

The Hague - The Democratic Party of St. Eustatius has written to State Secretary of Kingdom Relations Raymond Knops urging him to restore democracy on the island.

Party leader and former Island Council member Frini Adelka Spanner and Koos Sneek, also a former member of the Island Council, plead for elections to be held as soon as possible and, as a transitional phase, for some temporary supervision by the State of the functioning of the Island Council and the Executive Council.

In the letter, Spanner and Sneek elaborate on the progress report that Knops sent to the Lower House before the summer recess. The members of the DP have reservations about a large number of passages in the report. They are particularly critical of the lack of transparency, including with regard to new regulations.

Spanner and Sneek also point to the slow progress of the improvement process, although - unlike before the February 2018 intervention - there is no shortage of manpower or financial resources. Read below the entire letter of which the Lower House Committee for Kingdom Relations has received a copy.

“Dear Mr. Knops,

First of all, we would like to express our admiration for the way in which you have energetically fulfilled your responsibility as Secretary of State for Kingdom Relations and also, in particular, for your coordinating role between the various ministries. We have certainly missed this in the past. Your initiatives have led to visits to our island by several responsible ministers and state secretaries. The latter has visibly contributed to a clearer picture and greater understanding among ministers of the situation in which we find ourselves. The positive results of this are now visible.

We also express our appreciation for the way in which the reconstruction after Hurricane Irma has been handled. More than 130 houses have been refurbished. The embellishment of cemeteries, the restoration of the Dutch Reformed Church and other projects have significantly improved the appearance of our island. The large amount of work that this has produced for our contractors and the financial compensation that companies were allowed to receive have given a considerable boost to our island economy.

The main reason for this letter, however, is to convince you, if this is still necessary, that because of the success of last year's intervention on 7 February it is important to restore local democracy as soon as possible and to have elections of the island council take place. However, this must be accompanied by a transitional phase, during which there will be sufficient control and guidance from the Council and the Executive Council in order to remain within the limits of what is required. As you know, the latter was also part of the advice of the Council of State on the introduction of the St. Eustatius Abandonment of Tasks Act. This phased return to local government increases the success rate of the intervention and provides a certain form of guarantee of sustainable good local government for the future.

Your report paints a picture that is not entirely in line with reality on certain points and if this is ignored, it can be detrimental to a good result or to not taking the right decision. We would like to discuss this point by point.

General picture

Contrary to what you write, the current administration lacks communication and transparency towards the citizen. Town hall meetings have not been held since last year.

The Social Advice Council hardly works and if it works at all, the population is not kept informed. As far as we can see there are no fixed agendas for this council, the meetings are not public and no minutes are kept or at least these are not published. The population is not familiar with the subjects that are discussed in the council and the way in which the government commissioner is advised. The latter, incidentally, chairs the meetings, which complicates the advisory function. The return of the Island Council in a transitional phase with the public debate will increase transparency, in which citizens will also feel more involved in the developments.

In the end, the Cooperative Platform does not really function. On the one hand, the members of this platform need to put their own house in order. On the other hand, this mainly remained a one-way street. The platform poses a question, the government commissioner answers or (sometimes) makes information available. There was never any real dialogue.

When you visit the St. Eustatius Government website, you may come across minutes of Executive Council meetings (the last one on 28 May) but these are often meaningless documents because the background information is not known. The same applies to the quarterly reports. The last published Newsletter dates from 2016.

In your report you talk about the start of the road project. The Cherry Tree Road project started at the beginning of this year. The project was due to be completed on 26 June. On that date, however, not a single metre of concrete had been poured, if we leave aside the piece of foundation that was poured on the occasion of the visit of Minister Van Nieuwenhuizen of I&W. The concerns already expressed by the members of the Kingdom Relations Committee in September last year, where the members indicated to fear that too much would be thought in terms of A-16 etc., appear to have been justified. The project is too large-scale and the procedures too bureaucratic. As a result, we cannot avoid the deployment of large Dutch construction companies (with long mobilisation periods) and expensive consultants, and insufficient use is made of local expertise.

The second project would have been awarded by now. Apart from some unclear rumours, little is known to the Statian about this. Here, too, there is a lack of transparency. A dynamic approach to the roads could have been **the** calling card as a tangible form of the improvements that the Statians have been waiting for so long.

Incidentally, we do not think that this course of action was also your wish, something which you yourself have complained about in the past. However, the involvement of a large ministry, where one is indeed accustomed to thinking in terms of an A-16, stands in the way of small-scale thinking at the level of the construction of a village road. For such projects, cooperation with a Dutch municipality, where one can think at village level, could lead to better and faster results.

You mention the tourism plan in your report. The latter is another example of a lack of transparency. The Statian citizen has no idea what this plan consists of.

Administrative domain

You see a total clean-up of the population administration as a precondition for holding fair elections. We have a bit of a double feeling about this. For decades, St. Eustatius has had to manage elections with a population administration that has never been optimal due to all kinds of factors. Even during the period in which the Temporary Abandonment of Duties Act is in force, elections have been held twice, namely for the European Parliament and for the Electoral College, as well as for a referendum. The voter may wonder whether a proper population administration for these last two elections and for the referendum would not have been a precondition. Questions can also be asked about why it takes so long to get a relatively small population administration in order. Contrary to what the island

government structurally lacked before the intervention, it cannot be due to the available (external) capacity and financial resources, which are now available to a large extent after the intervention.

According to your report, the new organisational structure must be in place by 1 July 2019. This date has not been met. We hear about a postponement until 1 September. If this is also a precondition for elections to take place or not, it will be very soon in view of the fact that your next progress report will be scheduled for the same date. Again, the delay cannot be attributed to the available resources and (external) capacity, which is again present to a large extent here.

Incidentally, you should mention a new administrative office. In order to improve the functioning of the organisation as well as to offer the civil servants a place of work that is sufficient to meet the requirements, the construction of this office is badly needed. However, you do not elaborate on the progress of this important project and whether there are any concrete plans at all. Here, too, there is a lack of transparency.

Since 2012, the Executive Council has been trying to train specific people to become Extraordinary Police Officers (Bavpol). However, this has never been possible, partly due to a lack of sufficient cooperation from the Dutch Caribbean Police Force. It is good to read that 15 people have now been trained. Incidentally, these persons are still not working as such.

In the same period, the Belastingdienst Caribisch Nederland was approached to take care of the collection of the local taxes, because this would benefit the collection. This request was not granted at the time. It is good to hear that this will be taken up again.

Financial management

In the past, the CFT has on many occasions highlighted the lack of resilience in the budget. Due to a lack of financial scope for this, mainly caused by a too low free allowance, the successive Executive Councils were not able to do this time and time again. Apparently, the government commissioner has now also failed to find room for this in the still too tight budget for 2019. We look forward to seeing if and how the government commissioner for next year will succeed without an increase in the free allowance.

In the letter accompanying the budget for 2019, the government commissioner stated the following:

"During the preparation of the draft budget, the realisation arose that of the total costs of USD 16,000,000, more than USD 14,000,000 consists of fixed, non-influenced or slowly influenceable costs. As a result, there is a lack of budgetary space to plan the annual management costs for public space and buildings, subsidized institutions have to settle for frozen subsidies, and there is no room for innovation and stimulation of tourism, sustainable economy and agriculture and a growing self-sufficiency in St. Eustatius.

We are therefore going to draw up a budget which will include all the things that have now been lost and also the costs arising from the multiannual maintenance planning of the capital assets. We will discuss this budget with you before the summer of 2019. OLSE will make every effort to optimize the receipt of its own income, and the Netherlands will have to be prepared to grant the BES countries a free allowance that is in line with the cost level that a small Caribbean island simply entails."

It is not known whether the latter has happened or whether there is also a lack of transparency here. The fact that, as a result of the above, the government commissioner is not able to include resistance etc. in the budget should not be used as a criterion to postpone the elections any longer. What we do fear, however, is that a future Island Council and Executive Council will face the same problem at the end of the intervention.

You indicate the importance of the introduction of the Court of Auditors function. According to agreement, there would be a joint court of auditors for Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba. The last two islands already appointed members a number of years ago. It is Saba that has always refused all cooperation. The fact that there is still no court of auditors has nothing to do with St. Eustatius and can therefore not be considered as a criterion for not holding elections.

You report that a number of regulations have been amended. The introduction or amendment of these regulations was not preceded by a public debate or information campaign. Even after the introduction of most of these regulations, they were not publicised. The public is therefore unaware of how or why and what it is going to cost them. What is salient here is the introduction of a precarious levy, which until recently did not exist. Nobody knows about this, even though it could have considerable financial consequences for the electricity company STUCO and the telephone company EUTEL, among others, and, as a result, the possible costs for the citizen. Even the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management has unexpectedly been saddled with additional costs of USD 400,000 for the use of government land for the construction of the new airport building.

This state of affairs can be prevented in the future by the election of an island council, as a result of which such issues are dealt with in the public domain.

Finally

Without underestimating the gross neglect of duties and the disregard of the law of the previous board, we would like to point out that the neglect (of duties) of which you speak could have taken place over many years as a result of a desperate shortage of financial resources. This applies to the period before 10-10-10 as well as for the period after that.

The latter has also left its mark on the quality of the civil service. If sufficient resources are not structurally available, there is a very good chance that the problems will recur, even for future island councils and executive councils that do want to operate within the law.

We hope that you will see our criticism and the identification of some shortcomings as constructive and that you will take these into account when deciding whether or not island council elections will take place in the near future. The re-functioning of the democratic system with the Council and the Executive Council, preferably for a certain period of time in a transitional situation with sufficient guidance and supervision, will undoubtedly benefit transparency. In addition, the transition phase will offer a certain form of guarantee for the future, so that there will be no repetition of the situation that led to the intervention on 7 February 2018."