Leeuwarden, April 11th 2011

To the Ministry of the Interior

and Kingdom Relations

and to the members of the

Chamber of Deputies

p/a Postbus 20018

2500 EA ’S-GRAVENHAGE

**subject: consultation Act on Usage of Frisian Language**

Dear Mr Donner, dear members of the Chamber of Deputies,

Prior to the discussion of the Act on Usage of Frisian Language you requested commentary on the proposed bill from the Frisian inhabitants and social organizations.

Since 1994, the Topografyske Wurkgroep Fryslân has been striving for an increase in usage of Frisian toponyms in an official context, between citizens and government. We regard the proposed bill as positive. In addition, we also agree on the determined territorial area, which minutely follows the criteria as described in the *Europees Handvest voor regionale talen en talen van minderheden* (hereinafter referred to as European Charter). As a work group we looked at possible hiatus and have limited ourselves to the area of toponymy.

We have determined that the most basic right is not represented in the Act on Usage of Frisian Language, namely the right–as established in the European Charter– which allows citizens and government to communicate while using toponyms from the minority language. The decision by the government from 1953 only allows for one legal toponym in official communication. This means that Frisian toponyms can only be used in official context after amendment based on article 158 of the municipal law.

**Dutch toponyms**

From a linguistic perspective, in the province of Fryslân there is virtually no mention of Dutch toponyms. After the year 1500, when the Dutch state started to take form, the province of Fryslân only had Frisian toponyms. One third of these have never been altered. Another third has been frozen in name and is now seen as Dutch, even when in Frisian the development of that name had not ceased at the time. For instance, in Dutch it is now Den Haag instead of ‘s-Gravenhage. In Frisian this is similar for Franeker, which is now written as Frjentsjer.

The last third has been heavily influenced by Dutch. Prefixes such as ‘âld en heech’ became ‘oud en hoog’, while the rest of the name was virtually left unaltered. ‘Hegebeintum’ became ‘Hogebeintum’, but the village of ‘Heech’ was never renamed ‘Hoog’. Apparently the inhabitants thought that was one bridge too far. In most cases only a few letters were altered so the toponyms would comply more or less with the Dutch word image.

**European Charter**

When in 1998 parliament ratified the European Charter, a new situation arose. The following article is of particular interest for our work group.

European Charter Part III article 10:2g

[…], the Parties undertake to allow and/or encourage:

[…] g. the use or adoption, if necessary in conjunction with the name in the official language(s), of traditional and correct forms of place names in regional or minority languages.

1. In the combination ‘and/or’ the conjunction ‘or’ plays a secondary role. After all, the Party–here: government–can only encourage if it allows concurrently.

2. The article does not leave room for exceptions. This is why the explanation of the ministery (Frisian toponyms are allowed only if the municipality agrees) is incorrect.

3. Furthermore, the European Charter was designed to give citizens language rights and not to protect governments from those same rights.

The article of the European Charter does not change the authorization rights of the municipality to establish own toponyms based on article 158, but neither does it offer the possibility to revert back easily to Dutch toponyms after Frisian ones were chosen. At that moment, the Crown–here: the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations–should take the language rights as stated in the European Charter into consideration.

**Act on Usage of Frisian Language**

Article 10:2g of the European Charter urges us to document the usage of Frisian toponyms in the Act on Usage of Frisian Language. By explicitly endorsing the article mentioned, the government leveled the language rights of Frisian citizens with the right to use Frisian in oral and/or written communication with government or municipalities.

For the region as indicated in the Act on Usage of Frisian Language the government should allow citizens the possibility to communicate with the government using Frisian toponyms.

Globally, in translations proper names are usually kept as is or given a proper native equivalent. The European Charter enables the government to add the Dutch variation in cases where the spelling of the names differs tremendously between Dutch and Frisian.

We are more than willing to clarify matters with examples from actual practice.

Sincerely,

on behalf of The Topografyske Wurkgroep Fryslân

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