

Dear Chairman and members of the  
Kingdom Relations Committee,  
Committee on Education, Culture and Science,  
Committee on Infrastructure and Water Management,  
Committee on Public Health, Welfare and Sport,  
Committee on Social Affairs and Employment,

The recess is as good as over, reality is knocking at your door again. Of course that reality is dominated on a daily basis by the proverbial delusion of the day, but there are bound to be red threads. And St. Eustatius is certainly not high on your agenda, which I do understand from a national perspective (after all, St. Eustatius is only "a village" in The - Caribbean - Netherlands). I will mention below some recent developments and observations - in a random order - of which I hope you can still give them a place in a proper agenda.

### ***Committee Education, Culture and Science***

Let me start with Education. During the past summer holidays eleven CSEC students<sup>1</sup> of the Gwendoline van Puttenschool on St. Eustatius took their final exams. Every person involved in the education chain (ministry, school, pupil, parents, teacher) has seen this coming six years ago (admittedly, the pandemic was not yet foreseeable then of course) and yet the CXC Decision in which further details are (or: will be) formally worked out is still not available. As a result, the outflow of students, insofar as they want to join a higher professional education institution in the European Netherlands, is encountering 'connection problems'. After all, on the one hand the European Netherlands is unfamiliar with the level of this study programme and on the other hand there is a phasing problem: the results of the CSEC exam are not known until August/September of any year (and this year, because of COVID19, not even until September/October). Over the past six years, the Ministry has not been able to draw up a sound regulation for these aspects. Currently, individual cases are being discussed with directly involved educational institutions and representatives of MinOCW (NL) and MinOCW (CN), where the 'passing-through' (policy completely devoid of content) in the Dutch Caribbean (Bonaire) is aware of all this but has not raised any bells at all during all this time (Bonaire does not have an English speaking CXC training so the problem point is not felt there and therefore not taken up<sup>2</sup>).

### ***Committee on Social Affairs and Employment***

Then I took note of a recent call for consultation regarding the BES Aliens Employment Act Implementation Decree (Besluit uitvoering Wet arbeid vreemdelingen BES) in connection with a change of duties regarding the exemption of the duty to obtain a certificate of employment for teachers

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<sup>1</sup> CSEC stands for Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate in the CXC system (CXC in turn stands for Caribbean Examination Council) and is the high school diploma for the Windward Islands of the Dutch Caribbean, as established by the government (for these, the then State Secretary Dekker of MinOCW) in his letter to the Lower House of October 8, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The European Netherlands (The Hague) continues to try to see BES as a single entity with only one administrative contact point. Where Curaçao used to function as a focal point, it is now Bonaire, a thousand kilometers (!) away from Saba and St. Eustatius. Just as Curaçao used to think mainly of Curaçao, Bonaire now thinks mainly of Bonaire. Read here especially a plea for direct relations between the individual islands of the Dutch Caribbean on the one hand and the Hague ministries on the other hand.

on Saba. Quite a mouthful (but that is the way it says on the website of the Internet consultation). As far as content is concerned, I will respond by means of this internet consultation, but in essence my reaction (consultation) boils down to: "why only Saba?". On St. Eustatius the problem is identical and also there this duty leads to an excess of administration, delay and fake advertisements (to which you especially should not react, because they are only there because you have to). Because of this delay teachers only become available late (sometimes: too late) for their (new) work on the island, as a result of which the continuity of the training is ultimately harmed (which was precisely the intention, according to the text accompanying the consultation). Anyway, in terms of content, more along the lines of consultation.

### ***Committee on Infrastructure and Water Management***

Then the point of the air connections. Possibly already for a longer time, but in any case since hurricane Irma which in 2017 caused great damage to just about everything on St. Maarten, the dependency of both Saba and St. Eustatius on St. Maarten is under discussion. Both the telephone and internet connections, as well as the supply of shops and the referral to the 'larger' hospital in this region all run via St. Maarten and were therefore all at fault at that time. The call to be independent(er) from St. Maarten was omnipresent at the time but has silenced again in the course of time. The important player in the local connections is the monopolist Winair and attempts to diversify the air connections have yielded no results to date. There was EZ-Air and the CN-Express but they all died an early death. Why did they die early? The cause of this can only be guessed (and this is widely done) but nothing is heard from the official side. And then there is an open letter (dated August 7, 2020) from a resident of St. Eustatius to Secretary of State Knops who is also posted on Facebook and who has attracted the attention of BES reporter. BES reporter pays attention to it <sup>3</sup> and although still nothing substantial has happened, I see an increased activity by the local and national government to pay renewed attention to the airlift issue. The Facebook and BES reporter publication has led to several reactions including one, which addressed a, at least for me, until now, unknown and in my opinion widely underexposed point, namely the following.

Since the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles (10-10-10) the ownership of (monopolist) Winair has been in the hands of the countries Sint Maarten (approx. 92%) and the Netherlands (approx. 8%). This construction, it seems, means that both countries are bound to have the flight connections between Sint Maarten and (among others) Sint Eustatius exclusively carried out by Winair. Innovation in the sense of direct connections between the BES islands (including Bonaire) is not an issue here, because Winair and Sint Maarten do not see any bread in it. Organising these connections with companies other than Winair would be difficult because of precisely this ownership structure. A possible solution could be to divest the Dutch part of the ownership with which The (Caribbean) Netherlands has its hands free to work on this innovation. There may also be other possibilities to realize this innovation. In one way or another, however, there seems to be an administrative reluctance to face this reality and to work on a solution that serves the public interest - i.e. the people living on the island. In this context, I would also like to mention the high prices for the (air) connections (as a result of which many inhabitants of St. Eustatius actually feel trapped on their island). The

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://bes-reporter.com/index.php/2020/08/08/statia-resident-writes-knops-about-lack-of-air-connections/>

central government does not want to see these connections as public transport (like France does with its overseas territories, or transport to the Wadden Islands) so there is apparently no question of subsidy <sup>4</sup>.

However, they are working on a ferry connection between the windward islands (so again a great dependence on Sint Maarten). On St. Eustatius this attempt is seen as yet another test balloon of the European Netherlands that is kept in the air by subsidy (why not spend these funds on a good air connection?) and that in the long run is doomed to explode, as several earlier attempts have shown.

What I am about to write can be interpreted as "you are against economic development of the island" and that is absolutely not the case. What is it all about? About the Golden Rock Resort project on the southeast side of the island. Without a lot of publicity beforehand, a large plot of flora has disappeared for the benefit of the resort to be built. Plans that should give insight into "what do you want to achieve", "what are you going to do" and "what is it going to cost" have never been allowed to see the public light. Consequences for employment in the longer term, for example, have never been presented to any public forum. It is a 'toy' of a rich investor who starts from the adage 'for money everything is for sale' and acts accordingly. The entire project avoids public perception. Permits for the removal of the flora and the realisation of the building project are not available for public inspection, and the idea that cheap labour is brought in from elsewhere without a work permit or proper corona quarantine can hardly be refuted. Up to now, the investor seems to be right: for money everything appears to be for sale and the local government is also doing everything it can to please the investor. Am I against the development of the island as a tourist attraction? Not by definition, but how has the population been able to express their opinion on the future of the island? Not at all! There is no tourist master plan of which the realization of such a resort might be part and on which any public forum has expressed its opinion. I would like to challenge the reader of this letter to make the opposite plausible, but it is my firm belief that the investor is busy doing his 'thing' rücksichtslos and if it is finished with a profit, get rid of it. The island will (almost) not benefit at all. Under the line, the island will have lost quite a bit of nature. Everybody can see it, but nobody will do anything about it. Also - read: especially - the (local and national) government not.

### ***Committee on Public Health, Welfare and Sport*** <sup>5</sup>

Then health care. With the pandemic and the moderate state of health care on the island, the Navy sent HMS Karel Doorman to the Caribbean region. It was a welcome reassurance for many a resident. In that period MinVWS brought in the so-called hospitainer. Initially referred to as an intensive care facility with, among other things, respiratory equipment. Personnel would also be delegated. When I now look around the location I see six linked containers with a neatly constructed parking lot. Nothing more. As far as you can see inside (the door is closed, no one seems to be inside) you can only see storage of material. In my previous work environment there was sometimes talk of 'promoting away' another failed officer as if his new position would be that of 'chef empty boxes'. This thought now

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<sup>4</sup> Earlier I referred to a report on this from 2018: Connectivity Caribbean part of the Kingdom, which is (structurally?) but not taken up.

<sup>5</sup> State Secretary Blokhuis responded to my question of 7 December 2019 on 6 July 2020. A day later (July 7, 2020) I gave my reply - in this case his reaction was simply wrong - and since then it has been (again) quiet.

strongly occurs to me when I take a look at this constellation of containers which - in my opinion - contributes nothing at all to our public health. And HMS Karel Doorman has also been gone for some time now. The fact that the island is still virtually corona-free is mainly due to the fact that the external borders are fairly easy to keep closed and the reasonable (certainly not absolute) discipline to respond to the quarantine, and perhaps due to a certain dose of coincidence or luck! In my opinion, there is no question of any policy on Saint Eustatius on the part of MinVWS. And the state of health care on the island is, in my opinion, still moderate (and if I may believe the stories on the island: even declining). Here too there is the uncomfortable relationship with St. Maarten. The corona emergency on St. Maarten is high, at least higher than on St. Eustatius, with all its consequences for the referral of patients. In the meantime there is a drift to the medical facilities on the leeward islands of Bonaire and Curacao. In itself this does not seem wrong to me, but the movement is now born out of need instead of policy (where the leading idea is that Bonaire also belongs to the Dutch Caribbean, just like Saba and St. Eustatius).

### ***Committee Kingdom Relations***

Finally, some general observations. One that I would like to bring to your attention (which I have already done many times <sup>6</sup>) concerns communication. I am referring to communication with the population. Already many times I have stated that in The Hague people easily talk about St. Eustatius and absolutely not with the people of St. Eustatius themselves. An open dialogue with the population about the future of the island and the advocated relationship with the European Netherlands has been appointed by the Commission of Wise Men as very important and much needed, but has simply not been taken up by both the previous and the current government commissioner. I understand that such communication will be difficult to begin because the Statian is not at all accustomed to standing up for a collective interest. But not to start with it, I find it inappropriately arrogant (and when I read about the history of Indonesia's independence in this period - through the newspaper - such arrogant behaviour has been shown before by the Netherlands in its behaviour towards the colonies at that time; but well, this is all to the side...).

The Dutch elite then takes good care of themselves. The quarantine imposed by the government, where the quarantine taker has to pay himself but has no choice in the location, is mainly made a lot of money by the Dutch owner of the location(s). Another location, run by a local entrepreneur, takes some crumbs: let's say, the overflow for what the Dutch entrepreneur cannot handle. And all this under the guidance of the local government. If someone establishes that the Dutch elite takes good care of themselves, I can place this observation well. And wasn't it precisely this behaviour that prompted the administrative intervention?

In conclusion, I note that the administrative intervention did not go well from the start. At the time, I too thought "now the European Netherlands will set a good example". For the record: I will never blame anyone for coming here and not knowing what to do or where to start. I can imagine that very well. With a positive basic attitude and knowing how things can be arranged quite well, like in the European Netherlands, you can go far. But this positive basic attitude also implies a questioning and helping

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<sup>6</sup> In any case, I send a more or less monthly message to the Kingdom Relations Commission. The other committees I address now are only notified when there is a specific policy area at hand.

attitude. That of offering help is all well and good (i.e.: in the infrastructural field); even with the intentions it is all well and good. But with regard to the questioning, serving attitude, everything went wrong. The Dutch come here and claim to have the wisdom to know in no time what has to be done and then do it. Until now (since the start of the intervention in February 2018) no townhall meeting has taken place with a truly open agenda, aimed at the question "what is going on among the population with regard to the case 'what will St. Eustatius look like in a few years time and how do we think we will get there' or 'how can the relationship with the European Netherlands (The Hague) best be arranged (i.e. the optimization of the Public Entity after its evaluation by Spies c.s. in 2015)'".

I would like to turn back the time to February 2018 and start again with the attitude described here. But that is not possible. We are already deep in the mud and we have to muddle on. Recognising that things have gone wrong and that it might be possible to adjust things here and there would do a lot of good to the image of the European Netherlands, but I think the egos and financial interests are too big for that (and in any case the financial interests are not at the service of the local population).

I would like to wish you a lot of wisdom! And of course, I am always willing to lend a helping hand or to elaborate on the issues mentioned above (or before).

Kind regards,

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