

Dear President De Puig, dear colleagues,

It is an honour for me to address this conference today. The Senate of the Netherlands holds the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe –in short PACE - in high esteem. We have a very active and committed delegation to the PACE and we had the honour of having Mr René Van der Linden, a member of the Senate, as one of the Presidents of PACE.

The activities of the Dutch Senate are inspired by article one of the Statute of the Council of Europe: "the aim is to achieve a greater unity between the members". Winston Churchill, the statesman whose ideas paved the way for the Council of Europe, rightly stated in his groundbreaking speech of September 1949: "[Europe], it is the origin of most of the culture, arts, philosophy, and science both of ancient and modern times. If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance there would be no limit to the happiness, the prosperity, and the glory which its people would enjoy."

On the foundations of the Council of Europe we were able to build the European Union. On the foundations of the Council of Europe, we were able to build our European community after the fall of the Berlin Wall. And it is because of exactly these foundations, that we can not risk creating new dividing lines on the European continent.

Therefore we need the Council of Europe as a promoter of the core values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. And the Council of Europe needs us: the national parliaments.

Today, I would like to present some of the best practices of the Dutch Senate promoting the core values of the Council of Europe. We have two guiding principles. First, the general awareness that Europe is more than "just" the European Union. This awareness needs to be present with members of parliaments, as well as with governments. The second principle is the effectiveness of our activities: the greater the effectiveness, the stronger the awareness.

As members of parliament, there are three different approaches to realise greater awareness and effectiveness. Firstly, the instrument of agenda-setting: setting the agenda on both the national and the European level. Secondly, "frapper toujours": communicating your arguments constantly. Thirdly, no dividing lines, but integrating and interlinking different relevant platforms.

These are the main approaches as used by the Dutch Senate in placing the Council of Europe higher on the political agenda and with that safeguarding and promoting the core values.

I would like to give you four examples. Two of them refer to best practices of the Dutch Senate in mainly the national field. The other examples are applicable to the European context.

The first example is the initiative of the Senate to have an annual debate with our government on Europe. The Minister for European Affairs as well as the Minister for Foreign Affairs are both invited for the debate on the current and future stance of the whole European continent, not restricted to the EU. Exactly one month ago, this debate was held in our chamber. One of the results was a resolution supported by all eleven political parties. The resolution urgently requested the government to work together, with other members of the Council of Europe, to find structural solutions to bring the Council's finances in line with her important tasks. Our Dutch government fully endorsed the resolution. The Dutch Senate monitors the actions taken by our government very closely.

Our second example actually refers to last year's request of the PACE to deal with the annual report on the state of human rights and democracy in Europe. We not only requested a comprehensive analysis and opinion of our government on this report, but we also debated the report in a plenary session. This approach was agenda-setting and contributing to the awareness of our members and government. The Senate, but especially also the Dutch government had to constructively consider the different elements and recommendations of the report. For the Dutch Senate a new request of the PACE will not be needed next time the report on the state of human rights and democracy is presented.

Now I will share with you the two examples of our activities in the European field. The first one is probably known by many of you: the Senate's dealing with the set up of the European Agency for Fundamental Rights in Vienna. For three long years, this European proposal was scrutinized thoroughly by the Senate. We had two main objections. Firstly, a new agency could create new dividing lines on the European continent by differentiating between EU-members and non EU-members with regard to the fundamental European value of human rights. And secondly, related to that argument, we were of the opinion that the Agency was superfluous since the Council of Europe already does extraordinary work in the field of human rights.

The Senate has been successful in influencing the draft of the proposal. We could not have achieved this without the instrument of agenda-setting, of continuously bringing our arguments across and using many different fora, including the platform of PACE. We did not make any distinction between different platforms. On the contrary, we integrated and interlinked them. The members of the Senate dealing with this dossier, were not only members of our committee on European Affairs, but at the same time PACE-members and participants in EU-fora as well. Having the same persons responsible for the different national and European plat-

forms, these fora are combined in a natural and uncomplicated way. It creates a strong and broad field of influence.

The same approach was used by the Senate on the matter of the accession of the European Union to the European Convention for human rights. This is my last example. During the latest Spring Session of PACE, resolution 1610 "The accession of the European Union/European Community to the European Convention on Human Rights" was adopted. PACE stated that "the accession must be the priority in the dialogue between the two Organisations". Ever since Premier Juncker of Luxembourg in April of 2006 presented his report with recommendations on the relation between the EU and the Council of Europe, the Dutch Senate has been promoting a rapid accession. We have presented ourselves over the last two years as a fierce advocate of this accession on the national level, on the EU-level and the Council of Europe level – all three at the same time by the same members of the Senate. I presume that the fact that the rapporteur in PACE for resolution 1610 was a member of the Dutch Senate, might in this case not have been a coincidence.

I could give you several other examples of best practices of the Dutch Senate in promoting the core values of the Council of Europe. I would like however to conclude my account with our most recent working method. After every plenary session of the PACE, the Senate's committee on European Affairs discusses the adopted resolutions. If deemed necessary, the resolutions are brought to the attention of the policy-responsible committee in the Senate. Again, a very simple, but effective approach.

Dear colleagues, I presented some examples of how the Dutch Senate contributes to a prospering European continent, specifically by promoting the core values of the Council of Europe. The basis of our approach is found in the element of awareness: knowing that Europe is more than the EU. National parliaments are able to use their powers to increase this needed awareness, with their members as well as with their governments. And they should do so. To achieve true results, parliaments should strive at agenda-setting, followed by "frapper toujours" and having the same members held responsible for the different platforms and therefore the entire process.

Next year, in 2009, the Council of Europe will celebrate his 60th anniversary; the European Court of Human Rights will celebrate her 50th anniversary. I sincerely hope that many of you present here today, will also seize that moment to celebrate Europe and her core values. 2009 does not mark the end of an important period. May Churchill's ideas of 1949 inspire us as parliaments to renew our ambitions for our common future.

Thank you!