



Tweede Kamer

DER STATEN-GENERAAL

To All Members of the House of Representatives

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Date 9 April 2020

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Dear fellow-members,

Introduction

On 15 March 2020, I notified you of the measures the House of Representatives has taken to combat the coronavirus (covid-19). The essence of these measures is to make sure that the parliamentary process can continue, with the number of physical meetings kept to a minimum.

In that letter, I also mentioned that we were going to ask the Government to send us a list of urgent bills; bills that have to be dealt with in the short term, given their financial and organizational impact. The list we received on 27 March 2020 was amended at our request and the Government added concrete dates and deadlines to it. I sent the new list to the chairpersons of the standing committees, requesting the committees to critically consider which bills they wish to deal with in the short term.

In the past few weeks, that list was discussed in procedural meetings (via video conferencing) and via e-mail procedures. On the basis of this survey and the Cabinet's decision to extend the measures until at least 28 April 2020, we have opted for the current meeting regime to be extended, while observing the right balance between continuing the parliamentary process and protecting the health of MPs, staff members and journalists. This letter is to inform you about our working methods in the coming period.



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Working methods

The House is facing restricting circumstances with regard to physical meetings. In order to be able to hold a meeting, we need to appeal to many staff members: clerks, messengers, security staff and staff members of the Catering Department. Meanwhile, MPs must be able to fully exercise their duties of scrutiny and co-legislation, and to table issues they deem necessary and urgent. Therefore, it is important to make room, be it limited, for dealing with other issues, apart from the debates about the coronavirus.

Therefore, **committee debates on draft legislation and policy documents**, during which motions can be put forward, may from now on be held on Monday and Tuesday. If a holiday falls on a Monday or Tuesday, debates will be held on Thursday. The Thorbecke and Troelstra committee meeting rooms have already been prepared to this end, and as of 20 April, the Old Plenary Hall can also be used for this purpose. Given the presence of staff members and the care for cleaning the meeting rooms, the start and conclusion of these meetings may not coincide. The Registry is in charge of centrally coordinating the planning of these meetings, to ensure that they are evenly distributed over the week. Priority is given to issues and emergency bills related to the current coronavirus crisis, followed by draft legislation labelled "urgent" by standing committees. Subsequently, the Registry will plan the debates scheduled by the committees during their procedural meetings. The voting on the bills considered will take place in the first plenary sitting following the debate on the bill itself.

The Tilanus and Vondeling rooms remain available for video conferencing, a facility which can be used for **procedural meetings** in case meeting physically is not an option.

The Plenary Hall remains available **for debates and for voting**. As a rule, plenary sittings will be held one day a week. The Constitution and our own Rules of Procedure require the presence of a quorum for plenary sittings. There is no such requirement for committee meetings.

However, this widening of the meeting regime is not without limits. It is crucial that we exercise restraint in dealing with this. We are Parliament and thus play an exemplary role. It is our common responsibility to weigh time and again what needs to be considered right away and what can wait. There are two criteria for this. The first one is the availability of meeting space, the second one is the presence of people in the House. After all, the requirements imposed on society at large apply to ourselves just as much.

May recess

Now that the number of debates had to be reduced sharply while the corona crisis has society in its clutches, it was decided that the House will continue to work throughout



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its May recess. It will restrain itself to debates and consultations pertaining to the present crisis. The House's staff council supports this decision.

Public access

We have received questions from various sides, including representatives of the media, about the public nature of our meetings, and rightly so. Public access and transparency are inseparably linked with our democracy. It is stipulated in the Constitution that consultations of the States-General be public, so that everyone can follow the deliberations of the House of Representatives. The sittings taking place with the participants physically present in the premises of the House -- i.e. plenary sittings as well as committee debates on draft legislation or policy documents, which are held in the Thorbeckezaal, the Troelstraal and the Old Plenary Hall -- are streamed and can be replayed.

Procedural committee meetings can be held physically in the House as well. If that is not possible, use can be made of video conferencing facilities instead. At this point, the quality of livestreaming such meetings is not entirely to our liking yet. However, we ensure the public nature of procedural meetings by publicizing their agenda, a list of decisions and the verbatim report made of them, which usually becomes available within two days. Apart from that, a real-time audio connection is made available to accredited journalists, allowing them to follow the meetings live in real time.

Finally

The situation we are in is strange, unreal and difficult for all of us. We do everything we can to ensure that MPs, staff members and journalists whose presence in the House is necessary, can do their work as safely as possible, with the cleaners in particular doing an invaluable job. They work very hard to clean all the meeting rooms, work places and public areas in our buildings over and over again. However, much of the parliamentary work is done from home these days. It is not easy to combine that work with family life and sometimes with home schooling as well, but still it is being done. There is a great sense of unity and responsibility to join forces and see the parliamentary process through. That gives us confidence.

It goes without saying that I will keep you posted of the latest developments if these are relevant for the continuation of the parliamentary process. Until then: stay safe and be careful with contacts. Our health is the most precious asset we have.

With kind regards on behalf of the Presidium,

Khadija Arib
President of the House of Representatives