

Speech made by Anouchka van Miltenburg, Speaker of the House of Representatives, June 16th 2014

Dear Excellency, thank you for your invitation to speak to you and your colleagues at this lunch meeting.

After accepting an invitation, there is always the question: what could be an interesting topic to talk about? Given the fact that you are all ambassadors posted in the Netherlands, one of the 'founding fathers' of the European Union, I decided to focus this meeting on Europe. I can imagine that this broader context is more interesting for you and your part of the world, because you deal with the European Union as a whole probably as much as you deal with the Netherlands. It's a current topic too. The elections for the European Parliament are still fresh in mind. For a couple of weeks, Europe was the most important subject for media and in European parliaments. In my own household it was an significant matter too, and not only because of the politics. My daughter just turned eighteen, and she was so excited to be allowed to vote... at last! On May the 25th, the results became clear. They show the following picture:

One: throughout the entire European Union, the turnout was low to very low. In the Netherlands 37 percent of the people voted. I think that is disappointing, but it is still higher than in some other European countries, like Poland (with 22 percent) and the Czech Republic (with 19.5 percent).

I believe the low turnout is a sign, that European politics is not a very vivid topic among a large part of the European voters. And that's a shame. To be able to vote – in the context of free elections – is a fundamental right that people have, to influence European decision making.

Two: although the results in the Netherlands did not differ much from the results during the last elections, we see major shifts and contrasts in the rest of Europe. In some countries voters have become more Eurosceptic. In France, a quarter of the population voted for Front National, and in the UK, UKIP got most of the votes and 24 seats, which is almost as many as the 26 Dutch seats in total. But in countries like Spain or Italy, we see that the elections were won by parties that are pro-Europe.

Both the low turnout and the different, even conflicting sounds are important signs – signs that we cannot ignore. But what do they say? It is easy to count the votes, but it's more difficult to explain them. The European voters certainly didn't speak with one voice. Personally, I think it is up to the politicians now, to give a follow-up to the rather ambiguous outcome of the elections. Although many of them say the outcome has nothing to do with Europe, that people are just fed up with national politics, I strongly believe it is about Europe. And it is important to discuss and maybe redefine the way national parliaments take their role in influencing European decision making, in order to truly address the concerns of citizens on the developments in the European Union.

Let me start with a brief history.

[Role of national parliaments]

In 2009 the Lisbon Treaty was signed, which gave national parliaments specific rights regarding European decision making; the so-called 'yellow card procedure'. Dutch members of parliament perceive this subsidiarity check as one of the instruments to scrutinize the executive power, not in the Netherlands but in the EU. Therefore they use this instrument quite regularly, and inform their voters about this.

In the past five years, parliaments have been able to draw a yellow card to two European Commission proposals; one on the right to strike, the other one on the European Public Prosecutor's Office. The first yellow card resulted in the withdrawal of the proposal; in case of the European Public Prosecutor's Office the Commission maintained the proposal as it was. This caused some upheaval, at least in the House of Representatives in the Netherlands. Members felt that their arguments against this proposal were not being heard.

And this is essential in the relation between parliaments and the European Commission: it is not about getting your way, but about being heard by the Commission. So that members of parliament can inform their voters that dialogue takes place between the European Commission and the national parliament, and can make clear that the Commission at least listens to their arguments.

I believe this dialogue is necessary to strengthen the relationship between Europe and European voters. People should know what is being decided in Brussels, why and by whom. It will make them realize Europe is closer than they think, meaning that there are many topics that are discussed on a European level, that directly influence their daily lives.

After several years of experience with this new instrument and two yellow cards, I certainly have some ideas and practical suggestions on how to improve it. In the Netherlands and in some other member states, discussions have taken place whether a change to the Lisbon Treaty might be necessary to improve this instrument. I think it is possible to improve the instrument within the framework of the Lisbon Treaty and in dialogue with the European Commission, as long as all parties are willing to accept that national parliaments have a role to play and that they can only play this role in an optimal way if the instrument of the subsidiarity check is improved. Improving the instrument would not only be good for national parliaments; it would also benefit the European Commission and the EU as a whole, since a well-functioning subsidiarity check and more political dialogue will create more public involvement in and knowledge of future EU-legislation.

[Cooperation between national parliaments and the European Parliament]

In my opinion, it is crucial for national parliaments to work together and to make this visible to citizens. This improves the credibility both of national parliaments and of EU politics. After five years of practising, we try to improve this step by step, for example by video conferencing, visits to other national parliaments and speaking to each other on priority issues during interparliamentary conferences.

But also the interaction and cooperation between national parliaments and the European Parliament should be improved. Only through strong cooperation between the European Parliament and national parliaments, we can prevent the image of competition between the two organisations, which would be a wrong image to give. In the 'Tweede Kamer', we organize an annual debate with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs about the state of affairs in the European Union. In this debate – and this is very unique for our parliament! – Dutch members of the European parliament participate as well. By initiating such a debate, we make the European Parliament more visible and understandable and try to prevent the image of competition between the parliaments.

If both parliaments were to cooperate effectively, this would give citizens the feeling that through their parliaments, they can exercise influence on the decision making in Brussels. We should emphasize the fact that they have two votes on many important issues.

They not only affect national policy, but can also set the direction on a European level. And of course, both national and European parliamentarians also need to explain to citizens that in a democracy, they cannot always get what they want. The important thing is that they truly feel that their arguments are being listened to, in their own country and in Europe.

I would like to end by emphasizing that what makes Europe complicated, is the fact that most member states have a long democratic history. Not all states, obviously; last week I was in Poland, where they celebrated 25 years of free elections. But in the Netherlands, for example, democracy is almost 200 years old. We should not forget that the EU is still very young. Some politicians say they just want to give Europe up, but I believe we should give it time and space to blossom, to prove and improve itself throughout the years.

Dear ambassadors, I am very interested in your opinion on these developments in the European Union. And of course, I would like to hear your view on the political and economic cooperation between the countries of Asia.