

*Speech by Mr. René van der Linden, President of the Senate, welcoming the President of the European Parliament Mr. Jerzy Buzek, at a plenary discussion on 29th March 2011 with both Houses of Parliament*

Good afternoon. I open this very special meeting.

Also on behalf of Mrs. Gerdi Verbeet, President of our House of Representatives, I warmly welcome our guest, the President of the European Parliament, Mr. Jerzy Buzek, to the States-General of the Netherlands. It is a real honour and pleasure to receive you in this plenary hall of the Senate.

Mr. President. In many ways you embody the tremendous changes Europe has seen in the last few decades. In your home country Poland in the eighties of the last century, when your country was under oppressive communist rule, you were very active in the Solidarity trade union and political movement. You were one of the leaders that led your country to democracy. In the nineties you were appointed Prime Minister. After Poland's entry into the EU you were elected member of the European parliament with a very high number of preferential votes.

In 2009 you were elected President of the European Parliament. Your election as the first President of the European Parliament who comes from Central and Eastern Europe was a milestone in the history of the European Union. You are presiding over the most powerful European parliament the EU has ever seen, because through the Treaty of Lisbon which came into force on December 1, 2009, the European Parliament saw its competences widen drastically. The goal you defined for your presidency to bring the Parliament closer to the people, is one that I wholeheartedly support.

Now you are the guest of the national parliament of one of the founding members of the European Union. The Dutch States-General have a long tradition of support to the European integration. After the second world war the European economic community was created to prevent new wars. It has proven to be an extremely successful concept which indeed has maintained peace and has brought prosperity to many European countries, not in the least the Netherlands. After the collapse of the communist regimes the Dutch parliament fully supported the enlargement of the European Union based on the principle of 'no more dividing lines in Europe'.

Today we are confronted with new challenges on a global stage: climate change, energy crisis, terrorism and security risks, poverty and exclusion, budgetary deficits. The geopolitical map is changing. Europe has a crucial role to play in solving these crises. Crises have always helped Europe further. That can happen again, provided that we are ready to come up together with the right answers together. We have to be willing to pool sovereignty, while preserving our identities.

We all know, however, that the growth of the European Union in the last decade also has led to scepticism among citizens about ends and means of European cooperation. Member States tend to become more inward looking. The Netherlands has not been an exception on this trend. Speaking for the Senate I want to underline that it has only stimulated us to be very active on European issues and in European arena's. We raised issues in interparliamentary committees such COSAC where we came up with proposals to increase the openness of the deliberations of European Council meetings, contain the unwanted growth of European agencies, and to improve the European financial control systems through the obligatory introduction of approval statements.

The strong conviction that Europe is more than the European Union has led to a very active participation by our members to the activities of the Council of Europe, particularly its parliamentary assembly. It is extremely important that a community of values on human rights, rule of law and democracy exists on the European continent which has a much larger scale than the European Union. From the beginning we have pleaded the EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights. Parliamentary diplomacy through official visits and informal contacts certainly contributes to the dispersing and implementation of values and international rules and agreements.

I am quite proud that the European activities of the Senate have been acknowledged by the "Fondation du Mérite Européen" which recently has decided to award the Dutch Senate its "Médaille d'Or". This will make the Dutch Senate the first national parliamentary institution to receive this prestigious honour.

I am convinced that the Dutch parliamentary action has contributed to strengthening the role of parliaments within the European institutional setting. Of course we applaud the higher level of democracy that the Lisbon Treaty has brought. The Treaty is the beginning of a very important new phase within the European Union. It has given us parliamentarians enormous responsibilities. It is up to us to increase the indispensable support of the citizens to decisions which are important for the future of Europe. As national parliaments we have to respect the competences of the European Parliament under the Treaty. But the reverse is true as well. We expect a more open eye of the European Parliament for feelings and sentiments among European citizens. I make a strong plea that the European Parliament seriously takes note of the opinions of national parliaments. We are partners in democracy.

The powers of the European Parliament have been strengthened. Its reputation as an efficient and effective democratic institution needs further improvement. Openness, transparency, proper responsiveness to people's needs and expectations are required to gain people's trust. May I add: a constant cost conscience. The EP must assure that EU's expenses are necessary and justified. The EP's own expenses must be subject to utter self-criticism. In a period in which all state budgets are dramatically cut, the EP must be modest in its financial requests. It must be avoided that the extremely important tasks and role that the European Parliament has to fulfil are overshadowed by bickering over its own expenditure.

The world is changing rapidly. New economic powers have arisen. The recent dramatic events in Japan have increased the awareness that the energy crisis requires common global and common European action. The hopefully positive changeover in the Arab world poses a new challenge for our continent. It requires a common action to strategically strengthen the neighbourhood policy. Precisely the events in Northern Africa and the Middle East require also a strong Council of Europe next to the European Union. The European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should make full use of the Council's experience and instruments to protect and strengthen human rights and democracy. The Council of Europe's work should not be weakened by costly duplications of its programs by the EU.

May I finish by thanking you for your tireless efforts to strengthen Europe. The floor is yours. And after your speech Mrs. Strik, chairperson of the Senate's committee on European cooperation, will lead the discussion with Senators and Members of the House of Representatives.