

Keynote Speech by Ankie Broekers-Knol

Speakers' Conference, 9 April 2019

Session II: The European Union ahead of the 2019 European elections – further development of cooperation between national parliaments and European institutions.

Keynote speakers

Mr Wolfgang Schäuble, President of the German Bundestag

Ms Ankie Broekers-Knol, President of the Dutch Senate

Mr Gérard Larcher, President of the French Senate

Mr Marek Kuchciński, President of the Polish Sejm

Mister Chairman,

Let me first congratulate you on a very well organized and interesting conference. I would also like to thank you for the outstanding and welcoming dinner yesterday in the beautiful city of Vienna.

Secondly I thank you for your honourable invitation to speak here today on the subject of further development of the cooperation between national parliaments and European institutions among these eminent and eloquent colleagues: Wolfgang Schäuble, Gérard Larcher and Marek Kuchciński.

Dear colleagues,

Almost 10 years ago at the 43rd COSAC in Madrid I gave a speech on the topic: The **new model** for relations between national Parliaments and the European Parliament after the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon.

The speech tackled the various possibilities to create an effective model for cooperation. Many of the topics that we are discussing today were addressed back then as well.

I then made the point that we must avoid starting up a lot of new interparliamentary conferences as this would in all probability not contribute to the essential process of strengthening relations between national Parliaments and the European institutions, but on the other hand that we must put more focus into the discussions among ourselves. I discussed the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and the role of IPEX and other forms of what was then-called *electronic* communication between parliaments. I stressed that we must never forget the reason for inter-parliamentary cooperation between national Parliaments and the European Parliament, namely to connect and to reconnect the citizens of Europe with the European project.

And here we are, 10 years later and a few newly introduced IPCs further down the road, talking about all these issues again ahead of the 2019 European elections. But instead of

reiterating the thoughts I then shared with my audience on effective models for cooperation, let me now focus mainly on the aspect of interparliamentary cooperation and more precise on the importance of interparliamentary dialogue.

The year 2019 will undoubtedly be again a year with unprecedented events and political challenges.

And I am not referring to the Brexit-events, which will mark the year 2019 as a central point in a highly emotional and very disturbing political opera.

In the complex world of today no single member state can tackle issues like terrorism, climate change and migration alone. Working together means having more clout, also in global trade and geopolitics. We have to stand and to work together to achieve goals that go beyond the interests of individual sovereign states.

Having said this however, I personally do not support the idea of a federal Europe. For me it is clear that **the European Union is a unification of people, not states**. We have to make sure that the priorities of the people are the EU's priorities.

And above all, we need to be aware of the fact that citizens increasingly feel a loss of identity and are unsure of the future. It is the duty of the EU institutions and of the national politicians to seek a balance between a closely working together Union on the one hand and the acceptance by citizens of some unification on specific subjects on the other.

National parliaments - together with the European Parliament - are ideally placed to reaffirm the connection between EU-citizens and the EU. Parliamentarians are in the position to make sure that the policies the EU pursues, are based on public acceptance and benefit the citizens of our respective member states. Our national parliaments are and must be the voice of our citizens.

It is also essential that we as politicians keep our promises, because citizens choose the politicians that they trust the most. But these promises in my view have to be realistic and of a nature to support the idea of doing things together, not countermand them.

It can sometimes be difficult to explain to our citizens all the nuances of European policy, but let's be clear: the EU is not the bad guy. Young people growing up in the EU take many of the achievements of the EU for granted, and so does a large part of the older generation.

We as parliamentarians need to address the issue of the added value of the EU for the day-to-day life of our citizens. And that also means that we have to be clear about EU proposals that we think are not in the interest of our citizens. National parliaments should also be more transparent - and accountable – about their position on EU policy. And on the possibility to influence this.

Being open and transparent about what the EU does and how these decisions come about is essential. It is clear that procedures in the EU are difficult. Citizens should however be able to understand this process and be able to follow and even influence decisions through their

national parliaments. Not only is this an essential prerequisite of democracy, it helps to build trust in the EU.

In this regard, let me say a few words on the importance of interparliamentary meetings.

Building personal connections across European countries opens doors and facilitates conversations and discussions.

In my experience, during the various interparliamentary conferences I attended, it is not our intent to come up with solutions for the many challenges that face Europe. We exchange information, best practices and opinions. And we go home enriched with what we heard and learned from our colleagues.

So let us use our valuable time together to have honest and frank discussions among ourselves, not lengthy monologues.

There are some practical arrangements that can be introduced to stimulate discussions, which we can discuss further during the debate. For instance:

- I was delighted to see this set-up - where the Speakers sit closely around the table, so we can look each other in the eye.
- And we can try to introduce moderators more often who are experienced in stimulating a more lively debate among delegations.

To conclude: Let us seek to form connections that can end up proving invaluable in creating the common ground that Europe so desperately needs.

We owe it to those we represent – the people of the European Union – that we, parliamentarians, both national and European, cooperate effectively for the benefit of our citizens, so that indeed all European citizens feel connected to the European project, to the European Union, to a prosperous future.