

The Hague, December 12, 2022.

Dear Chairman and Members of the Committee on Kingdom Relations of TK and EK,

In a presentation in The Hague - December 8, 2022 - Mr. Clyde van Putten made a plea for a commonwealth form of state that seemed attractive to him and in which St. Eustatius could be linked to the Netherlands.

In such a commonwealth relationship, sovereign (independent) countries enter into cooperation with each other (think of a cooperation such as the BeNeLux). The VVD program also mentions the commonwealth option as the relationship advocated by the VVD between the Netherlands, Curaçao, Aruba and Sint Maarten (the four countries in the Kingdom of the Netherlands). In the VVD's idea, this would put these islands in a sovereign, (financially) independent position "at a distance" from the Netherlands, just as the "separate status" for Aruba was initiated at the time (1986). Ten years later (1996), Aruba would then take the step to full independence, but it never came to that. The Netherlands cannot force the step to independence - in relation to international laws and regulations as agreed upon in the United Nations - but there are therefore parties - including the VVD - that would prefer to see the Antillean islands kept as far away from the Netherlands as possible. If the islands themselves want to take the step toward independence, then that is possible (within the framework of the right to self-determination), but that must be an explicit wish of the island's inhabitants.

Clyde van Putten - a member of the Island Council of St. Eustatius - thinks that is a good plan for St. Eustatius. Before arriving at such a relationship, in that case, St. Eustatius must first become an independent country (within or outside the Kingdom). If the majority of the population wants this, that step will not be a problem legally. The question is whether this is a wise step. In all objectivity it must be recognized that this small island - half the size of Vlieland - with a population of about three thousand people without an independent economy will not have a prosperous future when the step to independence will be taken. After all, this step implies that the flow of money from the Netherlands will also be stopped. And functionalities such as education and health care are already directly financed by the Dutch government. Without external funding, the "independent St. Eustatius" will sink almost immediately. Of course, external funding could be provided by other countries. That will not always be without quid pro quo. The countries that would want to qualify for this are often not democratic and do not uphold human rights. Financing by the Netherlands, of which the BES islands are a public entity, is therefore a far preferable option.

At the same time, I understand the emotion very well. Financial consequences aside, the patronization of St. Eustatius (and the other BES islands of Saba and Bonaire) is verging on childish. And more than once I - and not only I - have cited examples where the Caribbean Dutchman is put away as a second-class resident of our country. The discussion surrounding the fight against poverty is nothing short of shameful. One delaying tactic after another is pulled out of the closet to discriminate against the Caribbean Dutchman.

Five years after the 10-10-10 milestone, there was the evaluation commission led by Ms. Spies. The findings of this commission were undeniable: the Dutch government should listen much better to the local population, do much more to fight poverty and be less dominant. As good as nothing has been done with these findings.

In the report of the Commission of Sages (drawn up in 2017 and presented in February 2018), I read on page 53, among other things: *"It is urgently necessary to start the autonomy debate on St. Eustatius, so that neither the current administration nor others can begin to think that Statian actions would be or become the standard. Prior to that, however, the Netherlands will have to develop a vision for the Caribbean Netherlands. Now this is missing, while on St. Eustatius there are pronounced views on this, also among other politicians than the current administration"*.

The offer letter dated February 5, 2018 further states, *"The commission also criticizes the Netherlands. It identifies a situation in which the Netherlands has stood on the sidelines for too long, both where the helping hand is concerned, and with regard to the debate about (more) autonomy. The committee also identifies an attitude in the Netherlands that is characterized by disinterest and the lack of a shared vision"*.

And now we are almost five years on and the findings of then are still in effect unchanged (!). The disinterest has not diminished and a shared vision is still lacking. The dialogue between the Netherlands and St. Eustatius is far from equal and respectful: still it is mainly discussed and decided *about* the Statian and certainly not in consultation *with* the Statian. Very recently, it appears once again that the government (both in the Netherlands and the "seat bosses" in St. Eustatius) are making an effort to keep unwelcome reports - it was about the safety of buildings, including a hotel, in relation to falling rocks due to erosion - secret. Fortunately, justice prevailed and recovery was ordered by the courts, but that it had to come to this point is downright disgraceful for that same government. If the February 2018 intervention was necessary because of the Statian government's dereliction of duty, in its place has come an if possible even greater dereliction of duty (and discrimination) by the European Dutch government.

There is no doubt about the right of self-determination (of the islands). However, the step to full autonomy cannot be taken for granted. A workable middle way seems to me to be working with clear multiannual plans that, as a constantly updating dot on the horizon, give direction to all parties involved. The condition is of course that the plans are drawn up by the Island Council, fed by the population.

Perhaps we do want to be a learning (government) organization but as yet there is a very intense stubbornness. We are - so I understand from the media - on the eve of pronouncing apologies for the slavery of yesteryear, but when it comes to dealing respectfully and equally with our fellow Dutchmen on St. Eustatius (or more broadly: in the Caribbean Netherlands), these apologies can only with difficulty be seen as anything other than laughable, ludicrous and in any case: not sincere. It is something like saying "sorry" by a student who is corrected by his teacher: it is a meaningless cry

because this student is certainly not going to adjust his behavior after his statement. Rather, he will "justify" his actions with "*I say sorry, right?*".

In summary, I would advocate:

- not to go for a commonwealth of independent countries and certainly not for the current Caribbean public entities within the country of the Netherlands;
- immediately stop the institutional discrimination by the European Netherlands against the Caribbean Netherlands;
- to enter as soon as possible into an open, honest and heartfelt dialogue (on the basis of mutual respect and equality) with the respective Island Councils (if possible: even more broadly with the entire population; after all, the islands are not that big) about the way in which now and in the (near) future a prosperous existence of the inhabitants of the Dutch Caribbean islands will be given shape (and to write that down and agree on it in multi-year plans to be updated every year).

Finally, a word about equality and equivalence. Equivalence between the islands/countries is the much-heard aspiration of the government in The Hague. I see a future goat trail being paved there to justify existing inequalities. When agreement is reached on matters (policy areas) between the countries, nothing seems wrong with that to me. However, for the Caribbean Netherlands - Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba - a concept like equivalence seems to me to be out of place. Article 1 of the Constitution speaks of equal treatment in equal cases for all in the Netherlands. This article existed before concepts such as European and Caribbean Netherlands were introduced. It seems obvious to me that this article in the Constitution addresses all Dutch people throughout the Netherlands. As far as Social Minimum, AOW, AOV, unemployment benefit, child benefit, etc. are concerned, it seems to me that all legal regulations about these therefore apply to all Dutch citizens, regardless of whether they live in Twente, the Randstad, the Wadden Islands or the Caribbean public entities. All "detours" (as currently under discussion) are nothing more or less than discrimination (of second-class Dutchmen).

Yours sincerely,

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