

**Speech by Kim Putters at council meeting at his installation as president of the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER)
16 September 2022**

Introduction

- I am grateful to be here and I'm really looking forward to the task ahead. Thank you also for those fine words and the trust you have placed in me. I would like to thank Tuur Elzinga for acting as interim president for the past six months.
I am very conscious that I am taking on the presidency in turbulent times, which may yet get a lot more complicated in the time ahead. What we do here at the SER is really going to matter! Climate crisis, rising social inequality, nitrogen, inflation, a looming wage price spiral, geopolitical relations – China, Russia, United States – migratory flows, war in Ukraine. I could go on. It's all adding up and confidence in our political institutions and their ability to deal with it all is no longer what it was. On the contrary.

Lessons from the SCP

- At the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), I learned a few things about that and came away with insights I hope I can also apply in my work at the SER. Sometimes we just need to hold our collective nerve, because the problems I just mentioned are not new. Almost all of them are problems and social changes that have been going on for a long time. It's just that they are all coming together at the same time, which means we are really feeling the impact in our wallets. Not everything is uncertain. At the SCP we were surprised to see that political debates often ignored developments we have known about for a long time. We already know almost exactly how many older people there will be in 2040 and what that will mean for our society. We already know quite a lot about climate change and what its effects will be. And we have also known for a long time that the existing youth care system in our country is not fit for purpose. And there is a very broad consensus on that. Sometimes things get ignored or put on the back burner for too long. We live in a time when that is no longer an option. It is up to the SER, along with politicians, to rise to that challenge.
- What I also learned at the SCP is that people have been worried about the future for a long time. Whether the government is out of its depth, what our children's diplomas will be worth in the future, or whether the family business can survive. Or whether you can start a new business. And yes, right now our first concern is getting through the winter, solving the immediate problems. After this winter there will be another winter, and we will have to come up with a way of sharing the burden. Because uncertainty about the future will remain, even if we manage to remove the uncertainty about today. The government cannot do this alone. This is something I have seen when it comes to the results of inquiries: policies get bogged down during the implementation or fall victim to increased polarisation, and in the end you have piles of reports and splendid plans that are never implemented in practice. Nor can the market solve everything – and sometimes it creates new problems. So cooperation is needed. I strongly believe in the consensus model to maintain the prospect of a positive, shared future.
- This is needed because there are things in our country that we need to get straightened out again. People sense that. They want to be able to count on a government that is dependable, whether that means good education, a permit system not subject to huge delays or a tax and customs administration that is working properly. But they also want to know that an honest day's work pays and offers greater security than it does now. That there is a good investment climate so they can continue to make a living. People lose faith when well-intentioned policies run aground, or indeed when those policies are absent. In the past, I have referred to that as a new social contract. Basically, it comes

down to being able to count on each other, and that means everyone will have to give and take. Everyone has to be included, whether you are an entrepreneur or a teacher or a long COVID patient.

- That calls for leaders we can trust, with an appealing and realistic vision for the future, who are prepared to look ahead and honestly tell us that some things will not go back to the way they were. We need to take advantage of new opportunities, because they do exist. It's not all doom and gloom. There are numerous opportunities around sustainability and digitalisation about which the SER has issued some great reports. As I mentioned before, in today's fragmented politics, a single seat is enough to win a majority, but after that it often doesn't get much further – I can say this from my own experience – than a draft coalition agreement outlining that vision. Things pretty soon get bogged down in details and polarisation. I am convinced – and I think we agree on this – that we need to work together to develop policies that extend beyond the term of one government and are truly concerned with the future. Not least for the sake of future generations. And to be quite honest, I do feel that long-term perspective is missing. Especially in a time of multiple crises, we are consumed with what is happening today, yet it is important that people understand the direction of travel.

The SER can contribute to that

- I can see three ways of doing so that I would like us to consider and put into practice together. The first is that we must first and foremost – all of you firmly rooted in your sectors – constantly and consistently keep thinking in terms of people. Whether entrepreneurs or employees or citizens in general; we are all people with families, we are part of organisations or companies. Too often in people's daily lives, they are held back by complex rules or implementation. If we don't talk to them enough, don't delve deeply enough into what they are experiencing on a day-to-day basis, then real solutions will fail to materialise. That will also impact the ability of companies, workers and society to shoulder the burden, and how heavy that burden will become. Living, working and business are not separate policy fields, the way they tend to be organised in The Hague. In practice they are deeply interrelated.

In recent years, the SER Youth Platform has highlighted very clearly the practical problems that the lack of joined-up thinking causes for young people. Taking on student debt, starting a career, starting a family, buying a home. Obviously, everyone suffers when those sums just don't add up. The exploratory studies and advisory reports clearly show what that means for them. We need to take that message to heart and review our policies accordingly. Which is why our Youth Platform and the SER have been advocating a 'generation test' for some time in order to give young people a voice. That way, we won't lose sight of the real needs of real people. If we fail, then there is something badly wrong with our country, and too many people already feel that there is.

- Second, at the SER, we need to think about a compact, coherent agenda that guides our work. Of course, dialogue with politicians is incredibly important in this regard. Our task is to link short-term goals with the medium and long-term prospects for our country. Here I am talking about the major ecological, economic and social transitions. These are systemic changes from sustainability to circular economy, the fight against inequality through education, an inclusive employment market and digitalisation. We want to nudge those major systemic changes in a direction that enjoys genuine support. The building blocks are there. An incredible amount has happened in recent years, but what matters is not the number of advisory reports we publish. What matters is that our recommendations have an impact, that we follow them up, that politicians do something with them. I see it as our responsibility to provide guidance, even – or perhaps

especially – when tensions are rising between the representatives of employers and employees. At those times, we need to at least continue to agree on the direction of travel, the necessary transitions and how we need to shape those changes. There will still be room for robust exchanges on the underlying issues, but at least we will be on the same page.

- The third route I see for the SER is that we have to make sure we retain the support of our stakeholders.

I have said it before: the government cannot do it alone. But the government does need to promote solidarity while improving the attractiveness of our country for business. The market cannot do it alone either; we are seeing this now in the state of public services and the way many sectors and groups within society have fallen behind. We need a reliable government, with a strong voice for employers and employees and a strong commitment to representation. My predecessor Mariëtte Hamer deserves real praise in this regard. In recent years she has been pushing for that kind of inclusive representation, including support for the Youth Platform and for the SER's involvement in Prevention and Climate Agreement. We need to look at how we can broaden the base of support. We are in the process of strengthening the position of self-employed people within our council. It is very important that we think about representation and participation. And in the months to come, I think it would be very worthwhile to draw lessons from the experiences of recent years. How can we generate more support and include a wider cross-section of the population in dialogue where it is needed? And also, how can we increase diversity in this very room, because I am not the only white man here. I see that as a task for all of us. I realise that this may lead to a discussion of the principles underlying the SER and the composition of the council. In my opinion, nothing should be taboo. It's about putting our heads together and really thinking about representation and participation. Labour and capital are still very important levers for change in the Netherlands.

Moreover, we will have to engage the relevant research institutes in appropriate and smart ways in order to maintain our capacity for change.

Taken together, this will help set out a course towards widely shared prosperity.

- Not because it's nice, fashionable or a bonus on top of what we were already doing. I am convinced – and the SER has included this in its recommendations – that widely shared prosperity will make or break our society and economy. It does come down to the impact of our work, and the vice presidents have just said the same thing. It is not the number of recommendations that matters, it is their impact. You can count on me not to take a back seat. I won't just be delivering reports to ministers, I'll be asking them what they are going to do with them, and I'm happy to engage with you on whether you feel our recommendations are being watered down too much. When that happens, we have to have a conversation right away, and we're going to do that, because at the end of the day all this talk has to make a noticeable difference to the people we are all working for.

Closing words

- I will strive to ensure that the SER remains a safe place to engage in dialogue and express trust in each other and remains a reliable and authoritative partner, also for the political parties. They need to be able to count on a reliable SER and know that the signatures under our recommendations are worth something. I want to play a directing role above party politics. And I can't do that alone. I need you for that, and I am really looking forward to working together.

We enjoy the support of a fantastic organisation led by Jacqueline Prins that we really rely on. It truly is a team characterised by professionalism, caring and a concern for impact. There are still lots of people I need to get to know, from reception to ICT, from the policy staff to catering and the secretariat. I very much look forward to getting to work with you and making sure that we go about it in a way that is right for us and for our council.

We need to get things straightened out in our country again

- I'll say it one more time. I really think there are things in our country that need to get straightened out.

The building blocks are there. It is now a matter of making a concerted, impactful effort directed towards politicians and society and making it happen in practice. I am taking up that gauntlet, I count on you to do the same, and in the Speech from the Throne next Tuesday, I hope to hear that politicians will be taking up the gauntlet as well!