



Intervention

by the President of the Senate of the Netherlands, prof.dr. J.A. Bruijn, during the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament in Dublin, Ireland

Theme 3: Equality and diversity in public representation – the participation of young people, women and ethnic and social groups as members of parliament

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Dear Chair, dear colleagues,

Thank you for this wonderful welcome here in Dublin and thank you to the Irish Parliament for organizing this meeting.

Dear colleagues,

This year the Netherlands celebrates the 175th birthday of the constitutional reforms that transformed the Netherlands into a parliamentary democracy. No longer the members of the Senate were appointed by the King, instead they were elected.

Because of the 175th anniversary of the constitutional reforms the Dutch Senate has organized over the past weeks an exposition of the handwritten Constitution of 1848. To see a document that has played such a pivotal role in our history, with the signatures of King William II and all the ministers of 1848, is a truly impressive experience.

One thing that caught my eye, though, was that in 1848 documents like these were signed by only men, only men were able to stand for elections – and only men of a certain wealth, and of a certain age.

Although in the Constitution of 1848 the minimum age to stand for parliament went down from 40 to 30, it would take another 135 years to reach the age of 18, as it still is.

In 1920 the first elected woman entered the Plenary Hall of the Senate. She would remain the only woman for 17 years. After the elections we've had in May of this year, the percentage of women has risen to almost 40%. We've come a long way, but there still is no equal representation.

And for criteria such as level of education, ethnic and social background, and inclusiveness towards people with disabilities, there is an even longer way to go in in the Dutch Senate.

This is worrying: when a country's representation is not inclusive, it fails to meet the meaning of representation. It should not be seen as a service to offer equal representation, it is a necessary fact, not an academic discussion.

No, this discussion touches on the foundations of, and trust in parliamentary representative democracy, and the question is whether we pay enough attention to this.

In this case, it is important to note that the Dutch parliament has no formal role and is not in the position to demand or organize equal representation. It is the responsibility of the political parties when recruitment of new politicians takes place.

I look forward to learning how this is organized in your countries.

Today, here in Dublin, we are looking for practical ideas to solve this democratic deficit, and I would like to propose, also on behalf of my colleague Vera Bergkamp, speaker of the House of Representatives in The Netherlands, that we, as speakers and presidents – each in our own country, invite the chairs of the political parties to discuss how we can accelerate and thus achieve true equal representation in our parliaments.

Moreover, if we want to be able to engage new talents from diverse backgrounds into politics, we must assure that politics is a safe environment. Yesterday, at the pre-conference, we discussed the effects of hate speech and threats against elected representatives, on the readiness of young people to enter politics. One of the issues is the variability of punishments of such crimes.



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Therefore, I would like to suggest to the leadership of the Council to consider performing a comparative, retrospective study on the variability of legal punishment and sentencing of hate speech and threats against elected representatives in order to facilitate benchmarking by member states themselves.

Wouldn't this fit well within the mission of the Council of Europe to defend democracy and the rule of law, I ask our leadership.

Thank you for giving me the floor.