

To: Chairman and members of the Committee on Kingdom Relations in the Senate
From: J.H.T. (Jan) Meijer MSc MBA, resident on St. Eustatius

At the (almost) last minute I see that tomorrow you will be debating for six hours with State Secretary Knops about the cooperation with the overseas territories (the countries Curaçao, Aruba and Sint Maarten and the public entities Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba). I would like to give you a brief overview of findings where St. Eustatius is concerned. Given the time I have left for this and taking into account the short time in which you will be able to take note of all this, I will limit myself to a few main points.

First a few words to introduce myself. For a whole military career I served in the Royal Netherlands Navy and the Ministry of Defense. It ended in 2010 (in the rank of captain of the technical service, colonel) due to reaching the age of 'functional age release'. After that I worked for three more years at the Mauritshuis and from the school year 2014/2015 I am working as a teacher of mathematics at the Gwendoline van Puttenschool on St. Eustatius. I have been living there for almost seven years now.

We - my wife and I - have always set ourselves up as 'guests of the island' and we tried to integrate as best we could. As a teacher at the secondary school, I naturally have the advantage of dealing with the youth of the island, as well as their parents. On a religious island like St. Eustatius it is also important to note that we are part of a denomination; this seems normal when you see that more than 90% of the population is part of one of the three major denominations on the island: Seventh Day Adventists, RK and Methodists. The education level of the population is low as is the income. The distribution of income is about one-third more unbalanced than in European Netherlands (Gini coefficient European Netherlands is about 0.3 while that of St. Eustatius is about 0.4).

In February 2018, the central government overruled local government and "took over" governance with the appointment of a government commissioner. This was to put an end to a governance that is riddled with intimidation and nepotism. Terms such as "friends, family and favors" were banded about but, of course, no one really felt addressed. The law that formed the framework for this was called the "St. Eustatius Neglecting Governing Tasks Act" and its basis was a document that was delivered by the Commission of Wise Persons. In all honesty, I must say that at first I was enthusiastic because potentially a lot could be improved with the help of and in cooperation with the European Netherlands.

Gradually my enthusiasm waned because, of all the developments I observed, there was one aspect that was structurally lacking and that was "consultation". Two (sets of) government commissioners took office: Franco/Stegers (Feb 2018-Feb 2020) and Van Rij/Francis (Feb 2020-present, with the recent announcement of Van Rij's departure). Both Commissioners - led by Knops - did absolutely nothing in terms of consultation with Statians (especially about 1) the future of the island and 2) the relationship with The Hague). I am convinced that potentially the Dutch intervention could have been very instructive, but if you just go your own (colonial) way without any consultation with the population, then you should not be surprised that island enthusiasm quickly drops below the minimum. In that respect, I would say that the intervention to date (plus the remaining part) has been a great era of opportunities that have (deliberately) not been taken. I suggest 'deliberately' because there is only one view: the European Dutch view. For the record, the consultation as I imagined it is called 'townhall meeting' here. It is a village of about three thousand residents and certainly if you organize something like this periodically (once or twice a month for example) then after some getting used to it a working consultation model could have come into being.

In terms of democracy, nothing at all has been learned. Infrastructural aspects have been tackled, such as the roads and the protection of the eroding cliff (all not really worthy of intervention, I would think).

The island election held last fall yielded exactly, but exactly the same composition of the island council as it had prior to the intervention. In short, there is absolutely no sympathy for the Dutch intervention. And I am convinced that this has everything, absolutely everything, to do with the way in which the European Dutchman treats his compatriot from Statia: arrogantly, pedantically and disrespectfully. The same issues that were being pursued could have been achieved much better, in any case with much more support, if a fruitful consultation model had been chosen, but the Knops route simply left no room for consultation or input of any other kind.

If you were to leaf through the findings of the Commission of Wise Men again, you would hardly be able to come up with a different view. And of course someone like Clyde van Putten has gone slightly too far on more than one occasion, but - in his defense - if the role of the fifth wheel has been forced upon you as a Statian for years, decades, perhaps centuries, aren't feelings of frustration 'automatically' fed? Understanding, empathy and respect (in addition to an overdose of good things, which have thus not or less effectively been achieved or conveyed) are the essential missing ingredients of this joint meal, which as far as I am concerned can safely be called a failure.

Now that the government commissioner Van Rij, who is not overflowing with communication either, is leaving, I see a situation in which both he and Knops can leave the arena with their heads held high because one is needed elsewhere and the other is outgoing. I fully understand the local call (from Clyde van Putten) to immediately reintroduce democracy without the phased play with a European Dutch director and referee. I hope that the recently held elections and the now following formation will end with an understanding Kingdom Relations team that will truly engage in consultation and work together to build a better relationship.

In these two A4 pages I do not want to delve into the depths of the matter but only briefly touch upon the following: in the Netherlands (consisting of a European and Caribbean part) two different legal frameworks apply. In the European Netherlands there is, by way of example, the Civil Code and in the Caribbean Netherlands the BES Civil Code (being the old Civil Code of the Netherlands Antilles from 1869, six years after the abolition of slavery). The synchronization of legislation, where desired and in consultation with the individual BES islands, is in my opinion a top priority. It may well be that for large parts the European Dutch legal framework will apply, but where it is considered desirable by a public entity, it must be possible to deviate in legislation or regulations for the benefit of the individual public entity. It requires a will to cooperate on both sides of the ocean; it will also require the necessary effort on this side of the ocean.

In short, in my opinion the intervention - no matter how understandable the reason was - was handled totally wrongly and the content of the intervention was never aimed at a better relationship with the European Netherlands and better local government. The approach was purely material and otherwise completely disrespectful to the Statian rolled out and flattened. Let the future with a new cabinet and a new composition of the House of Representatives come up with a better plan.

Wishing you much success in your debate.

Kind regards,

J.H.T. (Jan) Meijer MSc MBA,
St. Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean.