

## **Session II**

### **THEME: "Is representative democracy in crisis? Challenges for national parliaments"**

#### **Contribution by Mr. Fred de Graaf, President of the Senate of the Netherlands, Strassbourg, 21 September 2012**

Dear speakers, dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to contribute to this debate and dedicate some words to the Dutch case. Also for the democratic system in the Netherlands, the questions posed are indeed very topical. As you might be aware of, we had snap elections a little more than a week ago. These direct elections only affect the Lower House and that is why I could be here, but my colleague from the Lower House cannot. The Dutch Senate is an indirectly elected body, elected by the members of the provincial councils and we are in session only once a week.

In any case, dear colleagues, I want to share some simple data with you: Last week's general election was the 5th of its kind in 10 years time. At the eve of the elections, 40 percent of the voters did not know what party to support. And voter turnout has dropped from around 95 percent to 75 percent in the past decades.

Somehow, one might think there is a bug in the system. One of the reasons why we are here is to exchange ideas about what these bugs are and how we can solve or straighten them. I would like to focus on two points I think are at the heart of the question, at least in the Netherlands: a mismatch between parties and voter profiles and a gap between party promises and practice.

First of all, there has been a mismatch between parties and the preoccupations of the electorate. In the Netherlands, we currently seem to be in the process of re-aligning the two. This does not happen overnight and certainly comes with some hiccups and some odds. But the fact is that the Netherlands of the

1950s is not the Netherlands of 2012. A healthy democracy should be flexible and adjustable to keep reflecting what society stands for.

Because the Netherlands has a *perfect* representative system - with no significant electoral threshold -, changes in social thinking can easily be recognized. We work with 11 parties at the moment. In my own opinion, this is too much, but that is a different discussion. In the 1950s, the Netherlands knew predictable politics based on consensus of the center. Society was divided into groups with clear boundaries. We called this pillarization or compartmentalization ('verzuiling'). Catholics, Protestants, Liberals and Socialists moved within their own distinctive "pillar". Each group not only had its own political party, but also its own newspaper, television channel, schools, clubs and trade union. Only at the elite-level, groups communicated and interacted. The elite decided, the rest of the pillar simply followed.

This clearly is not the case in the Netherlands of 2012. The traditional pillars have crumbled. They eroded because of rapid secularization, individualization and globalization. Politicians started testing the new electoral cleavages and as a result, the political landscape changed. For example, in 1966, we saw the birth of a political party servicing the new secular, individualized crowd. It calls for increased citizen participation in politics. In the 1970s, the mainstream Catholic and Protestant parties merged, but even united, their influence declines. In the early 2000s, we then saw the rise of anti-immigration and Euroskeptic parties. Plus, and that shows the extreme representative nature of the Dutch system, we even nurtured a Party for the Animals -2 seats out of 150!

We might not like all of these developments, but they reflect changes in society. Their presence and inclusion in the democratic system of new parties and new preoccupations rather means that the system of representative democracy is alive and kicking, instead of in crisis.

Nonetheless, there certainly are problems. These arise when people sense there is no party that fits their specific individual

needs. We have an entire army of so-called floating voters. They also arise when those that do know who to support, think that all specific party proposals get lost in coalition negotiations. In addition, some voters have the feeling that their vote has no impact any more because everything is decided in Brussels or otherwise falls outside the control of national governments and parliaments.

It seems that the feeling of crisis sets in at the moment the gap between promise and practice becomes too wide. Thus, as politicians, we either have to better live up to our promises, or we have to be more honest in explaining the electorate what we can, but also what we cannot do. It is our duty to try retain parliamentary scrutiny over all aspects of policies, and thereby I would like to mention budgetary oversight in particular. But at the same time, we also have to be honest about our real room for maneuver. Politics, especially in times of austerity, is a lot about managing expectations.

As for the Netherlands: the outcome of last week's election came as a surprise in the sense that the further pounding (versnippering) of the political landscape has stopped. The two largest parties have gained considerably. This is seen as a sign that the voters want a stable government in the years to come and that the Netherlands should maintain and further develop its international and European orientation.

Thank you.