

The President of the House of Representatives
of the States-General
Postbus 20018
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Re: Policies on equal opportunities for homosexuals
Policy plans for 2005 to 2007

Mr President,

As the member of the government responsible for coordinating policy on equal rights for homosexuals, and acting on behalf of the government, I wish to inform you of the government's policies on the matter in the 2005 to 2007 period.

Since equal treatment and acceptance of homosexuals – i.e. homosexual men, lesbian women and bisexual men and women – are still not taken for granted in our society, government policy will continue to focus on both in the next few years. This will call for continued alertness in implementing existing policy measures. The government has also set itself three main goals for the next three years.

1. Promoting the social acceptance of homosexuals in the Netherlands. To this end, the government wishes to support the dialogue between them and various belief-based and ethnic groups and keep close track of social trends.
2. Enabling vulnerable groups of homosexuals to forge stronger ties with society and integrate more closely. This applies in particular to people who are isolated, cannot participate in society, and are threatened with exclusion: homosexuals from ethnic minorities, young homosexuals and older homosexuals who are dependent on care. The government wishes to focus on quality of life for these groups, and on social cohesion in the street and neighbourhood and at school and work. The government will set the right example by entering into consultations, supporting certain projects and making specific knowledge available to the field.
3. Devoting attention to the safety of homosexuals and to countering discrimination.

The appendix contains an overview of the practical implications of this policy.

1. Current state of affairs with regard to equal opportunities for homosexuals

In its coalition agreement *Participation, Employment, Deregulation*, the government points out that 'Respect, tolerance and the rejection of discrimination are essential to the maintenance of social cohesion'.ⁱ Over some thirty years, the basis has been laid for equal treatment of homosexuals in the Netherlands. Successive governments drafted and implemented many policies, and much has been achieved. Generally speaking, homosexuals enjoy equal opportunities. At the same time, however, there are signs that the social acceptance of homosexuals is beginning to waver among certain groups, such as young people and members of ethnic minorities.ⁱⁱ

The government has discussed the matter, and spoken with various parties. In late November 2004, members of the interministerial working group on government policy and homosexuality consulted with civil servants from several European countries on the equal treatment of homosexuals. In January and February 2005, we spoke with representatives of local government, national knowledge institutes and field organisations on problems and possible measures.ⁱⁱⁱ In the debate on the 2005 budget, the House of Representatives asked for additional measures.^{iv}

2. What is it like to be a homosexual in the Netherlands today?

What is the current situation for homosexuals in this country?

As pointed out, homosexuals in the Netherlands are in a reasonably good position and many positive developments also illustrate the great diversity of this group. Homosexual seniors in Rotterdam, for instance, have started their own residential home, and homosexuals with a different ethnic or cultural background are beginning to set up their own networks. 'Pink Saturday' (*Roze Zaterdag*), the annual national demonstration, held this year in Nijmegen, the 2005 EuroGames in Utrecht, and recent efforts by Muslims and homosexuals to seek rapprochement are all good examples.

Increasingly, however, we are receiving reports of intolerance among groups of young people and members of ethnic minorities. The polarisation of our society and the growing intolerance of certain groups of citizens are also having repercussions for the homosexual community. The government wishes to nip this development in the bud.

Homosexuals' lifestyles vary widely, which means that general measures will not be very effective. Targeted action and tailor-made strategies are needed. Still, the emphasis must shift in other ways too. In the past twenty or thirty years, the focus has been on equal treatment for homosexuals in legislation and target group policy. Now, however, themes such

as quality of life, safety, integration, own responsibility and mainstreaming also claim attention.^v

Four principles underpin the government's policy.

- The ban on discrimination against homosexuals is a non-negotiable norm in Dutch society. The principle is and remains 'to protect human dignity, and enable participation in society on an equal footing, regardless of sexual orientation'.^{vi}
- Since a member of the government was appointed to coordinate policy in September 1986, equal opportunities for and the equal treatment of homosexuals have been mainstreamed into the policy of all ministries.^{vii} This means that, in preparing policy measures, the ministers and state secretaries involved must take account of their impact on homosexuals. To this end, the interministerial working group on government policy and homosexuality meets regularly, and equal opportunities for homosexuals receive attention in policy as a whole. If necessary, the subject will temporarily be given specific attention or emphasis.
- The role of central government is mainly to set rules and establish frameworks (as it is doing in this letter, for instance), to encourage others to perform their tasks properly, and hold them responsible for doing so, and to keep track of trends in society.
- The government will continue to commit itself at both international and European level to tackling discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and to eradicating differences in the legal protection afforded to people discriminated against on those grounds. Since equal treatment is a fundamental value that should be respected, the government will dovetail its efforts with the steps recently announced by the European Commission, and with the Social Agenda (the Lisbon agenda).

Others in our society also play an important role in ensuring equal treatment and acceptance of homosexuals.

3. The responsibilities of citizens, institutions and civil society organisations

Generally speaking, homosexuals in the Netherlands are capable of standing up for themselves or - if necessary - acquiring the advice, help or care they need, or organising it for themselves. Much of what has been achieved in recent years is the result of the work of a number of highly active, self-aware volunteer organisations and initiatives, such as the *Vrienden van de Gay Krant* (Friends of the Dutch gay newspaper) and the gay rights organisation, COC, which was set up in 1946.^{viii}

The government believes that it is primarily up to civil society organisations themselves to contribute to the equal treatment of homosexuals. Not only homosexuals' own organisations but also ethnic minorities' organisations, the social partners, industrial sector organisations and education, care and welfare institutions have a role to play. They can, for instance, agree on rules about the quality of the services they provide, or draw up codes of conduct. Homosexuals' own organisations and the many volunteers active in the field of equal rights for homosexuals are responsible for a wide range of national and local activities, including sports, contact between individuals, local debates, information and advice, and providing specific care services and informal care.

Examples of initiatives that could be launched on a wider scale include:

- information by the COC at schools in some cities;
- informal care by volunteers from organisations such as *Rotterdam Verkeert* and the *Schorer Stichting*, both of which seek to improve care services for homosexuals who depend on them;
- dialogue and debating activities about homosexuality and belief with Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Hindu groups by the Humanist Association, the COC, the Yoesuf Foundation and Islam & Citizenship;
- representation of specific interests in the police, among teaching staff, and in the armed forces and other government sectors by trade unions;
- an invitation to visit a mosque in Rotterdam sent to the COC by the mosque leaders.

4. Tailor-made measures at local level

The government believes that other public authorities are also responsible for the equal treatment and acceptance of homosexuals. It is up to the municipal authorities and private organisations to carry out tasks in the field of, for example, social support under the Welfare Act and the new Social Support Act, which will soon enter into force. Promoting social cohesion, quality of life and safety are important tasks for the municipal authorities, and they can be held to account for them. Given the autonomy of the municipalities, and depending on the nature of the problem, they have the scope to come up with tailor-made solutions, for instance in their policies on safe meeting places, or in deploying resources. Some municipalities consult local homosexual organisations before making and delivering their policies. Others support activities in fields ranging from social dialogue, rapprochement, shelter and advice to sports, information for schools and safe meeting places. The provincial authorities also play their part in strengthening the social infrastructure by initiating and

supporting projects and help develop, exchange and disseminate good practices, through, for instance, the Centres for Social Development and by providing grants for projects.

A number of measures taken by municipalities could be introduced on a wider scale. They include:

- aldermen holding the education portfolio consulting with school boards on measures to tackle intolerance of homosexuals among young people at schools in cities such as Rotterdam, Nijmegen and Amsterdam;
- the 'pink breakfast' held every year in Rotterdam town hall for homosexual seniors;
- the alderman holding the sports portfolio consulting with local sports clubs on ways of countering discrimination and exclusion (in Nijmegen);
- experiments in, for instance, The Hague and Amsterdam, in providing ethnic minority homosexuals with advice, information and care;
- targeted social work in the COC's premises in The Hague.

5. Central government keeps a finger on the pulse

As mentioned above, the role of central government is mainly to set rules and establish frameworks (as it is doing in this letter), to encourage others to perform their tasks properly and hold them responsible for doing so, and to keep track of trends in society. Ways of fulfilling this role include drafting rules on the accessibility and quality of services, and the total ban on discrimination. The government may also carry out or commission specific studies and make specific knowledge available to the field, or it may keep track of the position of homosexuals, and acceptance of them, in parts of its own organisation. That is how central government keeps its finger on the pulse. Finally, in her capacity as coordinator, the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport ensures that the ministries concerned carry out their roles effectively and coherently.

These are a few examples of the measures central government plans to take in the next few years.

- The Social and Cultural Planning Office will study changes in the acceptance of homosexuals among population groups and explore ways of keeping track of them in the future.
- The COC will take part in the sounding board group preparing the Social Support Act.
- Several municipalities providing specific care, shelter and advice for ethnic minority homosexuals will be given financial support.

- Several national organisations will be given a financial injection to encourage further dialogue and rapprochement between homosexuals, religious groups and members of ethnic minorities.
- At European level, the government will help fund capacity building and strengthening of non-governmental gay organisations in Europe.

A full overview of the measures, organised by the fields of the various ministries, is included in the appendix to this letter. A short financial overview is also enclosed.

What is the significance to the government of this short analysis and summary of principles, objectives and distribution of roles?

6. Moving forward

The government believes that respect, tolerance and the rejection of discrimination are essential to the maintenance of social cohesion. That also applies to the equal treatment and position of homosexuals. As I have already pointed out, social acceptance is beginning to waver in some places. That is why extra measures are needed – concrete steps that can get the stalling engine moving again. Civil society organisations, institutions and municipalities all play an important role. The government is going to carry out the intentions set out in this letter and the appendix to it, and calls on everyone involved to do their part and to shoulder their responsibilities.

Yours sincerely,

Clémence Ross-van Dorp

State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport

ⁱ The second Balkenende government's coalition agreement, under heading 'immigration and integration', p.11, 16 May 2003.

ⁱⁱ A rise in the number of incidents reported to the Internet Discrimination Hotline, April 2005 and to local, independent antidiscrimination bureaus, April 2004; survey of school-age youth in North Brabant, *Stichting Outway*, April 2005; information gained from civil society organisations and major cities, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, February 2005; survey conducted by the *Gay Krant*, August 2004; Mulier report: '*Het gaat om de sport..*', October 2003; report by gay rights organisation COC *Potten en flikkers de klas uit*, May 2003; Local youth monitors in Rotterdam and The Hague, summer 2002; Social and cultural trends in the Netherlands, Nijmegen Catholic University, 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ The minutes, with annexes, are accessible in full on the website of the knowledge centre for policy on equal rights for homosexuals www.homo-emancipatie.nl/raadplegingen_VWS.html

^{iv} 2005 budgets of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Parliamentary Papers 29,800 VIII, no 12, the Ministry of Justice, Parliamentary Papers 29,800 VI, no 7 and the Ministry of Health,

Welfare and Sport, Parliamentary Papers 29,800 XVI, no 6. These three amendments have been converted into measures, which will be discussed in this letter.

^v See the government's letter on the equal treatment of disabled or chronically ill people, Parliamentary Papers, 29,355 no 1, 28 November 2003.

^{vi} Principle underpinning the policy document on equal opportunities for homosexuals, Parliamentary Papers 27,107, no 2, 8 February 2001, p. 9.

^{vii} Letter from the Prime Minister to the House of Representatives, Parliamentary Papers 19,504, no 3, 11 September 1986.

^{viii} In 1939, a group of homosexual men launched a magazine, followed by the *Cultuur en Onstpanningscentrum* (Cultural Centre) – COC – in 1946. The organisation received the royal stamp of approval in 1973.