



Tweede Kamer

DER STATEN-GENERAAL

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Door de voorzitter van de Tweede Kamer, Vera Bergkamp

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“Democracies facing the Covid-19 public health crisis: sharing experiences, the way forward”

Dear Mr President, dear Colleagues,

Let me start by thanking the Hellenic Parliament, and specifically Mr Tassoulas, for the wonderful organization of this European Conference of Presidents of Parliament. It is truly a pleasure to be here in Athens – the birthplace of Parliamentary democracy – and to experience the Greek hospitality. I have recently been elected in April this year as the Speaker of the Dutch House of Representatives. I welcome this opportunity, provided by the Hellenic Parliament and by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), to meet so many of my European colleagues here today.

Our democracies and, more specifically, our Parliaments have faced most serious challenges during the Covid-19 public health crisis, as presented so well by the key-note speakers. Upholding the Council of Europe standards of democracy, human rights and the rule of law has always been a challenge since the founding of our organization, but perhaps never more so than in the past one and a half year. In the Dutch House of Representatives there was one thing that was paramount when



the pandemic fully reached our country in March last year: our scrutinizing role in government should remain intact. Democracy may never come to a standstill, especially not when times are tough. So we did everything to keep up our constitutional role in overseeing government actions.

What started with advices to wash hands quickly evolved into new logistical arrangement to ensure that crucial parliamentary debates could take place on the Covid measures taken by the government, like the introduction of a controversial curfew. Committee work initially was put on the backburner. Only committees of inquiry were allowed to continue their work with all important hearings. Furthermore, we ensured that parliamentary media could continue its work and that journalists could attend debates. In a free democracy the media can never be locked out, not even when society is in lock down due to a pandemic.

Allowing representatives of the media to attend debates was even more crucial as we concluded that we had to temporarily ban the public from our Parliament. We do believe that in an open and transparent democracy as we have in the Netherlands, the public gallery should always be filled. However, sanitary restrictions made this a physical impossibility. But the



public could still follow parliamentary debates through live stream.

In line with the new provisions that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe developed for holding hybrid and remote meetings, in the Dutch House of Representatives we also developed methods and procedures for remote committee meetings. Before the pandemic we did not have committee meetings by video. But over the past one and a half year it has proven to be a key stone in ensuring that our parliament can fulfil its role as guarantor of democracy in times of crisis. Unlike PACE we have not yet developed facilities for on-line voting and a digital quorum. We managed the Covid crisis without this so far. But we are studying the issue to see whether the increased flexibility it would provide, could be fitted into constitutional requirements.

Will the House of Representatives in the future continue using any of the new working methods that we developed during the crisis? I think hybrid working is here to stay, both for our MP's and for their staff. It provides people with the opportunity to create more balance between work life and family life. And that will be appreciated also once Covid is no longer a crisis. Hybrid working might even bring a stimulus to interparliamentary relations, as it will allow more parliamentarians to get involved in



meetings of, for example, PACE or other assemblies without having to leave their parliamentary business back home unattended. With this I do not mean to devalue in-person contact. Meetings in real life will always have added value over video meetings. But if Covid-19 has brought our democracies one good thing, it is that it has taught us how to work in a more flexible way, while still living up to our fundamental democratic values and principles.

I thank you for your attention.