

## TO CHOOSE FREEDOM

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74 years ago in Wageningen, the German armed forces, which were still occupying parts of the Netherlands, surrendered to the Allied forces. The signing of the capitulation, created the conditions to alleviate the needs of the civilian population as quickly as possible; to put an end to hunger and hardship; and to enable people to return home. In the months following the end of the war, the small number of Jewish victims who had survived deportation to concentration - and extermination camps, were able to return to the Netherlands.

May the 5<sup>th</sup> is celebrated thus as Liberation Day. It is to be cherished and protected but we do however still need to be on our guard. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1945, freedom was not just handed back to the Netherlands as a gift, but as something constantly needing to be worked upon. Freedom is never a finished project, it demands attention and active involvement, each and every day. This year, the Liberation Day celebrations rightly emphasize this: we must choose freedom ourselves and continue to make a choice for it. "Liberation" is only worthy of that name if it receives focus, without people being subjected to violence and persecution.

But what do we then make a choice for? Are we guided solely by our own interests when voting during general elections, disregarding others, acting on our own behalf? Is that democracy, ignoring the need of others?

In her message to the Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei, the president of the House of Representatives, Khadija Arib, referred to the words of Amos Oz: Radicalism is the greatest threat. Individuals, groups and parties not pursuing consensus, but causing division. We have to be on our guard against that type of radicalism.

I would like to add a few thoughts on this subject. As the saying goes: to govern means to predict. This is also applicable to democratic citizenship. Exercising our right to vote, participating in elections, does not contribute to democracy if the sole intention is to show disapproval of government policy. Democratic rights are only fully exercised when a vision for the future of our society is expressed as well. A democratic society includes: not accepting violence, inequalities, and exclusion based on a person's identity, such as race or religion. As the psalmist poet of the Old Testament wrote: Faithful love and truth will join together; righteousness and peace will embrace. A democracy guided by values secures internal peace and does not go to war.

*This* is the reason why we should ask ourselves, when preparing to vote: what kind of democracy do we envisage? What does the freedom we are privileged to choose mean, for ourselves and for future generations? Do we really choose freedom if radicalism is elected that turns against fellow citizens and refugees, or neglects the destiny of future generations?

A democratic society expects both civilians and governors to be guided by the same virtues, Aristotle wrote. Voting should not be regarded as pressing the buttons of society for personal gain. Voting is a political act, accepting responsibility for a common future. People may have different opinions, but still share a common future.

A democracy offers freedom. But unlike what has been argued by Carl Schmitt - who became an ideologist of national socialism - politics is not a battle to exclude or subjugate enemies. Democratic politics should reflect the message of connectedness between people. A genuine democratic politician tries to gain a majority for his or her own points of view, but never forgets he or she also serves the minority. Therefore, a democracy is incomplete and vulnerable without the rule of law: protecting the human dignity of all.

The freedom, fought for during World War II with great sacrifices, is not only the absence of coercion and oppression. It is a precious responsibility as well. Back then, this view was shared by visionary leaders like Winston Churchill, who called for a European Union. Around the mass graves and on the ruins of those years, civilians and their leaders came to realise that the regained freedom involves a *mission*. Those post war years are often referred to as the years of rebuilding. However, it was much more than repairing and reconstructing the pre-war situation. And often it was about something different. Social abuses, vulnerability to foreign aggression, and antidemocratic and antisemitic tendencies that had emerged in the Netherlands during the 1930s, definitely needed *not* to be reinstated.

Now, after nearly three quarters of a century, we also face major questions: *what type of democracy do we wish to pass on?* A democracy that divides us, or one that brings us together? A democracy that uses up all resources, or a sustainable one? A democracy focused on just today, or one that takes into account the interests of future generations? An entrenched democracy, or one that reaches out to other democracies? Our choices define our freedom.

My area of expertise, the field of civil rights and constitutional law, focuses on safeguarding this. During the constitutional revisions of 1917 and 1922, every Dutch citizen was given the right to vote and the right to be elected. The Netherlands also chose to have all political opinions represented proportionally in parliament. Unlike the majority system in Great Britain and the United States, where elections result in 'the winner takes it all'.

Too often elections are considered some sort of running competition, where at the end the winner is placed on a podium. En route to the finish line -the final election results- journalists closely monitor and report developments: who is ahead, who is falling behind. In the meantime, coaches, campaign managers, comments from the side line, handing out refreshments. At the final debate, when the election results are being discussed, debating qualities seem to be valued more than factually correct and meaningful statements.

In a democratic society, the elected need energy and inspiration for what follows after a positive election result. Not a trophy, but a task, a responsibility.

It would be too easy to just focus on politicians receiving a political mandate. In a vital democracy, the way citizens interpret their responsibility is also important. That was Aristotle's lesson, when he wrote about 'virtues'. Elections are not intended to only express dissatisfaction, the so-called protest votes. Above all, voting should be considered as giving the elected representatives and office holders an *assignment*. Here, citizens carry a responsibility. Who will they support, and based on what vision will they give a political mandate?

Globally there is now an increased awareness that every society needs to develop further, in fields such as social justice, education, equality, sustainability, control of personal life, and living together in peace. When people focus on the earth's future and on next generations, it adds meaning to their understanding of constitutional basic concepts of democracy, rule of law and human rights. In future elections, let us take less into account the politicians we want to teach a lesson. It is more important to decide who we entrust with the responsibility of safeguarding a world of peace and justice, for those yet too young to vote, their children and grandchildren. It is a considerable task, only to be fulfilled to some extent when the most dedicated and wise people communicate and cooperate to realise their ideals. It is therefore understandable that we have a political system not dominated by one "strong man", or one political party. A connecting democracy has a brighter future than a system where those in power feel the need to settle scores with those that are not.

In these complicated and uncertain times, we are grateful to have a constitutional system in which the need for cooperation is embedded. Not only for the common good of today's population, but also for future generations that will live here, wherever they may come from.

Let us take courage, let us give courage to others, while here today let us think of the liberators of 1945. Liberators from different countries and continents, but guided by shared ideals: ideals of freedom and justice for all.