



Speech of the President of the Senate of the States General
on Saturday 5 July 2003
on the occasion of the opening of the
Twelfth Annual Session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
in Rotterdam

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the Netherlands. Your meeting today is of special significance for our country. It comes at a moment when the question of whether the major issues of security, combating crime, conflict resolution and peace will be resolved within the framework of the major existing institutions or by fluctuating coalitions has become extremely acute in the international arena. In our country there is a widespread conviction that the institutions established after the Second World War are the framework within which cross-border issues can and must be resolved. The OSCE is one of the youngest of these institutions, but has already proved to be a framework of unparalleled historical importance both for peace and for freedom. Its even younger Parliamentary Assembly has proved that it can fulfil three major functions:

- first of all, it serves as a meeting place for parliamentarians from the member states where they can exchange views across borders, discuss differences and in this way help to prevent unnecessary misunderstandings and incorrect perceptions; history teaches us that misconceptions of this kind are often at the root of conflicts and hostility;
- secondly, it provides a means of gathering information and knowledge, particularly of sensitive subjects, and concentrates on obtaining information about subjects that are often complicated and multifaceted; as we all know, normal parliamentary work requires that attention be paid to countless subjects and problems, which is why a concentrated meeting of his kind is necessary in order to master the difficult issues.
- and, thirdly and finally, as stated at the time of the establishment of the Assembly in 1991, it is a means of providing democratic legitimacy and accountability for the OSCE itself.

The relationship between intergovernmental and multilateral organisations and national

parliaments is never easy. It follows from the very nature of such organisations that governments were initially the real and often only members. But as these institutions became more important in the second half of the previous century, there was a growing wish to involve in some way the democratic institutions to which the governments were accountable in their own country. Indeed, this need has now become so great that international and multilateral bodies which do not have a direct relationship with parliaments are increasingly searching for ways of establishing direct ties with them. As we all know, this creates obligations in two directions: first, national parliaments should not usurp the position of their governments and should focus above all on those subjects that are of real significance to decision-making in the institutions concerned; and, second, the institutions themselves and the governments cooperating in them should take very seriously these meetings of parliamentarians since they present a unique opportunity for the exchange of views, the acquisition of knowledge and the preparation of the ultimate decisions. The principal subject of today's session, namely your role in the new architecture of Europe, can be of historical significance, certainly at this juncture.

Just as reconciliation, freedom and prosperity were the sources of inspiration for the establishment of the EU in the 20th century, so we face the gigantic task in the 21st century of translating these concepts into guarantees and cross-border institutions in a much larger part of Europe and Asia. This is one of the major challenges facing contemporary politics and our democracies. Given our parliamentary tradition in the Netherlands and our views on justice and peace, we greatly respect your commitment to fulfilling this task, which is why I regard it as an honour to address this Assembly.

But there is more: the Netherlands not only contributes to the work of the OSCE and its Assembly, it also receives much in return. And I am not referring merely to the great importance of security, peace and the international legal order to our country. The Netherlands has had to learn – and is indeed still learning - to live with the reality, particularly since 1989, that the architecture of Europe has substantially changed, with all the consequences that this entails for us. For more than four centuries we felt comfortable on the edge of the Eurasian continent, with our backs as it were to the European hinterland and with our view fixed on other continents. Indeed, many of us were more familiar with the map of the western hemisphere than with that of the Balkans, the Caucasus or the republics of Central Asia. But since 1989 we have realised that it is precisely these areas that play a decisive role in stability, peace and security, or the reverse. As a nation we have simply lost the freedom to turn our back on this reality, which is a lesson we have sometimes had to learn the hard way. This is why an institution such as yours has tremendous added value: it

enables - and indeed compels - us to take good note of these realities, the new reality of our own region, with its huge opportunities and real threats. Needless to say, we should not lose our intercontinental involvement since it has moulded the character of our nation, but we can enhance its value still further by developing and strengthening a new engagement with the rest of our own far-flung region. The Netherlands must, as it were, make a quarter turn.

At the very moment we hold the chair, you have convened a meeting of special significance. Seldom if ever have so many far-reaching developments coincided: the enlargement of the EU (and accordingly the question of the limits of the Union), the future of the Atlantic cooperation, stabilisation in the Balkans, the mobilisation in the fight against terrorism, the challenge of how to deal with a new phenomenon - that of the blurring of the dividing line between international insecurity and private crime - but above all the issue of the place of the institutions which must promote and guarantee peace, stability and justice in our time. It is therefore a real privilege to be able to take part in the meeting and in the deliberations of an institution faced with such challenges.

Thank you.