

St. Eustatius, February 23, 2022.

Dear Chairman and Members of the Kingdom Relations Committee,

In the evening of Monday, February 21, 2022, there was the 'meet & greet' with the new State Secretary for Kingdom Relations (and Digitalization). She - Ms. Alexandra van Huffelen - is making an introductory tour of all the Caribbean islands in the Kingdom and these days St. Eustatius was on the program.

Someone had signed me up to be part of the group of about twenty-five residents of St. Eustatius who could participate in this 'meet & greet'. Without wishing to criticize this, it strikes me that this was a selected group of residents who were invited; apparently it was not the intention that the entire village could join in. Not that I would immediately expect this - after all, the program has not been made public at all - but for a 'meet & greet', aimed at mutual acquaintance, I would not want to go for a 'selection'.

At the 'meet & greet' I got the impression that most invitees were able to talk to Ms. Van Huffelen for a few minutes. It was, of course, a first acquaintance on both sides so a sharp turn in policy between that of her predecessor and herself is not immediately to be expected but it came as a relief to me that Ms. Van Huffelen was apparently listening with sincere interest to what was being exchanged with her. My name was already known to her in advance, so it turned out when I met her: she had read my most recent letters in any case, so she indicated.

I think it's a good thing that in a country like the Netherlands what has been (constitutionally) laid down is not suddenly changed by decree. That would only feed something like an unreliable and arbitrary government. Nevertheless, I have some comments to make here:

- At the time, I found it hard to explain the law that made the intervention possible ("something about neglect of duties") in any other way than as a carefully prepared surprise attack, with a simultaneous and joint debate in the Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament and an immediate entry into force.
- If, on the other hand, you want to change the policy so that, for example, the BSN is introduced more broadly, the same government hides behind legal arguments whereby meticulousness mainly leads to a lengthy process in which laws have to be amended. And then it turns out very recently that this lengthy process can also be 'short-circuited' by going the route of the AMvB. Well, you just have to be creative. The end seems to justify the means. Anyway, although I think that fortunately the Netherlands is not an autocracy and the civil service has a dampening effect on all too sudden policy changes, the government does not always seem a reliable and above all fair partner.

- Thus - by surprise - suddenly, in the context of a progress report, the set of twelve criteria that would have to be met (by St. Eustatius; not a single condition that the Central Government would have to meet, while the report of the Commission of Sages did indeed give cause for this) was pulled out of the hat before democracy could return to the island.
- Some arbitrariness does seem to be present: when a large investment on the island (i.e. a resort for tourism) is being considered (and implemented), the idea that what is equal is equal is a fallacy; on the other hand, we see around us every day that, free from George Orwell, all animals are equal, but some animals appear to be more equal than others. For example, Covid measures are selectively enforced, logging and building is done while the permits are not in place at the time, etc.
- In all these years - counting from 10-10-10 - the Central Government has still not succeeded in reducing the poverty and skewed income distribution on the island to acceptable proportions. Worse, no attempt has been made. I note that - in my opinion - the discussion around the subsistence minimum for the BES islands should not and cannot actually exist. Just as this discussion - rightly - is not held about the subsistence minimum in the various regions in the Netherlands. The same argument can be made about the various social benefits in the European and Caribbean Netherlands.

It seems to me that this set of comments may not be exhaustive, but still illustrative with respect to the way our island is governed. The big difference, of course, is that in the European Netherlands, supposed abuses are widely reported in the various media. Apart from Facebook there are no media here (oh yes, The Daily Herald, a newspaper on St. Maarten, occasionally reports on a single development on the island; here there is no real 'hearing both sides of the argument': if something is photographed or described then it is published uncritically).

*Note: It is not only the practice of "hearing both sides of the argument" that is not applied. There is no transparency at all in decision making, nor is there open communication (two-way traffic!) between the island leaders and the population. The fact that a mediator is being sought to get the communication between the government commissioner and the Island Council out of the rut is telling!*

The following should be said about the status of *the democracy taken away from the island*. Broadly speaking, there are two opinions possible. You are against it, or you think it is a good thing that the (European) Dutch government actually "does" the administration. The opponents say that the intervention has now lasted long enough (*does it really take more than four years to restore order to an island with about three thousand inhabitants?*) and that there should be more local control over the future of the island and its organization. The proponents believe that "The Hague" has the best intentions for St. Eustatius and further believe that a man like Clyde van Putten with his sharp criticism of everything that comes from (European) Netherlands is responsible for the poor mutual understanding.

My appreciation here is that Clyde van Putten indeed does not mince his words, speaks straight from the heart and speaks on behalf of many voters as a vote cannon of the PLP. However, the (European) Dutch are also quite disrespectful and only with difficulty consult with the locals on "how to proceed". The obvious solution is of course: "talk to each other" and that is exactly what is proving difficult. Discussing the common future of the island with each other proves to be a difficult point. Discussions (if they even exist) too easily degenerate into a vulgar fight in which the most decibels often have the longest breath. Good arguments too often lose out to emotional violence. Patience and good listening are valuable ingredients but they are insufficiently recognized and appreciated.

In recent days I have regularly heard, derived from "it takes two to tango", that a good relationship between the Island Council, local government (Government Commissioner) and the Netherlands (StasBZK and officials of MinBZK) is of great importance. Until now I think to see that the Island Council, yes, also with input from Clyde van Putten [who looks somewhat black and white: they are wrong and we are right, while the future should be colored together], here looks the most professional. With the arrival of the new Secretary of State, I too hope that we will have a somewhat better future because one thing is certain: the gap between the Statian population and the European Netherlands has not really narrowed in recent years.

In other words: let it not just be a personnel change, but also a policy change with more patience, mutual respect and increased listening skills. To date it is only roads, walls, street names and the airport that have improved; when it comes to democracy and the associated model of consultation and transparency, it is still not there. Not for several years now!

Kind regards,

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*Note: Shortly before the actual sending of this message, I caught sight of - call it unconfirmed news - that consideration is being given to giving the Government Representative (in Bonaire) more functions again. I think it was the Council of State that advised (in my opinion quite rightly) that more powers should be given to the island government, which maintains direct contact with the (European) Netherlands. That artificial intermediate layer - a kind of province - only disturbs the communication.*