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by

Dr Remco NEHMELMAN
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on

“Participation of citizens in the work of Parliament”

Manama Session
March 2023

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

First of all, I would like to emphasize that it is a great pleasure for me to be here.

As always, it is a wonderful and inspiring experience to meet so many colleagues from all over the world.

Also, I would like to extend my gratitude to our Bahraini hosts and the ASGP secretariat for organizing this conference in an excellent way.

Colleagues,

I believe the topic at hand is not new – although it has become somewhat of a hot topic in recent years. Participation of citizens has been at the heart of our democracies since the words *demos* and *kratos* were first used by the ancient Greeks.

You only have to look at the word, meaning ‘people rule’, to realize that our democracies are built on participation by citizens. Without them there would be no democracy.

Though this may seem a simplification of reality, I do think it is necessary that we realize this before we continue our exchange of views on the topic.

Of course, we are now dealing with representative democracies, in which our parliaments are elected by the people. With that mandate, parliamentarians can go forward with their work.

In recent years, we – in the Netherlands – have seen that voter turnout has declined and more and more people have started to express that they do not feel represented by their elected representatives, on all levels: local, regional, national and European.

In my country, as in others, this has led to many initiatives in the past ten to fifteen years, in order to engage citizens in other ways than through elections.

Also, a so-called State Committee that advises the Dutch government on all sorts of subjects, has advised to explore the direct participation of citizens in democracy, for instance through a corrective referendum.

Although I feel that change is needed in order to increase citizens engagement, I do doubt whether systems like lotteries, referendums and citizen panels are the right answer.

First of all, the believe that direct participation is a panacea is wrong. Citizens engagement is not always the right answer to political fragmentation for instance.

I am especially hesitant when the means – that is citizens engagement – seems to be more important than the subject. I do feel that this is the case in many initiatives.

And often it is not well prepared. Before you consider any of all possibilities, you need to determine whether you want citizens engagement to for instance improve your policies, to increase the sense of responsibility of citizens or to create support for a certain decision.

The example of Ireland, where a Citizens Assembly of 99 citizens and an independent chairperson has been asked by the Irish government to advise on the issues of abortion, climate and aging, seems like a success. But still, this Assembly was formed by the government with no involvement of parliament.

In the Netherlands we have had some experience with referendums, but these were never full-fledged referendums, but so-called consultative referendums. And more often than not, the results were discarded by the government. Which again led to more people losing their faith in their representatives. A vicious circle.

A topic that I do feel is worthwhile exploring is the call for lowering voting age. In the Netherlands the voting age is 18, and many believe that by changing it to 16 will benefit the involvement of people, and the youth especially.

Also, young people have a different perspective on issues such as climate change and migration. Perspectives that are not taken into account at the moment, at least when it comes to voter participation on which our parliament is based.

Although there are official advisory reports to the Dutch government to lower the age to 16, the government has thus far rejected these proposals, because on the one hand it means constitutional change, a thorough process which cannot be undertaken lightly, and on the other hand it is suggested by the government that the brains of young people are not fully grown and ready to assume such a responsibility.

I know that several countries have lowered the voting age in recent years, and I look forward to hearing from you what your experiences are. And, whether this had had a positive effect on voter turnout and citizens, especially young citizens, engagement.

Colleagues,

As you can tell, I am hesitant.

Hesitant, whether citizens engagement is the only way forward. Hesitant whether participation projects are the solution to citizens unrest and political fragmentation, and hesitant because of what this will mean for our parliaments.

What is parliaments' role in the call for new democracy? Is citizens participation the future of our parliamentary democracy? And if yes, how can we best organize this with respect for parliamentary democracy? These are my questions to you this afternoon.

I for one do not yet have the answers, and I look forward to our discussions.

Thank you.