

Parliamentary Assembly  
Assemblée parlementaire



COUNCIL OF EUROPE  
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**European Conference of Presidents of Parliament**  
**Conférence européenne des Présidents de parlement**  
**Strasbourg, 22-23 /05 /2008**  
**Palais de l'Europe**

**DRAFT PROGRAMME**

**Thursday 22 May 2008**

Arrival of delegations in Strasbourg

11.00 – 19.00 Registration of participants  
*Welcome desk in the Council of Europe*

14.00 – 15.00 Meeting of the secretaries of delegation  
*Room ...*

16.00 – 19.00 **OPENING** of the Conference by the  
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

**THEME 1: “Parliaments and Civil Society”**

**a) Interaction between Parliaments and civil society**

*Presentation by*  
Mrs Katalin Szili,  
Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly

*Debate*

19.30 *Dinner hosted for all participants by the City of Strasbourg*

**Friday 23 May 2008**

8.00 – 9.30 MEETING of the Secretaries General  
*Room ...*

- 9.30 – 11.30                    **THEME 1 (continuation)**
- b)     **Mechanisms for civil society input into parliamentary processes – exchange of good practices**
- Presentation by*  
          Mr Per Westerberg,  
          Speaker of the Swedish Parliament
- Debate*
- 11.30 – 13.00                    **THEME 2: “National Parliaments and the Council of Europe: Promoting the core values of democracy, human rights and rule of law”**
- a)     **Added value of the Council of Europe as guardian of the core values**
- Presentation*  
          Mrs Jozefina Topalli,  
          Speaker of the Albanian People's Assembly
- Debate*
- 13h00                                *Photo of the Presidents in the lobby*
- 13.00                                *Buffet lunch hosted by the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Council of Europe restaurant*
- 15.00 – 16.00                    **THEME 2:     Continuation of sub-theme a)**
- Debate*
- 16.00 – 18.00                    b)     **The Role of national parliaments in promoting the core values: exchange of good practices**
- Presentation by*  
          Mrs Barbara Prammer,  
          President of the Austrian National Parliament
- Debate*
- 18.00                                **Conclusions** presented by the President of PACE
- 18.30                                *Reception for all participants hosted by the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*
- End of the Conference

**Speech by the President of the House of Representatives**  
**of the States General**  
**Ms. Gerdi A. Verbeet**  
**on the occasion of the**  
**European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments**  
**Strasbourg, 22 - 23 May 2008**  
**“Parliaments and Civil Society”**

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

At the very core of the business of democratic governments and parliaments lies the careful weighing of and choosing between different interests. Only thus can a “general interest” be defined and can we find the best possible compromise between the many, diverse and often conflicting wishes of individuals and groups in society. But how do we ensure we are aware of all interests, that we have heard all opinions?

In the Netherlands, we have a long tradition of compromise, for the simple reason that we are a country of many minorities. Years of experience with reaching compromises, especially since the Second World War, have given us the polder model that we are famous for. This polder model is, in fact, a structure in which elements of civil society are ensured a voice in the early stages of policy formulation. In return, they are expected to assist the government in successfully implementing that policy.

The problem we have encountered in the Netherlands now, however, is that this system has become too effective. The consultation structures are so efficient that we always manage to reach a compromise. It thus catches us completely by surprise, when we are suddenly confronted with anger and frustration on the shop floor in the phase of policy implementation.

It seems that now, it’s not just parliament that has a legitimacy problem. The traditional organisations in civil society don’t appear to represent everyone they claim to, anymore, either. Add to that the problem that “compromise” seems to have become somewhat of a dirty word. “Watered-down

solutions”, “spineless government”, “electoral deceit” are slogans that spring to mind. But I spoke of weighing various different and often conflicting interests.

What else than that, to best conscience, can members of parliament and government do in a pluralistic society? I do not deny that there are difficulties and that some members of the public are truly grieved about particular policies. Perhaps we should take those grievances more seriously than we have done in some cases. However, I would not wish to ever depart from the principle that, in a democratic, pluralistic society, peaceful co-existence of different groups simply means that often, no-one gets exactly what she or he wants. We can only aim to accommodate as many people as possible while minimising the inconvenience of disagreeing minorities.

So what to do? How to turn the tide and make people feel that – even if they haven’t got exactly what they asked for, at least their arguments were taken seriously? I think it is of growing importance that we facilitate people who want to participate in public debate. We cannot force them to engage. It is an important democratic right to choose what one does or does not embark upon. But we can make it much easier for those who want to voice their opinions to do so. For this reason, the House of Representatives has been experimenting, since a few years, with holding regular parliamentary debates in different locations around the country, and with organising debates with citizens in several cities as well. It’s a start, at least.

In addition to hearing the public, I believe parliaments should actively seek to hear sceptical critics, notorious doom-mongers and independent professionals from relevant fields, right from the early stages of government policymaking. There is no reason why parliament shouldn’t organise itself and hear contradicting views before more or less definite policy proposals are put to it by government. The House of Representatives has been attempting to increase its influence by organising more round table discussions and hearings in which others than the “usual suspects” are heard. By inviting critical persons to present their opinions as soon as ideas are launched by policymaking organs, on a national or European level. The process of ensuring that as many as possible controversial sounds reach parliament is not an easy but certainly a very important one. Special attention, in that respect, must go out to groups which are generally underrepresented in parliament as well as in political consultations, such as youngsters. They must be even more actively recruited to participate in public debate than others.

Article 50 of our Constitution literally states that “the States General represent the entire Dutch population”. Too often, these days, this assumption is threatened. Even with eleven parties in the House of Representatives.

Finally, however, and on a more positive note, the absence of a threshold in our electoral system – which I just indirectly referred to – does mean that changes in society are automatically reflected in discussions in parliament. The simple mechanism of elections in the Netherlands guarantees that new opinions and interests in civil society reach the parliamentary arena. They did indeed in 2002 when Pim Fortuyn's party won 18% of the seats in the House. And in 2006 when the Party for Animals won two seats. But as you plainly see from that which I have said thus far – this is no reason for us to sit back and be lazy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I firmly believe compromise is essential to the proper functioning of a pluralistic democracy. I also believe, however, that we should learn from our failures and from the successes that seem to have exceeded themselves. We should not be afraid to adapt our system to changing times. I believe government, parliament and civil society will come out stronger. Democracy, after all, requires continuous maintenance to keep it in good working order.

Thank you for your attention.