



The development of the Dutch Caribbean islands

Emily S. de Jongh-Elhage,
Prime Minister of the Netherlands Antilles

10th October 2010 marks a new phase in the Netherlands Antilles' development, with each family member charting a course towards their own future

The Netherlands Antilles is currently undergoing a major overhaul of its constitutional arrangements. As a result, by 10th October 2010 the Netherlands Antilles as we know them will cease to exist. In keeping with the outcome of various referenda that were organised on our islands these last few years, both Curaçao and St Maarten will become self-governing entities within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The two new countries will obtain responsibility for all matters related to the internal governance of their respective territories, such as education, housing, healthcare, economic development, fiscal matters and the judiciary. As such they will have their own prime minister, governor-general and elected parliament.

Our sister islands Bonaire, Saba and St Eustatius, have instead opted in favour of a closer link with the European part of the Kingdom and will – as overseas municipalities – become an integral part of the governmental system in the Netherlands. As such they will receive a significant amount of direct support from The Hague.

For some of us 10th October will be a sad day. Albeit not perfect, the federation-like structure of the Netherlands Antilles for many years banded together six unique islands. This brought about a wonderful diverse mix of peoples and cultures freely roaming throughout our beloved Caribbean region, working and living wherever their jobs and ambitions led them to.

The Netherlands Antilles has been a family that included three Papiamentto-speaking islands just off the coast of Venezuela (Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire) and three English-speaking islands all the way up the island-chain, separated by 600 miles of Caribbean Sea (St Maarten, St Eustatius and Saba). We have always portrayed the image of a prosperous family forever joined together by a shared history, linked to the Kingdom of the Netherlands by a complex set of constitutional and administrative arrangements. These arrangements were last updated in 1986 when Aruba acquired country status within the

Kingdom of the Netherlands. Aruba's exit from the Dutch Antilles' constellation upset the centre of gravity of the islands. This development explains in part the necessity for an overhaul of the constitutional arrangements (in the Netherlands Antilles internally) between the islands as well as within a larger context of the Kingdom between the mother country and the respective islands. In addition, the realities and complexities of today's world justifies a more workable constitutional structure.

For most of us therefore, 10th October will be a tremendous day to look forward to. A day to celebrate. A day to start a new phase in the development of our islands, each family member by its own free will charting a course towards its own future. A day to close the current chapter on constitutional agenda and instead fully dedicate ourselves towards building our islands into all they can be: Islands at ease with themselves in their natural habitat, named the Greater Caribbean. But at the same time thankfully enjoying the special bonds that unite us within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and grateful for the protection and stability its protective umbrella will continue to offer.

Economic development

In spite of all the economic turbulence in recent years, our islands have plenty of reasons to be optimistic about the future. Even during the height of the economic turmoil our economy has continued to perform to the best of its abilities, registering two per cent growth in 2008 while hovering around zero per cent growth in 2009. In that same period several major tourist projects came to fruition. With the recent openings of the Renaissance and Hyatt hotels in Curaçao, more high-quality options were added to an already sophisticated market. The same goes for St Maarten, where the existing and impressive cruise facility is undergoing a major expansion. And there is yet more to come. In addition, major advances were made by our financial services industry when our jurisdiction was included in



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several coveted 'white lists'. This subsequently led to the conclusion of tax information exchange and fiscal treaties with several major players in the industry, both within and outside of the region.

These examples are shared by way of illustrating the pride we feel for our deeply ingrained democratic traditions, our sound governmental institutions and our legal and regulatory framework, which combined provide an environment that is very much conducive to business development, especially when seen within a regional context.

If you take a good look at our air- and seaports, dry-dock, free zone and e-commerce opportunities, you will find that they provide services to many partners and destinations throughout the Western Hemisphere and even to some privileged ones in Europe. Regular flights by local and foreign carriers connect our islands with the rest of the world: Caracas, Bogotá, Santo Domingo, Kingston, Port-au-Prince, Port of Spain, Paramaribo, São Paulo, Miami, New York and Amsterdam. Our free zone welcomes many shoppers. And our dry-dock receives many ships, both large and small. And what can I say about our ports? Forever looking ahead, and anticipating new opportunities, they recently signed a strategic partnership with the Panama Canal Authority and multi-year agreements with major cruise lines.

We are very business-minded, actively pursuing business opportunities throughout the Greater Caribbean and beyond. As was the case earlier this year, when sizeable trade missions from Curaçao visited both Colombia and Brazil, I can only hope that you do the same and, while doing so, keep considering us when exploring new business opportunities.

Regional cooperation

For many years successive governments of the Netherlands Antilles have followed a policy of active engagement with our neighbours, both through bilateral and multilateral channels. Bilaterally our attention historically has primarily been focused on those countries directly neighbouring us, such as Venezuela and Colombia. Because of developments in more recent decades, this gradually developed into a more open and diversified regional approach, which also includes many interactions on all kinds of levels and in all kinds of shapes and forms with countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Surinam. In fact, one of our national carriers was among the first to provide relief goods to earthquake-stricken Haiti in January of this year.

Multilaterally we gladly avail ourselves of the opportunities provided to us by organisations such as the Association of Caribbean States, the Caribbean Community, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the United Nations Environmental Programme. But we also – and actively – participate in many specialised regional bodies, such as the Caribbean Association of National Telecommunication Organisations, whose annual Conference and Trade Exhibition the Netherlands Antilles hosted in the month of July, and the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force, which is currently chaired by the Netherlands Antilles.

And then, last but not least, there are of course our youth and sportsmen and women, who very actively participate in all sorts of regional undertakings: Sometimes bringing home gold, as our sprinter Churandy Martina did recently when she won two gold medals at the Central American and Caribbean Games in Puerto Rico. Sometimes by hosting a gathering of Caribbean boy and girl scouts, as was the case in the recently concluded Cuboree in Curaçao, which attracted some 1,400 participants from across the region; and sometimes on a more academic level, as is the case with the cooperation between the University of the Netherlands Antilles and the University of the West Indies and St Maarten's participation in exams from the Caribbean Examinations Council.

In conclusion, it can safely be stated that the Netherlands Antilles both constitutionally, economically and in terms of their relations with the region are well poised to successfully embark on a new phase in their social-economic and political development. In the years to come each individual island will have the task to inwardly strengthen and build upon its democratic institutions, whilst at the same time adopting an outward-looking attitude in order to benefit and share from the cross fertilisation of ideas and practices gained from a fruitful interaction with its surroundings. The experience of the major constitutional overhaul has engendered a never-before-experienced creativity in us as leaders and in the wider community as a whole. It is my fervent wish that this creativity will continue to serve us in the years to come as we face and overcome the challenges that undoubtedly we will encounter in our new political status.

Allow me to close by inviting those of you who have never visited our islands before, to pay us a visit. Whatever the occasion of your trip, we will warmly welcome you. Of one thing you can be sure: as polyglots we speak your language. ■