

Dear Chairman and Members of the Kingdom Relations Committee,

You have, of course, just finished the recess, so my expectation that my letter of last month has already generated some response is perhaps a touch too ambitious. It is my custom to get in touch with you about once a month. After all, not much journalistic news is to be expected from this island. And the degree to which I am independent is, of course, also a question of your faith in me on the basis of my blue eyes. In short, I hope to win your trust but the extent to which I succeed in doing so is up to you and not to me.

Talking about journalism: of course it is not up to you (the newspapers do that themselves) but it would be honourable for national newspapers in general to give the Dutch Caribbean a more inclusive feeling. To start with - for example - the national weather report. Once when I was in Spain (for a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela) I followed the weather forecast daily. I noticed that when giving a national weather report, the Canary Islands were naturally included. Why the Caribbean Netherlands (belonging to the country 'the Netherlands') is not included in a Dutch weather report, is initially a mystery to me and as I think about it more and more, a source of daily irritation. If you could use your influence on this, that would give me a good feeling.

Now of course it is not only about whether or not I feel good. But - seen in a broader sense - it is of course about the second-class position that you give to the Caribbean Netherlands. In the preparation of 10-10-10, the BES Civil Code came into being. This is basically the Civil Code of the Netherlands Antilles (from 1869, six years after the abolition of slavery!) with mainly three adjustments: gay marriage, euthanasia and abortion had to be included. Now I am not directly a proponent or opponent of this development but in my opinion it is already going wrong in the basics. In the Netherlands we have a Civil Code and as of 10-10-10 it should - I repeat: according to me - apply to the whole country of the Netherlands. And so a number of other (if not: all) laws.

The nice thing about being a Public Entity is that when an exception has to be made, fortunately that is possible. And those exceptions, in my opinion, should all have a good reason which has something to do with the special character of St. Eustatius (or of Saba, or of Bonaire; but in my letter I limit myself to St. Eustatius). And then I am referring to the small community of about 3000 people, the closed island character, English as the main language (incl. the language of instruction at school), a tropical climate, situated in a hurricane-prone area, the specific flora and fauna (including the coral) and perhaps a few more things of which it is obvious that tailor-made laws and regulations apply.

But for all kinds of other things, such an exemption situation seems to me to be less desirable. And the insight into this legislation and regulations (i.e. what is national and what is applicable to the islands) is not easy to give. When I search for all laws and regulations applicable only to Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius (source: <https://wetten.overheid.nl>) I see 598 laws. When I did this the other day I came up with 600, where that difference of two comes from: no idea.

One of those laws, by the way, is the "BES Civil Law Notary Act" which includes a definition of the places of employment: two on Bonaire and one for the islands of Saba and St. Eustatius. And what are we doing here these last months? We are using the services of notaries on St. Maarten: *nota bene another country within the Kingdom*. When asked, the government commissioner has already reported to me once that the notaries on St. Maarten are the only ones who, based on the current legislation,

would be authorized to provide notarial services on St. Eustatius (and Saba). He called the option I raised "worth exploring", but it would not provide a solution at present. The option I raised does not come out of the blue (yes, maybe for the Government Commissioner): it is simply current legislation, valid as of July 1, 2015!

It reinforces my feeling that we are just muddling along here and that the government is cozily participating in it. The Secretary of State "knows" what is good for the St. Eustatians, and follows his own course. I certainly believe that he thinks he is doing the right thing, but consultation with the St. Eustatians simply does not take place.

On the island there is an investment in a hotel. It is widely known on the island that the investor, Mr. Barnhoorn, is working with big money here. There is virtually no transparency about all this. When all this was just beginning (with the clearing of a piece of nature for this relatively large building project) I went after the necessary permits. Mr. Barnhoorn believes that everything can be bought for money, including this piece of island with the use he advocates. It could be that by now the permits are all in order, but - take it from me - the first six months of this project were not at all! After half a year of meeting all the cupboards and walls of the government, I stopped looking further: not a single permit was visible to me. Oh yes, it was at that time that the term "essential worker" made its appearance. It referred to those workers who went to work on the Barnhoorn project without further quarantine measures. I don't believe anything went wrong, but obviously there was a great risk involved.

*Note: In early November 2020, State Secretary Knops - with entourage - made a lightning visit to the island, also without maintaining quarantine measures. And of a need for that visit, nothing has come to my attention. Getting acquainted with the newly elected members of the Island Council could of course easily have been done via video.*

*Note: I can of course imagine something about "essential worker". In a case in which the input of this kind of capacity can make the difference between life and death, I will not be heard squealing, but the occurrence or non-occurrence of some delay in a hotel construction project, coincidentally of a wealthy investor, seems to me to have difficulty in acquiring the character of an "essential worker". Also the introduction of a new device for the hospital, supervised by an official from St. Maarten, who had tested positive, for which the government commissioner personally granted the designation "essential worker", seems to me to be difficult to stand the test of criticism. And that something like this happens once in a while (the whole island knows about it!), I am willing to believe, but it would have honored the government commissioner if he had expressed a "mea culpa" in his weekly talk on the radio. When he instead urged the population to be especially careful, he had of course quickly lost the credit he might have built up with the population.*

Back to the here and now. It seems important to me that the Island Council also speaks with one mouth (at least to the outside world). The cooperation in the Island Council has not been particularly exemplary to date. And that does not work very well when the members are not inclined to deal with ideas constructively. Instead, the idea that the other person's idea is "wrong" and one's own idea is "right" sometimes prevails. Admittedly, before the intervention this attitude was more common, so I hold out hope for the future! It helps when a "common enemy" - the Dutch - manifests itself ;-)

It seems to me that a new composition of your committee offers many opportunities to make a fresh start and I hope that the Island Council will also start to see it that way. With regard to an agenda of items to be discussed, it seems to me that this step can be taken "automatically" when the mutual willingness to cooperate, on the basis of equality and respect, is there in any case.

I would like to leave it at that. I express the hope that the cooperation as I mean it here, and in which listening to each other is an important asset, may really get off the ground.

With kind regards,

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