

Dear Chairman and members of the Kingdom Relations Commission,

After I had read the Parliamentary Letter of State Secretary Knops on the progress on St. Eustatius (of Friday, May 29, 2020), I thought: "*what would I think of that as a member of parliament?*". The letter breathes quite a few positive developments so that makes you happy. I would like to invite you to take a closer look at things with me. Beneath the glossy varnish I think there are quite a few rotten spots that have just been painted over without taking the rotten spots out, repairing them, repainting them, and only then applying the varnish layer.

The progress is measured by means of a dozen criteria that were formulated in November 2018. I notice three things about it:

1. All points have to do with St. Eustatius, no action needs to be taken on the side of The Hague. The Commission of Wise Men had in fact pointed out that on your side of the ocean some things also had to be taken up, but not a word about that now.
2. These twelve points are regularly found in the State Secretary's report to your House of Representatives, starting with defining them in November 2018. Apart from those progress reports, I do not know of any documents here on the island that address these points. I have been surprised before that not a project group or task force would complete these points one by one in order to be able to quickly return to the 'own' democracy. Also the government commissioner does not seem to want to put these points on the agenda with enthusiasm and/or urgency (and certainly not to discuss them with the local population).
3. With regard to these twelve points (but also in a broader sense), it seems to me that improvements may have been made, but the extent to which they remain is a not unimportant question. In other words: did the Dutch people who flew in do a trick and did they leave or did the Statian actually learn how to do it?

Subjects that are mentioned as having been discussed in the Social Advisory Council may have been discussed. I'd like to take a look at the minutes of those consultations to make sure I know the arguments mentioned back and forth, but apart from the fact that they may be distributed among the members, there is nothing publicly available on the local government website. A similar wish concerns the consultations of the now established Central Dialogue. And actually all other public dialogues.

The letter speaks of a consultation with representatives of political parties on the island in view of the upcoming elections. That was new to me. Now you can say, yes, but you are not a representative of a political party on the island. That's true, but even though I'm not part of the Kingdom Relations Committee, I can take note of your consultations, their agendas and the underlying documents. Isn't the daily publication of the agendas of the government commissioners (in addition to the weather forecast) on Facebook a possibility to consider? I suspect - but don't have any minutes of it either -

that such discussions have not been reported in advance to the Social Advisory Council either. You would expect that when transparency is really high on the agenda. *Note: As long as the Social Advisory Council is the only legally prescribed forum with which the government commissioner communicates, one might expect that all developments have in any case been discussed or announced in this forum. If in a separate forum the depth is sought, of course, only the announcement in the Social Advisory Council will suffice. I have already made the point about the missing, publicly available minutes.*

The State Secretary states that COVID19 has once again exposed the vulnerability of the island. This was, of course, already the case before: in 2017, Hurricane Irma not only exposed the vulnerability (at that time mainly of St. Maarten) but also the dependence of our island on St. Maarten. In 2017 it was stated that the dependency of St. Maarten was too great and should be reduced. In the future no action was taken at all and the dependency is still very high. Even the air connections still run exclusively through Sint Maarten. At the end of 2017 there were plans with the CN Express and somewhat later with EZ Air for direct connections between the BES-islands: a very favorable development but that means competition for Winair and that development has (with the help of the Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland) skillfully been turned around.

*Note: I have previously proposed a business case based on having good, regular and direct connections between the Windward and Leeward Islands which also include the ZVK flights. With the phasing out of 'Colombia' in favour of 'Bonaire' (and/or Curacao and Aruba) this business case should, in my opinion, be favourable. It seems almost unwillingness not to want to elaborate this business case further. Or are there people who have a personal interest in maintaining Winair, Sint Maarten or Colombia? You'd almost think so...*

In a certain sense I miss a critical journalistic function here, partly based on 'follow the money'. Take, for example, the St. Eustatius Tourism Development Foundation with an annual contribution from the budget of St. Eustatius of 330,000 US dollars. What happens with that money each year and what results become visible in - for example - the following year. A Court of Audit-like research question, I would think. I hope that question will be taken up again. What I think I see in terms of tourism in everyday practice is that especially divers are welcomed on the island for a diving holiday. In the wake of this, the hotel industry and the catering industry also get their share. Apart from these divers, I don't see many tourists on the island. As far as I know, the visit to the (diving) fairs in Europe and the United States by the diving school in order to attract holidaymakers is not financed from this budget. I think these costs have to be borne by the diving school itself.

Speaking about tourism I read that the Secretary of State considers it hopeful that new tourist accommodations are under construction that can bring new employment and economic development to St. Eustatius. I am critical about that. The new building will not take place in such an open and

transparent way. There's a lot of deforestation and if you're looking for permits, they can't be discussed. In that context, everything is imported, including plants. Whether that is responsible, I wonder. How did the Colorado potato beetle and the oak processionary caterpillar actually end up in the Netherlands? Yet also along the road of uncontrolled import ...?

And then I read in the letter from the Secretary of State another piece of news that I haven't heard at all here on the island. The Cabinet is betting on a ferry between the windward islands! Of course I welcome any development that contributes to (affordable) accessibility of the island, but earlier developments based on a ferry connection have all stranded sooner or later (mainly because of the relatively long journey time and the hardly competitive rates; not to mention the fact that many St. Maarten have an aversion to sailing), moreover a ferry connection with St. Maarten does not make 'our' dependence on St. Maarten any smaller. If we are looking for developments in this field I would rather see that the advice resulting from the report 'Connectivity Caribbean part of the Kingdom' of July 30, 2018, is really put into practice.

*Note: The fact that I read this news in a report to the House of Representatives in The Hague is remarkable anyway. You would assume that local matters are best known locally. That turns out to be disappointing. If openness and transparency are of paramount importance, the government commissioner should take this into account.*

When I read the developments surrounding the elections, I see that the 'ocean steamer' of Knops is continuing his phased reintroduction of democracy, starting with elections in October 2020. A truly open consultation about the near future of the island with the population - I am thinking of a townhall meeting - has never taken place to date (I do not count the information about this in the Social Advisory Council: a discussion with the government commissioner has been skillfully withheld in these consultations to date; and I do not count the townhall meeting of 23 September 2019 either: it had the character of a robbery in which the letter to You that followed the following morning was already ready). Here he makes clever use (I would like to say 'abuse') of the low propensity for cooperation of the political parties. The ratio on the island says "you wouldn't want to stand for election when you are then muzzled in the Island Council" (the Council of State also endorses this). But as soon as parties would like to propagate this out loud as a policy, there is always another party that would like to make use of this position and thinks "if you don't participate, that's fine with me". My view is that it is reprehensible of the State Secretary to make use (abuse) of these feelings. In my opinion, he should rather focus on a fruitful cooperation between the two parties. I wonder whether there is still room for a more significant change of course, for example, one in which the original situation is quickly restored (acknowledging that not much has actually been achieved yet), work is of course being done within legal frameworks and progress is being made on the basis of administrative agreements between the local government and the central government.

With regard to current events concerning drinking water (with the intervention of, among others, the National Ombudsman) there is a strong focus on the company Stuco, owned by the Public Entity of St. Eustatius. Although I agree with the critics that there is simply not enough fist on the table (by both Stuco and the Public Entity), it is mainly the Hague Ministry of I and W that has not taken up developments here for about five years.

*Note: A smaller "thing" (but no less important) concerns the CXC Decision of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science concerning the transition of primary and secondary education on the island initiated six years ago (English as the language of instruction and CXC-oriented). The CXC Decree, which among other things must define the value of the local school diploma in the Dutch system, has still not been implemented while the first cohort of CXC/CSEC graduates will be leaving school this summer.*

Then a single word on the COVID19 pandemic. The island was - rightly in my opinion - not considered able to adequately deal with a possible outbreak on the island. In that respect, I am very happy that at least the 'Karel Doorman' is on a tour in this region that can help in case of an emergency. With a lot of bombardment, a so-called hospitainer has now been placed here without any noteworthy extra staff (with knowledge and experience). This puts extra pressure on the occupation of the already relatively weakly organized hospital on the island. It seems to me that we have actually deteriorated. From a promise of a capacity with six IC beds, a kind of medium care is now left over (without experienced and equipped staff). Should there still be an outbreak here, the island would be on its own (perhaps with the help of the 'Karel Doorman') while referrals to elsewhere have not become easier either (not even for normal care).

I conclude by expressing the hope and the wish that action will finally be shown on the various files that have been open for some time now, and that the island will not be alone when the need arises. I look forward to the plenary debate the day after tomorrow!

Kind regards,

J.H.T. (Jan) Meijer MSc MBA,

Bellevue Road 4, Upper Round Hill, St. Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean.