

St. Eustatius, June 17, 2022.

Dear Chairman and Members of the Kingdom Relations Committee (Lower and Upper Houses),

The town hall meeting was - at least that is how I imagined it at the time - once intended as a kind of general information and discussion place. A kind of marketplace of arguments and developments. In my expectation of the intervention, shortly after it took place in February 2018, I thought that the period without much information and transparency would come to an end and that the Dutch government would show how things should be done, all this of course based on principles such as openness of government (transparency).

By now I know better. In a certain respect I can imagine the generally passive attitude of the Statian where it concerns the developments of his own island. There is no question of any broad consultation (that matters). Never a discussion about a choice beforehand regarding the future. Always some fait accompli that is communicated without further consultation. Not even appearances are made. Franco and Stegers - our first set of government commissioners - already didn't like much input from residents, but then as administrators succeeded each other, transparency and communication only got worse. And our current government commissioner may have built up experience in communication (at the Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland), but there is nothing to show that she actually values that position. The statement has been quoted many times but it really applies here: "*keep them in the dark and feed them with shit*", a statement known as the *mushroom routine*, and which expresses the disdain with which our administrators go about their business without any form of feedback.

Anyway, the State Secretary for Kingdom Relations (and Digitalization) and the Minister for Housing and Spatial Planning are visiting St. Eustatius, so a townhall meeting (dated Tuesday, June 14, 2022) is deemed opportune (read: inevitable). A day or two in advance we announce such a thing (then perhaps - hopefully - not too many people will come) - so our Government Commissioner must have thought - and on the basis of four topics there will be a very brief introduction followed by a brief opportunity to ask questions.

The topics are Nature, Cultural Heritage, Democracy and Social Housing. One of those present asked what is actually meant by Cultural Heritage. Actually quite a good question, if you consider that when the Dutch (Zeeuwen) took possession of St. Eustatius in 1636, the island was actually found uninhabited. Much attention is now paid to maintenance of "colonial" buildings while the actual cultural heritage - one of the largest slave cemeteries in the Caribbean - is given no attention.

To go a little deeper, the issue is the disrespectful handling of this slave cemetery that was investigated by SECAR with the approval of the government commissioner but without any consultation with the residents. This was a source of annoyance. And well, under whose responsibility did this investigation actually fall? It was a construction to which politicians in The Hague can still suck a point. The government commissioner hid behind SECAR and vice versa. After the protests among the population subsided somewhat, a group of scientists conducted research and drew up a report on the question of "*what next?*". One recommendation of these scientists is to organize the consultation of the population that is permanently needed. Another recommendation concerns the reburial of the excavated human remains and the establishment of a memorial site.

The (my) expectation is that they will quietly wait until the unrest has subsided further and the research will continue as usual (DNA research on the bones). Eventually - so is my continued expectation - a future airport boulevard will be found to be an important economic development (is currently not in any publicly available plan, but the fait accompli will, if necessary, just be pulled out of a hat) after which the graves will be exhumed and the respectful reburial will be forgotten (something with 'points of no return' that have already been passed, or so).

Of course, this is only a hypothesis, and it will obviously be denied; in some time in the future we will be able to see whether the hypothesis really did not make sense, or whether it might have been correct after all (but by then it will be too late to do anything respectful). In this context I also note that the government commissioner has already written to me once to say that she will no longer deal with my letters on this subject. I don't see a board of mayor and aldermen of any municipality in the European Netherlands getting away with such a reaction that shows contempt for the inhabitants. Here that contempt takes place continuously. The necessity of the recently held *mediation* between the government commissioners and the Island Council can, in my opinion, also be traced back to this attitude.

*Note: A word about archaeology (in the context of Cultural Heritage). For some time now (more than a year) the University of Leiden has been trying to repatriate material from St. Eustatius. But mails sent to the island government simply go unanswered...*

On the very morning of the day the townhall meeting was planned, the news site [dossierkoninkrijksrelaties.nl](https://dossierkoninkrijksrelaties.nl) reported <sup>1</sup> that five reports (in the period June 2017-October 2020) about the alarming situation around the cliff had been covered up. Not communicated about, not discussed with the Island Council, no information to the population. The article literally states, "*By the way, it was not difficult to push the reports under the carpet, because the Island Council had been sent home at the beginning of 2018*". Also in the townhall meeting the case remained without explanation because there was a lawsuit pending concerning a report: it could not be quoted from, of course. I explained that my question was not just about the lawsuit but about the fact that five reports mentioning a high risk had remained untreated and uncommunicated for so long (about five years). This observation remained further without response. On one side of the island people are rightly seriously concerned about erosion while on the other side - namely from the resort - the investor with the knowledge of the government commissioner has shoveled down paths with impunity and without a permit. Well, whoever still understands may explain it to me <sup>2</sup>.

Regarding the point about the return of democracy on the island, I am inclined to believe the statements of the State Secretary when she states that this will be as soon as possible. The timetable she outlined would come down to "commissioners (aldermen) to be appointed by the Island Council at the end of this calendar year" and "at some point shortly after the 2023 elections, the budget right back to the Island Council". Seems to me all not unreasonable whereby I also note that the points (criteria) that should be met at the time were unilaterally drawn up and submitted by the Netherlands. There was never any prior discussion or negotiation about this. In other words: the European Netherlands too - at least in the recent past - has not shown any respect for each other.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dossierkoninkrijksrelaties.nl/2022/06/14/alarmerende-rapporten-over-gevaar-klif-op-sint-eustatius-genegeerd/>

<sup>2</sup> In my explanation, I get no further than two conclusions: 1) apparently, everything (!) can be bought for money and 2) power corrupts.

Finally, there is an ongoing issue that was not put on the agenda of the town hall meeting: healthcare on the island. It is true that the State Secretary of Health, Welfare and Sport will be visiting our island shortly, but concrete statements about the improvement of care remain a bit of a cloud. The National Ombudsman has already expressed his concern about the Guardianship Council with regard to the payment of alimony. With respect to medical care, it's about a new mission and vision, change manager wanted, etc. But the fact that we (the population) are being subjected to doctors who would not naturally get a job in the European Netherlands continues to hang over the market a bit. I am offered the opportunity to speak with officials from the Ministry of Health, but then it again remains just words which, of course, can also be misunderstood. This time I'll leave the Augeas stable for what it is, but the saying that 'soft nurses make stinking wounds' also applies. No firm measures but a bit of nit-picking at the edges. Suddenly no one is talking about the two recent deaths either. Am I wrong here? It could be, but when I look at the news supply of our Public Entity (on the internet) I don't get any wiser.

Perhaps a concrete question in this area to conclude. Suppose someone leaves Sint Eustatius and settles in the European Netherlands (where he originally comes from). He deregisters from Sint Eustatius and only after registration in a municipality in the European Netherlands can he get health insurance. How is this person insured from the moment of de-registration on St. Eustatius until registration with a NL health insurance?

A tip for the island government: make the town hall meeting a periodic event (twice a month or so) and don't just make it a good news show or only put accomplished facts on the table but also come up with plans for consultation.

Well so much for my posting this time.

Kind regards,

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*Afterword: I have taken note of the additional funds that have become available for the island. At the same time I ask myself: is this really "extra money" or was this money already in this or that envelope and is it now being given a concrete destination? I suspect the latter, with which I don't want to make a sour comment about the cigar from our own box, but I do want to emphasize that we shouldn't make fools of each other and should just be honest and respectful to each other. In that sense I would also like to see that the Caribbean Dutchman - just like the European Dutchman - is simply held up to the light as a "Dutchman", thus also has to deal with Dutch laws and regulations and does not have to suffer under constructions such as a "social minimum for the Caribbean Netherlands" while for "the Netherlands" a completely different social minimum applies.*

Cc: *National Ombudsman  
deputy) government commissioner on St. Eustatius  
Island Council of St. Eustatius*