

Dear Chairman and members of the Commission on Kingdom Relations,

Saturday 10 October 2020 passed rather unnoticed here on the island - St. Eustatius. The weather was good (as usual) and there was little to do, especially due to the global pandemic caused by the coronavirus. It is true that the island does not suffer very much from it in the direct sense, but the fear of it is 'maintained' and mouth caps are increasingly part of a familiar streetscape.

Nevertheless, it was the tenth anniversary of a rather radical change in the constitutional system in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Ten years ago Curaçao and Sint Maarten became 'countries' within the kingdom (Aruba had been since 1986) and Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba became part of the 'country' of the Netherlands as a 'public body'.

On that occasion, emeritus professor Joop van den Berg and former journalist René Zwart compiled a book in which fifty prominent figures give their views on what happened and 'how to proceed'. According to them the book is not only a retrospective of 10-10-10 but also a lesson for the future. This Saturday, 10 October 2020, I read the book in one go. It is fifty relatively short pieces by people who have experienced this history themselves, have been close to it whether or not, professionally or not, they have an opinion about it or are just (still) in the middle of it.

I myself have experienced the run-up to it as no more than interested and newspaper-reading Dutchman, working and living in the European Netherlands. Now that I live and work on St. Eustatius since 2014 this involvement and interest has intensified, not in the least because I am still almost daily amazed at the differences that should not exist in my opinion and that do not make it any easier for the ordinary St. Eustatius. Where I can make a reasonable comparison with the European and Caribbean Netherlands, many a Statian cannot because he or she has never been to the European Netherlands (other than perhaps for a vacation, a study or a family visit). That makes that I experience some things as a loss that are not even noticed by the Statian because it has always been that way. I sometimes say that the Statian is a second-class Dutchman - that is how everyday practice teaches me - and the book teaches me that I am not the only one who notices that.

Reading the fifty impressions makes me somewhat modest: where so many people have not succeeded in making something beautiful out of it in such a long time, I should not be under too many illusions. At the same time, I have some difficulty in seeing that the things that took the European Netherlands years - if not centuries - to have them as they are now, are not available or accessible to

all Dutch people ¹. And, I did not know that and I am not a subject matter expert either, when I read that the equal treatment legislation, resulting from Article 1 of the Constitution, does not apply to the Dutch Caribbean, then you are ashamed of yourself!

I would rather not dwell too long on how this came about. It is much more important to think about "how to go on", given where we are now. In principle I am sympathetic to the idea that Mr. Aart G. Broek describes: "turn the Caribbean islands into one province and six municipalities according to the Dutch model", but I think that this idea is too rigid and leaves too little room for a specific Caribbean or island contribution; moreover, there is the danger that one of the islands will present itself as a 'main island' with which the first steps will be taken back in time. More customization would seem more sympathetic to me. In the contribution of Prof. Hoogers I see a confirmation of my idea about this, the construction to that end, at least a more ideal solution already exists in my opinion: make a public body of all six Caribbean islands and agree on further rules of play and lay them down in legislation (per island).

Agreeing on further rules of the game is, by the way, the challenge that really has to be taken up. The entire book describes an ongoing, inappropriate arrogance of the European Netherlands. I believe that this can also be clearly observed in my immediate surroundings on St. Eustatius. That the country 'the Netherlands' is the richest in the Kingdom needs no explanation and that most knowledge and skills do not prevail there either, but these matters do not need to be exploited in an open and honest consultation in which the equal input of the interlocutors is an important starting point. Sincere interest in each other's findings, brought together in an equal dialogue in which listening is 'gold' and speaking is 'silver', is something that did not actually take place in the run-up to 10-10-10, nor in the period thereafter. Maybe at the evaluation in 2015, but the chairman of the evaluation committee himself remarks "I find it disappointing that little has been learned from the report". In daily life on St. Eustatius, the government commissioner, on behalf of State Secretary Knops, acts without real consultation ².

¹ A simple example: the BSN. Nobody is bothered by having a BSN, but you can have some ease with it, for example when applying for a DigiD or opening an account with a NL bank. The first step the Stavian student has to take when studying in the European Netherlands is to apply for a BSN. Only then do things like a bank account or study grant from DUO come into the picture. Incidentally, the products of NL banks and insurance companies are for the time being not at all available to Dutch Caribbean residents. For these kinds of organizations you are simply a 'foreigner'.

² Consultation is pretended but not actually held. Listening does not take place and when it threatens to come, it is time to end the meeting. If the discussion about the quarantine measures does not go the way the government commissioner wants it to, the rules of the game change: From now on, 'essential workers' will be called 'vital workers' and the suggestion is made that things are very different now. But in reality, people who enter the island do or do not go into quarantine, depending on whether the government commissioner is there. And if it is people working on 'essential' projects (which are not at all essential in the sense of a 'matter of life or death') then the will of the project owner (i.e. the investor) seems to be law.

The construction of the public body leaves room to declare the Dutch legislation (in its entirety! ³) applicable to the Dutch Caribbean and - at the same time - to relativize it, where applicable, as a result of or in favor of local circumstances, customs or experiences. It seems to me that whether or not or to what extent autonomy should be given a place in the local government can be discussed and solved sensibly and with dignity in this way.

So far a reflection on my part after reading the book "Kingdom on Eggs". I advise everyone to read it (and especially, as the compilers say, as a lesson for the future).

Kind regards,

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Note: In December 2020 a book by Mrs. Teresa E. Leslie, Ph.D: "Eight years on Statia: Race, Coloniality and Development" will be published by 'Uitgeverij Boekscout'. The manuscript was thus received by the publisher: *"The importance of your manuscript becomes clear from the first page. As your research progresses, it becomes increasingly clear to me that this is one of the subjects that the Dutch white people can no longer ignore. You place yourself and your own experiences, both in the USA and on St. Eustatius, within the analytical framework and thereby put yourself in direct opposition to the (white-) Dutch pretexts of objectivity and color blindness. With carefully chosen sources you will strengthen your research. Because you have divided your analysis into three parts, which still show a good coherence, you bring the systematic, hierarchical colonial structure and relationship between St. Eustatius and the Netherlands into focus. But you also go a step further: not only do you put your finger on the sore spot(s), but you also immediately show how the population of St. Eustatius can break through this structure and unequal power relationship, how they can achieve their own empowerment and actively contribute to the development of the island"*.

³ In its entirety because the entire legal infrastructure is - in my words - the accumulated civilization as it has built up in the European Netherlands. Let the inhabitants of the Dutch Caribbean share in this civilization in equal measure. Underneath - of course - the system of benefits, etc. to be understood. Surely it is incomprehensible that local entrepreneurs first have to learn here that NOW 3.0 is declared applicable, while this is already the case in the rest of the Netherlands.