because a majority of senators in favor of a bill is never a given. The debate still goes on, as does our legislative work in the Senate.

The scope of the Senate's work is not restricted to national issues. For national policy is partly also European policy, and European



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policy is for the greater part national policy. The Senate realises that, and has tried for many years now to stress the important role that national parliaments play in strengthening European cooperation and policy. Since 2009 European legislation is directly put on the agenda of parliamentary committees. This means that the position of the Senate equals on that aspect that of the House of Representatives. In addition: by hosting conferences, expert meetings, and hearings the Senate sparks debate in and with society and improves its knowledge on European dilemmas. The Senate has also created a specific website on which its European related issues are publicised. In a way this helps the Senate to be accountable for its role in fortifying the democratic legitimacy of the EU.

National parliaments play an extremely important role in bringing European citizens and European institutions closer together. It is the task of national parliaments to bridge the gap between on the one hand irreversible trends of European centralisation and on the other hand the sentiments of uncertainty, resistance and unbelief among the people the national parliaments represent. If people do not feel at ease, the worst thing parliamentarians can do is look aside or step back.

But international cooperation - and the role that national parliaments have to play in this - stretches further than the boundaries of Europe. The Inter-Parliamentary Union is a good example of democratically chosen parliaments working together to preserve peace and to promote a world-wide dialogue. The Inter-Parliamentary Union works for co-operation among peoples and for the firm establishment of representative democracy. As Chairman of the Dutch delegation I have seen first-hand that even difficult subjects such as human rights can be addressed on a global, political level.

By the way, the focus on international cooperation is certainly not recent. To prove this point, I would like to direct you to the images that are painted on this ceiling. When this room was created in the mid seventeenth century, it was specifically requested that the



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room expressed a strong international connection.

If you look up, you will see people from all over the world looking down on us, with a sense of curiosity. If you look closely, you can recognise the Polish, the Persians, the Turks, the Spanish, the Mexicans, the French, the Italians, the Russians and the Germans. Since the seventeenth century and specifically now in this age of growing globalisation, it has become more and more important that countries realise that they cannot live in isolation. And that major issues such as climate control, safety and the battle against poverty cannot be tackled on a national level alone.

This brings me to what I think is one of the great merits of a conference like this. Not only does it offer the chance to look back on parliamentary history on an international level, it also offers a chance to learn from that history and to look to the future together.

Since the theme of this conference is 'The ideal parliament' perhaps you will allow me to briefly touch upon that subject. The word 'ideal' is explained in the dictionary as 'reaching an imaginary standard of excellence'. There is a quote from Winston Churchill that I think applies here: "*To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.*" Perhaps an ideal parliament is in a way always 'an imaginary standard'. As long as we change, we are always improving. And if we change often, we can hopefully reach that standard of excellence. Or at least, according to Churchill we will...

The Dutch Senate has certainly tried its best to change, since we are the first parliament in the world that fully functions on digital data processing. We no longer have stacks and stacks of paper, but can find everything we need on our iPads. On your desks you see a small tin pot, that was used in the past for dipping ink. We have a saying here: "from ink pot to iPad". This is one of the ways in which the Senate is trying to constantly evolve and improve.

Today is my one of my last speeches as First Vice President of the Senate. I will be leaving my position here in a few weeks. To have formed part of the Dutch parliamentary system and therefore of its



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parliamentary history has been a remarkable experience for me. I am glad to see that that history is researched and examined carefully. For now I wish you a very interesting and as I said "thought-provoking" conference. I hope it contributes to finding out what makes an ideal parliament.