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Speech by Marianne SCHUURMANS-WIJDEVEN, Mayor of Haarlemmermeer, The Netherlands

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Debate on Direct election of mayors

22 March 2023

Salutation

Honourable members of the Chamber of Local Government,
Dear Chairman/President,

Introduction

My name is Marianne Schuurmans. Since July 2019, I have been mayor of the Dutch municipality of Haarlemmermeer, which includes our national airport Schiphol. Haarlemmermeer has about 160,000 inhabitants. Before that, I was successively mayor in two smaller municipalities, of 6,000 and 47,000 inhabitants respectively. Before becoming a local administrator, I worked in software sales and as a recruiter of software specialists. Besides my current job, I am, among other things, secretary of the professional association of mayors, the Dutch Association of Mayors. All mayors in the Netherlands are members of our professional association, which focuses on the professionalisation/education of mayors during their careers.

It is an honour for me to speak to you here in Strasbourg about the office of mayor. Before going into more detail about the office, the method of appointment and the tasks of a mayor, I would like to give you a broader picture of the developments in the Netherlands, some of which may also be fully or partly recognisable for your country.

Story

We live and govern in a time when faith in the government is under pressure and many people feel uncertain about their future. Recent years of covid-19, the war in Ukraine, protests, climate and energy crises have increased the gap between public authorities and citizens, but also amongst people themselves. At least in the Netherlands.

In order to bring government and citizens closer again, not only attention to the human element is needed, but also inspiration and connection. In the Netherlands, the mayor plays an important role in strengthening the relationship with citizens, restoring trust and ensuring that people, not the system, are central to our policies.

So what makes the mayor specifically qualified to fulfil this role?

Compared to other administrators/politicians in the Netherlands, whether at national, local or regional level, mayors in the Netherlands enjoy the most authority and trust from residents. This is mainly due to the mayor's neutral, a-political role, making him or her recognisable and approachable to all residents.

The most important core value of a Dutch mayor is his or her independence. The mayor is not guided by party-political interests, but always keeps the general interest of the municipality and its inhabitants in mind. From this non-political role, the mayor is a connecting and stabilising factor at local level, just like the King's Commissioner at the regional level. This role is not based on formal power, but on authority.

Even in 'their own house', in the city hall, councillors and aldermen hold the mayor in high regard and trust. The number of mayors who involuntarily have to leave office because the municipal council withdraws its trust in them is extremely low in the Netherlands (a handful, an average of 5 mayors a year, 1.5%).

One of the reasons why there is high confidence in the mayor is because the mayor's selection process prioritises the quality of the person, not his or her background, not his or her connections or financial position. A comprehensive, careful selection process based on knowledge, competences and professionalism allows the mayor to operate as an authoritative administrator.

The other reason why the mayor enjoys a lot of trust and support is because he or she is actually elected by the municipal council, the local representation of the people as a whole. This also guarantees the mayor's democratic legitimacy. As a result, in our opinion, the Netherlands fulfils the European Charter of Local Self Government.

I would like to briefly outline the appointment procedure of a mayor in the Netherlands.

When a municipality seeks a new mayor, the municipal council - the highest body in a municipality - draws up a profile for the new mayor.

The municipal council also sets up a selection committee from among its members in which all political forces are represented.

After that, any Dutch citizen aged 18 and above can apply for a mayoral vacancy.

The selection committee interviews several candidates and recommends the most suitable candidate to the municipal council. Based on the recommendation of the selection committee, the municipal council nominates one candidate to the Minister of the Interior. In principle, the minister always follows the nomination of the municipal council. Only in serious circumstances can the minister deviate from the nomination. The nomination is ratified by the Crown. The commissioner of the King assists the municipal council throughout the selection process and monitors the diligence of the process.

Contrary to what many people think, the mayor is not the boss of the municipality. The municipal council is the highest body of the municipality; the council nominates the mayor for appointment and can also nominate him or her for dismissal in case of dysfunction. The mayor is accountable to the municipal council for the performance of his or her duties.

The duties and powers of a mayor are listed exhaustively in the law.

The best-known duties are: being chairman of the municipal council (without voting rights!), chairman of the College of Mayor and Aldermen (with voting rights and with collegial governance) and maintaining public order whereby direct action is necessary.

In addition to these duties, the mayor has a number of care duties as guardian of local democracy. For instance, from his or her neutral position, the mayor ensures that the integrity of the municipality is promoted and that citizens' complaints are handled carefully.

Some people in our country believe that the appointment method of the mayor, and thus the office itself, should be changed by having the mayor directly elected by the people. However, previous experiments with an elected mayor in our country were not successful.

Allow me to say the following about the directly elected mayor:

The State system in the Netherlands is built on the premise that supreme power lies with the directly elected parliament, not with individual administrators. All individual administrators at the local and the regional level are nominated or appointed by the parliament. No person in the Netherlands is elected 'in person'. An elected mayor or an elected Commissioner of the King therefore does not fit into our State system.

Any change in the mayor's appointment method is a drastic change in local governance that will have an effect on the entire local system. After all, the mayor's office does not stand alone. It is closely linked to the municipal council and the College of Mayor and Aldermen, but also to other parties and institutions in the community. In the Netherlands, a balance between the role and position of the mayor and those of others has emerged in recent years. Any substantial change made to the office of mayor therefore affects the roles and positions of those other players in and around local democracy. Their position also changes as a result.

Consider, for example, the position of the municipal council, now the highest body in the municipality. What will happen to that position if the mayor is also directly elected and has his own electoral mandate?

What happens to the aldermen? Now the city council appoints the aldermen. Does a directly elected mayor form his own 'aldermanic team'? If so, how democratic is that?

At the moment, the powers in the field of Public Order & Safety lie with a politically neutral person, who carefully monitors the fundamental rights of citizens and protects them where necessary. What happens when powers in the field of Public Order & Safety are vested in one politically elected official, without control and accountability to the municipal council? People's safety and fundamental rights should not depend on political interests.

Last but not least: By whom and how is it assessed whether the mayor to be elected has the right competences? Who assesses whether the to-be elected mayor has the desired knowledge and qualities to govern authoritatively?

The solutions to the social and political-administrative developments in our country do not lie with one official, but with the total system of public administration in the Netherlands. Any adjustment of the position and appointment method of the mayor requires a fundamental political and social debate in our country in which all pros and cons are properly weighed and in which the total public administration is considered as a whole.

For now, the current nomination and appointment method is the most appropriate for our country, with an important role for the municipal council, which actually appoints the mayor and can also remove him or her. With this, the municipal council is and will remain the supreme body in our local democracy. Why fix something that ain't broken?

Thank you for your time and attention.