



## Toespraak

van de Voorzitter van de Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, prof. dr. J. A. Bruijn, tijdens de digitale IPU-bijeenkomst van parlementsvoorzitters (panel discussion 'Improving governance by bridging the gap between parliaments and the people')

*datum 20 augustus 2020*

Dear colleagues,

It is a very great honour to be here today and to speak to you about this important topic: improving governance by bridging the gap between parliaments and the people.

It is a great privilege for the Dutch Parliament and for me personally to participate in this meeting. We are grateful to the IPU Secretariat for organising this meeting in this alternative, digital manner due to the restrictions in all our countries because of COVID-19.

Dear colleagues,

First of all, the corona crisis is of course an enormous drama because of the people affected: the people who have died, their relatives, everyone who has contributed to combatting the crisis, and also people who have lost their income, companies that went bankrupt and the restrictions in freedom for all of us. The crisis is unparalleled in recent history.

The Dutch Senate has fortunately been able to continue its work. In March we decided to close the building to keep our Members and staff safe, and we took to digital meetings quite fast. In the first few weeks we held 88 digital committee meetings. After about a month we worked out a more hybrid form of combining both digital meetings and scaled down physical meetings with only one Member from every Group in the Senate (fourteen in total), respecting 1.5 meters distance.

At the same time, we started looking for a venue big enough to hold all of our 75 Members at 1.5 meters apart from each other. Two months after we closed our own building, we were able to meet in the historic Hall of Knights in The Hague, build in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The hall can hold 75 Members at the same time. By maintaining the hybrid combination between digital and physical meetings at 1.5 meters distance - and of course via webcasting! - we have been able to continue debating and voting on all legislation, including that connected to the COVID-19 measures by the government, in a transparent and democratic way.

I am very proud that we have been able to continue our work as representatives of the people under these difficult times and circumstances.

The measures proposed by the government have had an enormous impact on Dutch society, and still difficult decisions have to be made. At this moment the Dutch House of Representatives is handling a new proposal that will replace the emergency ordinances that have been in force since the beginning of the crisis.

The proposal - and also the current emergency ordinances - have led to heated discussions in both Parliament and society as a whole, since they affect people's rights directly. It is of the utmost importance that we scrutinize this new proposal in both Chambers of Parliament and do justice to the concerns in society.



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As Speakers of Parliament, as representatives of the people, it is our duty to take these challenges seriously. Now, more than ever, it is important for us to work in the spirit of the IPU's 1997 Universal Declaration on Democracy. As a political system democracy is the *only* system that has the capacity for self-correction. And if we as politicians do not allow ourselves to be corrected by our constituents, we will fail in bridging the gap between parliaments and the people.

Dear colleagues,

Thank you for your attention, it is a great privilege to speak with you today and I look forward to the rest of our discussions.