

HENK KAMP, FORMER KINGDOM REPRESENTATIVE AND CURRENT MINISTER OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS, TALKS WITH LT GOVERNOR GLENN THODÉ

The same dance to different rhythms

The Dutch approach to problem solving is as distant from the Bonairean approach as the two places are distant from each other physically. But the Dutch polder and the Dutch Caribbean have a promising, albeit longdistance, relationship. Lt Governor Glenn Thodé in discussion with the former Kingdom Representative and current Minister of Social Affairs Henk Kamp about opportunities, respect and progress.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BAUD SCHOENMAECKERS

At the time of this interview in August 2010, Henk Kamp was Representative of the Dutch government in the BES islands. In October he became Minister of Social Affairs in the cabinet of Mark Rutte.

The stately office of the Bonaire Island Government on the Plaza Wilhelmina looks welcoming, as it stands along the canal where large cruise ships bask lazily in the sun. When these drop off their precious “cargo”, thousands of tourists overrun the picturesque town of Kralendijk – previously known as Korallengijk or a dike

built on coral. The tourist industry is Bonaire’s largest source of income. Growth is needed to satisfy the increasing demand.

How much growth can Bonaire take on without destroying its vulnerable environment?

Glenn Thodé: “It will never become a case of economy versus ecology; the two will always go hand in hand on Bonaire. As administrators we will ensure that Bonaire retains its ecological value. That is the only way to help the economy move forward sustainably. The government makes regulations and policy designed to protect the vulnerable environment, and NGOs such as STINAPA ensure that this protection is well managed.”

“I agree that ecology and economy are not opposites”, says Henk Kamp. “But in the short term there will be some friction. The island is working on zoning plans that include projects for wastewater treatment and better waste processing. If you are used to dumping waste without many restrictions or costs, discharging wastewater into the sea and putting up a building wherever you like, then I can imagine that as an entrepreneur you might now feel a bit hemmed in. But regulation is needed to preserve biodiversity in the long term. So we have to make sure that entrepreneurs stay on board despite this friction.”

The number of people on Bonaire is increasing, there is more activity, the pressure is building...

Thodé: “Growth has always come in waves on Bonaire. The population is now increasing because of the stream of newcomers resulting from the political changes. In the past physical growth was absorbed almost naturally. This capacity to absorb has declined because tourism has grown and a lot of construction has taken place in recent years. This increasing pressure on our island is being felt by the population and sometimes feels threatening. Nevertheless, I want us to continue actively involving everyone in our society in all developments – entrepreneurs, teachers, NGOs – the whole population. We started on the path to sustainable growth in Bonaire already 40 years ago. The

Glenn Thodé (left) and Henk Kamp meet regularly to discuss joint policy for Bonaire



current flurry of activity makes it look like this is a new effort, but that is not the case. We will continue along this path and adjust our course as necessary to ensure balance – in nature, culture and progress. This means that we have to learn to interact differently with our surroundings and limit or redesign some activities – and this will be met with some resistance.”

Kamp: “This will demand the best of us. We, the Dutch, have to come across with a long-term vision that clearly demonstrates the necessity of regulation. Like us, the Bonairean Governing Council wants to see controlled growth in tourism, but no disruption in

the character of the island, its nature or the composition of its population. There is currently a lot of new construction taking place, because previously granted permits are being implemented.”

Since 1 September a few important implementation decrees related to the nature management ordinance have come into effect. These provide legal protection for nature and the environment on Bonaire. A Spatial Development Plan will also soon be adopted by the Island Government.

An analysis of these plans has shown that if all existing building permits are implemented growth will be enormous. Thodé poetically adds that Bonaire has for years been sitting on a trotting horse. “We now have to prevent the horse from breaking into an uncontrolled gallop. We have to hold on to the reins and see what we can or cannot still allow, using a model that shows what the effects of growth will be. Only then will growth be manageable.”

With the image of holding the reins you create a nice link to the subject of the Netherlands’ control and influence

Thodé: “The control is comparable to that of the Antillean government’s. But the influence is greater because the Netherlands is physically more present – there are more Dutch civil servants on the island. The Antillean government was more distant. Control can also stimulate action. I notice that the Netherlands wants to be more supportive and often is – and if we find that the reins should be looser, we will discuss it.”

Kamp: “The influence is definitely strong. All of our ministries are represented here, and 96 projects are currently in progress on all fronts – education, social

services, fire fighting, taxation. But we remain aware of our place, as a European country located more than 7800 km away. We have to define our position in relation to the local government; just as Bonaire has to define its position in relation to us. We are searching, but in a constructive way. We consult with each other weekly and meet monthly with the Governing Council.”

Thodé: I know a nice example of control. We were not very disciplined when it comes to budgeting. The Netherlands and Bonaire agreed that a Board of Financial Supervision would assist us in this regard and see how we can use our resources more effectively. This is a type of control, but we decided together what form it would take on. And that stimulates us to take action. Just as we will work together to address the focal areas that the islands and the Netherlands have jointly established: security, education, health care and social security for young people and families.”

What is the most difficult aspect of the cooperation?

Thodé: “Communicating as one to the population. Sending the right joint message; making it clear how we are the same and how we differ. The government of the Netherlands wants to explain what it does in a way that reflects its own reality. But that reality does not always apply here, especially when it comes to important issues such as the consequences of the transition, the Board of Financial Supervision and the four focal areas. These things could be communicated in a different way that would be more geared toward the population here. A frequently asked question is “What does this mean for me, or for my grandmother and grandfather?” This too is part of the process. We still have to find each other in the dance we are performing together to different rhythms. The rhythm of the Netherlands sometimes resembles that of “house” music, with many beats per minute. We still have a calm bachata rhythm – based on our experience, our culture and Caribbean customs.”

This touches on the point of cultural differences

Kamp: “They are large. The Netherlands is used to working according to a plan, progressing one stage at a time from analysis, through to planning, division of tasks and implementation. On Bonaire improvisation and feeling play a larger role; more time is invested in finding common ground, building a relationship and convincing each other. I don’t think our approach is always wrong, but theirs isn’t either. The trick is now to meet each other half way.”

“I would like to see the two governments on this island melt together into one humane government”, says Thodé, “not one of calculations, dossiers and numbers. A government that encompasses the best of both worlds, in which the two methods are merged. The Dutch approach is rational and systematic. Here we look at what the problems are and we talk to all



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parties. Then you follow your heart and gut feeling and choose the solution that suits both sides the best. What I have noticed is that neither approach is optimal. If we can combine them in a way that creates more harmony between approach and culture, we will have a government that can make the best choices for Bonaire and its inhabitants.”

Kamp: “Bonaire is in the fortunate position of dealing with a Dutch government that is one entity and that has one contact point: the Kingdom Representative. Municipalities in the Netherlands have to deal with all of the ministries, with their separate policies and activities that do not always line up. Here the ministries work closely together, and are even housed in one building together in the National Office for the Caribbean Netherlands (RCN), formerly known as the Regional Service Center. They all confer with each other three times per week.”

Sounds good – but from Bonaire’s perspective possibly like an administrative invasion

Thodé: “Not an invasion, but definitely a flood of Dutch people! When the RCN opened, it felt as if we were being bombarded with focal areas. “Which priorities do we have to focus our attention on?” Don’t forget that our administrative body has fewer employees than the Dutch government has here. If people feel that an approach is not in line with Bonaire’s own approach, they will resist. But if they are stimulated and can participate in the discussion they will see the approach more as a form of support. The resistance will dissipate when people see that they can do more with the capacities they have.”

This intensive interaction with the central government is new for Bonaire. The relationship between the Netherlands Antilles and Bonaire had federal aspects, which enabled the island to operate with a great deal of independence. This was experienced as autonomy, and a group opposed to the changes now sees the increased interference of the Dutch government as a threat to this autonomy. People are asking themselves “What does it mean for me, that the Netherlands is now looking over my shoulder?” According to Thodé, a change in attitude is already noticeable: what was originally seen as interference is now increasingly seen as an attempt to join forces and provide mutual support.

Kamp: “If we didn’t approach things in the direct Dutch way, it would lead to dissatisfaction. Expectations would be created that cannot quickly be met. When we came here in January 2009 there was a poor jail with 26 inmates, now there is a better facility for 75 inmates. This represents greater security for Bonaire. First aid has also been improved. We are working on a central reporting system for all social services. Medical insurance is currently problematic, but will

be available to everyone as of January 2011. We have given extra priority to a number of issues, and this will eventually benefit the people of Bonaire. I understand the resistance, but appreciation for these changes will grow as soon as the benefits start to be felt.”

What does the average Bonairean think of 10-10-10, the magical date?

Thodé: “There is no average Bonairean. Some are strongly against the transition and some who are strongly in favour look farther ahead and see how things can eventually become better. Media coverage has focused primarily on those who are opposed.”

Kamp believes that the feelings of those who are opposed have to be taken seriously. Administrators have to make it very clear that not all of the Netherlands’ laws and regulations will be applied to the BES islands. The system is still based on the Antillean laws, which will remain in effect in adjusted form. Separate laws for the Caribbean Netherlands have also been established, such as taxation laws that are appropriate for the local context.

What two pieces of advice would you give each other?

Thodé: “Number one: Be more open to the Bonaireans. The fact that we have joined the Netherlands means our relationship is based on solidarity and equality. If Dutch administrators are open to this, we will be able to work together to create a humane government that understands the wishes of the Bonaireans. My second piece of advice is: “Make sure all the Dutch who are sent here or are involved in making regulations first visit the islands and talk to the people living here. Then they can form an image of the framework and context in which the regulations have to be applied. There are people in the Netherlands who speak on behalf of the islands, but I don’t see them enough here. They don’t understand the atmosphere or conditions here. They have no idea how the society works.”

Kamp: “Number one: Stay critical of the Netherlands, because the Dutch do not have a monopoly on wisdom. And number two: Stay positive. We, the Dutch civil servants working on the island have a positive attitude, have a lot to offer and see many opportunities. The Netherlands has a well-functioning government – but keep us on our toes, and stay constructively critical.” ■



A frequently asked question is “What does this mean for me, or for my grandmother and grandfather?”

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