

Dear Chairman and members of the Commission on Kingdom Relations,

In these days of General Considerations, following the presentation of the State Budget, I read a lot in the newspaper about the influence of the coronavirus on this budget. Much larger than any other 'input', it seems. And then in a few months' time there will also be the elections, so it's always a matter of checking whether a minister or prime minister is speaking here, or a foreman from the party he represents. That dilemma may not exist here, but the local elections are coming up as well.

The campaign is most visible here because of the flags that are hung along the road. There are three parties: DP, PLP and UPC. I walk past the most important of their positions (without wanting to speak on behalf of these parties: it is only my interpretation of what I see and hear). All parties claim to have the best interests of the Statian population. So where are the differences?

The DP is very busy with a good understanding with the European Netherlands. There is a partnership with the CDA and I have the impression that this relationship is being used as well as possible to position the points advocated by the DP correctly in the spotlight in The Hague. The other day there was a general round of mail in which the advantages of the close relationship with the European Netherlands were once again explained. And of course it is also undeniably where the construction 'Public Entity within the Netherlands' promotes the welfare of the local population. Certainly when you compare the local situation with that of the independent countries in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom that in many respects have to keep their own pants on and for that - as I read about Aruba, for example - even sometimes go into the expensive capital market instead of opting for the conditional cheaper option by borrowing interest-free from the Netherlands. In short, according to the DP, the population has been affected by the option 'Public Entity within the Netherlands'.

I don't know of any concrete plan or manifesto of the PLP, but the positions that were held at the time are still valid, as far as I can see. The influence that the European Netherlands has on the course of events on St. Eustatius is, in the opinion of PLP, far too great. The PLP does not so much strive for independence outside the Kingdom (in my words: "you don't just throw away so much comfort of course") but the autonomy should be significantly greater than it is now ¹.

Although the PLP likes to mirror the autonomy of the Caribbean countries within the Kingdom, it seems somewhat blind and deaf to the problems that occur on Curaçao, Aruba and St. Maarten and that are partly caused by having too much eye of government and parliament for their own stuffed pockets and a little less eye for the real needs of the inhabitants of the mentioned countries. When it comes to the feelings, I would think that the PLP slogans like "own people first" and "less European Dutch on the island" would just like to count as hers.

¹ And also here - in my opinion - the 'Public Entity' is a very flexible construction. I am convinced that when more autonomy can be made concrete in terms of 'what', 'how', 'who' and 'what budget' it will at least be possible to discuss this.

Then the UPC. Where DP and PLP are both expected to score around 40% to 45%, the UPC is the small, third party. As far as I can read from them, the sharp edges that the PLP likes to apply have been somewhat filed off at the UPC. But also in a recent circular from the UPC I read about the colonial power from which we have to crawl as well as about the structural standstill (in progress) that we have been confronted with for some time now. It seems that the UPC will be the smallest party but it will not be the first time that this party will take a key position in obtaining a majority coalition.

In short, little news under the sun, it seems. And I am happy to give my opinion on that as well. Because, in my view, it could have been a lot different. The fact that PLP clearly overslept its hand in the period shortly before the intervention in February 2018 by pushing aside Dutch legislation is perhaps the straw that has spilled over the proverbial bucket in the European Netherlands. I, too, thought, "now the European Netherlands is showing us how things should be done in a democracy". But that did not happen at all!

Where the Netherlands has a name to uphold in terms of the consultation model (the 'polder model'), it has structurally failed to consult with the Statian population. That course (in my words: "the course Knops") has now been sailed for two and a half years. And the opportunity to use a kind of charm offensive in a healthy and good consultation to mix the good things from the European Netherlands with a 'couleur locale', has not been used at all. And well, those wry fruits are now being picked. The hearts of the Statian people are not won with street signs, refurbished cemeteries and new whitewashed walls. Projects such as repairing the roads and modernizing the airport (with control tower and arrival/departure hall) are positively appreciated, but those plans already existed and they don't really have to do with an improved democracy.

A proverbial "broad social discussion" about the future of the island (in the sense of an improved economic situation) as well as about an effective relationship with 'The Hague' does not take place. It is my estimation that a structural, respectful consultation with the Statian population, with an input based on equality, would have been enormously more effective than just 'financing' some infrastructural projects here and there and therefore 'bringing them forward' in time (planning). Is tourism the key word in this? The government commissioner (both this one and the previous one) probably thinks so and bases his opinion on conversations with a few and probably especially "a few in the European Netherlands" (including the investor who is now making part of the island bare for a hotel). Organizing a structural consultation with the population would also have resulted in a much better understanding of the European Dutch 'way of doing things'. But yes, that is not what was chosen. In fact, I don't think any strategy was consciously thought through at all. The Dutch just do what they are good at and consult... what is that good for? after all, it only distracts...?!

And then that recent corona "outbreak" (which fortunately seems to have stabilized somewhat). Everyone has been able to see it: after all, Facebook is flourishing. The hospital staff is not sticking to anything at all and the government commissioner is also going to stand by (for the photo), and yes: the 'essential' employee (who probably wasn't that essential at all) doesn't have to be quarantined,

turns out to be infected and an important part of the club that has to set a good example and that needs to know better anyway, turns out to be infected as well. A guilty attitude and a word of apology would have been appropriate and the Statian population would have known that nothing human is alien to our administration. But no, in an almost arrogant, in any case misplaced regentesque way, the government commissioner urges us all to respect 'social distancing' above all. As I said, on Facebook this attitude has been widely measured and the credibility of the medical staff and the managers on the island has at least been pretty dented.

And what would this alternative strategy have cost? Well, what does 'good consultation' cost? Of course, in this day and age it would have to be improvised but a hundred or two hundred seats on an outdoor soccer field, perhaps supported by a sound system: that's all (and a few times in time, for example once or twice a month). And, to make optimal use of today's ICT: how about a regular webinar? Anyway, none of this has taken place and instead of little it has cost nothing at all. But instead of a lot of understanding, it has not cost anything at all. It looks like we'll be back at the end of 2017/early 2018. Just wait for the elections and we'll know if we've made any progress. My assessment? A case with only losers. And it could have yielded so much more - for the same money ². *Note: Is there actually a consultation? Judging from the radio updates (concerning the coronavirus) he mentions here and there targeted consultations (with 'stakeholders'). For example, I have heard of a consultation with school leaders about whether or not to reopen the schools, and of a consultation that hides under the name 'central dialogue': a consultation with employers on the island. There is little or no consultation with the only legally prescribed consultation ('Advisory Board'). And what I hear about it is announcements that have otherwise long been in the public domain or decisions that have in fact already been made. Real advice is never sought. And the future of the island has never been discussed here either.*

And on the other files concerning Saint Eustatius? We did discuss the financial infrastructure, but nothing has changed at all and - in my opinion - there are no improvements in the pipeline like European Dutch banks, or if necessary a BES bank, on the island; I'm not talking about a BSN for the Dutch Caribbean. About air connections: as far as I can see, the Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management hardly knows, if at all, that she owns the problem of the overpriced air connections provided by monopolist Winair, and the Cabinet does not even seem to want to take up this issue. After the internet consultation (February/March 2020), nothing at all has been heard about the CXC Decision (important for a good embedding of CXC education in the Dutch educational system). This embedding has been unfinished for six years now. And also regarding the ZVK (including a case with a student from here who, due to the actions of ZVK, finds himself in a situation that the CAK and the SVB describe as "uninsured, which is punishable in the Netherlands". Well, the thought occurs to me that with such friends you don't need enemies anymore, but that wouldn't be nice, and maybe too

² And not only that. In its report, the Commission of Wise Men pointed out the importance of the involvement of the local population. An importance that the administrators (and their managing Secretary of State) have done nothing with and do not seem to want to do anything with.

short. But is it crazy to say that the neglect of duties that 'The Hague' reproached the then Stavian government, in a certain respect now also applies to the same 'The Hague' (with its instruments, including the government commissioner)?

How to proceed? Well, it's up to you, I would think. Or you should give me more advice on how to get the engine working here. I am only afraid that you will again "accept my letter for notification", wait for a further, and undoubtedly rosier, report from the Secretary of State (who, I firmly believe, is now of the opinion that this dossier turns out to be a little less easily solvable than he estimated at the time, but will of course never admit this) and that on balance, therefore, not much will change in any area. Nevertheless, I keep hoping for better times!

Kind regards,

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Note: Did I already tell you that the problem with the water seems far from resolved? The other day (I think yesterday or the day before yesterday) it was once again announced that the water supply has been cut off indefinitely due to leaks in the pipe system.