



Speech

by the Secretary General of the Senate of the Netherlands, mr. R.N. Nehmelman, during the meeting of Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments (ASGP) in Luanda, Angola
Session: The skills of parliamentary administrations in terms of the regulation and use of artificial intelligence

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Dear colleagues,

It is a great honor to be here today and to speak to you about this important topic. Artificial Intelligence, or AI, gained tremendous momentum when ChatGPT was introduced. Rest assured, this speech was not written by the program, although I – and probably many of you – may have been experimenting with the tool. Am I right?

Of course, AI has been on the top of our minds for much longer. In the Netherlands, the working of algorithms has been a major source of unrest, both politically and socially, when in 2020 the House of Representatives unraveled how algorithms had disrupted and destroyed the lives of thousands of families in the Netherlands. Computer systems at the national tax authority had unlawfully deemed that those families had wrongly received childcare allowance.

And, yes, this scandal was not the fault of computer systems: laws aimed at preventing and detecting fraud were at the heart. The government, parliament and the legal system were to blame. But still, algorithms played their part once the computers had been programmed, according to the adopted laws.

The scandal at the Dutch national tax authority is the largest of its kind but does not stand alone. We now know that also at the government agency responsible for student loans and scholarships, has unlawfully used discriminatory algorithms to detect fraud.

As a result of the childcare allowance scandal the Dutch Senate has for the past two years discussed the growing influence of AI on decision making processes and the role of the Senate. This has resulted in a debate with the minister of Digital Affairs. One of the conclusions of the debate was that the senate would like to have more specialized expertise on AI within the support staff.

Currently, we are in the process of hiring staff to help us understand both the technical side of AI and algorithms, as well as the legal implications. This will not only benefit the Members, but also me and my colleagues. How to get a grip on AI and equip both staff and politics with tools when controlling our government: these are the questions at the center of the focus of the Dutch Senate.

Also, the Council of Europe is drafting a treaty on Artificial Intelligence with input from national parliaments, after the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on the Committee of Ministers to elaborate a legally binding instrument governing artificial intelligence based on a comprehensive approach, deals with the whole life cycle of AI-based systems, is addressed to all stakeholders, and includes mechanisms to ensure the implementation of this instrument.

It is important to have democratic control, especially where artificial intelligence, algorithms and coding are concerned. Because fundamental rights are at stake.

Since I wanted to know what your parliaments are doing to secure this democratic control, I sent out a questionnaire. We have collected the results and will present them right after my introduction.

Dear colleagues,

Thank you for your attention, I look forward to the exchange of views and hearing your thoughts and experiences.