



Tweede Kamer

DER STATEN-GENERAAL

Welcoming speech to the General Assembly of the European Network of
Ombudsmen, by the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Netherlands, 24
September 2015

A couple of weeks ago, the world was shocked by a picture of a little Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi. He was lying on his belly, washed upon the shore in the Turkish town of Bodrum: his face turned to the left, his eyes shut, his arms alongside his body. He wore a red shirt and blue pants, and he wore shoes. He had not made it to a better future. The picture hit hard, in the Dutch parliament as well as elsewhere. It symbolizes the vulnerability of children, especially in war-torn areas, but also here in Europe, where children are well off as a rule. It is our responsibility to protect them, to make sure nothing bad happens to them and to give them all the opportunities we can.

In the Netherlands, the government is taking this responsibility very seriously. I assume this holds true for your countries as well. We provide good education, accessible health care and a safe public space for our children. We try to give children the start they deserve in life to live it happily and successfully. Yet, there are children who, unintentionally, fall between two stools; children who are not being seen or heard.

It is the strength of the Ombudsman for children that he (or she!) is close to the children. I understand that our Ombudsman for children, Marc Dullaert, engages in working visits on a regular basis, for instance to schools, care institutions and refugee centres. That is how help is literally given a face, and how direct contact with an independent promoter of children's interests is guaranteed. Modern means of communication are used more and more. I believe that, meanwhile, the Ombudsman for children has more than 10,000 followers on Twitter. This results in individual problems being tackled by one person, whom we know and who is accessible. People do not get stuck in red tape or complicated legal procedures. Instead, there is someone who gets his teeth into their problems, and who endeavours to find concrete solutions to, for instance poverty; lack of appropriate education for children who would like to go to school, but who are hampered because of medical or social circumstances; or shortcomings in the policy on children following their parents who came here as refugees. In doing so the Ombudsman for children not only helps that one specific child, but contributes to society as a whole.

I like the idea of your gathering in the Tweede Kamer today, after your conference on child abuse. The Dutch parliament has a special relationship with the Ombudsman for children. We may not have been the first country to appoint an Ombudsman for children – certainly not; 33 countries preceded us – but the initiative to do so in the Netherlands came from within parliament. In 2001, an initiative bill was introduced to the House by two MPs, Ms Arib (PvdA) and Ms Van Vliet, (D66). The bill was adopted and since march 2011, Mr Dullaert has been protecting the rights of Dutch children. He can count on a high level of support, both in parliament and society.

This holds true for all of you: Mr Dullaert is a symbol for you all. You do not always have an easy job. You will come across a lot of sadness and sometimes injustice, and I

can imagine that you will find it difficult to shake off touching stories. And your job also provokes discussion. Standing up for children who are falling between two stools is evident. But whose responsibility is this to solve the problems? Who determines what is right or wrong for them? Their parents, their teachers, social workers, the government or the Ombudsman? This responsibility issue involves a certain – political – tension, but that does not detract from the fact that your work matters and that you make a difference. And that is something I would like to thank you for. On behalf of the House of Representatives I wish you a productive and successful day.