

**Speech by the President of the Senate of the Netherlands,
Yvonne E.M.A. Timmerman-Buck, on the occasion of the European Conference
of Presidents of Parliaments, Wednesday 31st May 2006, Tallinn, Estonia**

Subject: Role of parliaments in promoting pluralistic democracy at home and abroad.

Mister President, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

How to improve our parliaments' contribution to fostering and consolidating democracies at home and abroad? Perhaps we could apply the European Union's principle of subsidiarity to this question: do we achieve better and more effective results on a supranational level or on the national level. I think the answer is obvious. On a supranational level, combining our efforts and forces we can really help new born democracies. And we should do so.

The most important goal to realise in this field is a solid and trusted cooperation between the EU and the Council of Europe. They really should work together, avoiding re-doing each others work. National parliaments can of course give additional assistance with bilateral programs and with the exchange of best practices. However, the key players for this on the European continent and in neighbouring countries should be the Council of Europe and the EU.

Therefore I would like to take this opportunity to call on everybody to do their utmost to successfully conclude the Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and the Council of Europe and to implement the recommendations made by Luxembourg Prime Minister Juncker in his report on the cooperation between the Council of Europe and the EU. The Senate of the Netherlands endorses the view of Mr Juncker that we should support a sole ambition for the European continent. Furthermore, the European Parliament has adopted a very ambitious resolution on the European Neighbourhood Policy aiming for close cooperation with the Council of Europe. I call upon the European Parliament, which has also been invited to this conference, to implement its resolution.

Since action convinces more than words, I do hope that in the near future the citizens of the new democracies will be seeing solid agreements on how to implement the resolution of the European Parliament and the Memorandum of Understanding.

Regarding the national parliaments, I believe our contribution can be best found in our bilateral and informal contacts in the different international fora and in bilateral relations. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and other fora give us the opportunity to discuss the "broader picture". We are not obliged to debate directly legally binding documents or new detailed laws. Instead we can share our experiences and exchange views on general guidelines, policy and perspectives. More importantly, we can exchange views with the opposition parties in countries too. Is it not a core value of a pluralistic democracy that there is opposition? All voices should be heard. This is beneficial to our parliamentary diplomacy because it supports its continuity. We all know that the opposition of today can be the coalition of tomorrow.

Working together with the Council of Europe and the EU, national parliaments can pull their weight to help foster and consolidate democracy around the world; to make sure that parliaments do not degenerate into applauding machines but turn into full fledged democratic representations.

Thank you for your attention.