

Dutch Government and Politics

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and

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*To Jan Andeweg and Arnold Irwin
who inspired our interest in politics*

*and for Esther, David, Monica, and Mark
whom we in turn perhaps may inspire*

Contents

<i>List of Tables, Figures, Exhibits and Maps</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xviii
1 The Country and the People	1
A small country	1
The struggle against the water	2
Boundaries	6
Historical boundaries	6
The language boundary	6
Political and religious boundaries	7
Recent history	11
The people	13
Religious groups	13
Social class	15
The structure of the Dutch economy	16
Trade relations	19
Conclusion	21
2 A Country of Minorities	23
Three threats to stable government	23
Minorities	23
Two cleavages	25
Pillarisation	27
Consociational democracy	33
Alternative interpretations	40
Depillarisation and its consequences	44
3 Political Parties and the Party System	50
Historical development of the parties	50
Christian Democrats	50

Socialists	53
Liberals	55
Other parties	56
Party organisation	58
Party structure	58
Party membership	63
Party finances	65
A decline of parties?	68
Political party system	70
The numerical criterion	70
Dimensionality	74
4 Elections	79
Characteristics of the electoral system	80
Few shall be chosen	80
The simple act of voting	81
Absence of geographical representation	84
Extreme proportionality	87
Parties and campaigning	89
Candidate selection	89
Campaigning	92
Electoral behaviour	96
From a structured to an open model	96
Party identification	100
Ideology and issues	101
Candidates	106
Conclusion	107
5 The Cabinet	108
Building the governing coalition	108
Procedures of cabinet formation	109
Attempts at reform	114
Coalition theory and Dutch cabinets	118
Collective and collegial government	123
The position of the Prime Minister	123
The politicisation of the cabinet	128
6 Parliament	134
Parliamentary organisation and procedures	137
The structure of Parliament	139

Parliamentary procedures	141
Executive–Legislative relations	145
From institution to arena	145
The paradox of parliamentary activism	148
Parliament as a marketplace	151
The coexistence of institution, arena, and marketplace	152
Parliament and the people	156
7 The Policy-Making Process: Territorial Centralisation and Functional Decentralisation	158
The territorial dimension	158
Provincial government	158
Municipal government	160
Functional decentralisation	164
The incorporation of interest groups	164
The fragmentation of the bureaucracy	176
The quest for control	180
8 Socio-Economic Policy	187
The return of the ‘Dutch disease’	187
Unemployment	189
The size of the labour force	189
Rising unemployment	191
Combating unemployment	192
The size of the public sector	194
The growth of the welfare state	194
Reducing the public sector	199
The budget deficit	206
Natural gas and the ‘Dutch disease’	207
The financing deficit reduced	209
Conclusion	210
9 Foreign Policy	212
The constants of Dutch foreign policy	212
From staunch ally back to neutral state?	214
European integration versus Atlantic orientation?	220
Interests versus idealism?	225
Foreign policy constants reexamined	227

10	The Capability of a Fragmented System	229
	Decision by negotiation	229
	The constraints of consensus	231
	An underlying consensus	231
	The crucial role of experts	232
	Accepted tie-breakers	233
	The political role of the judiciary	234
	'Brussels' as a scapegoat	237
	Capability and legitimacy	238
	<i>Further Reading</i>	241
	<i>Main Data Sources</i>	245
	<i>Bibliography</i>	246
	<i>Index</i>	256

List of Tables, Figures, Exhibits and Maps

Tables

1.1	Employment in various sectors, 1950–88	19
1.2	Percentage of Dutch imports and exports by country (1988)	20
2.1	The structure of the Dutch pillars	30
2.2	Priests in the Catholic Church, 1960–70	46
2.3	The changing rules of Dutch politics	48
3.1	Party membership and membership as a percentage of the party vote	64
3.2	Number of parties contesting the elections and number of parties achieving representation 1918–89	72
4.1	Distribution of the population according to the structured model of voting behaviour	98
4.2	Electoral choice according to the structured model of voting behaviour	99
4.3	Vote distribution within ideological heartlands and battlefield, 1989	104
5.1	Duration of Cabinet formations and Cabinets, 1945–89	115
5.2	Prime Ministers and composition of Cabinets	119
5.3	Technical expertise and political experience in ministerial (first) appointments, 1848–1986	130
6.1	Use made of assorted parliamentary rights, 1956–89	149
6.2	MPs' opinions on executive–legislative relations (1990)	153
6.3	MPs' perceptions of executive–legislative relations (1990)	155

xii *List of Tables, Figures, Exhibits and Maps*

7.1	Personnel and budgets of government departments, 1992	177
8.1	Percentage of the population aged 15–64 holding employment (1987)	189
8.2	Participation of potential labour force by age and sex in the Netherlands, the USA, and Sweden (1980 and 1987)	191
8.3	Premiums for social insurance programmes	196
8.4	Expenditures for disability, early retirement, welfare, and unemployment 1980–8	206
10.1	Trust in Dutch politics 1971–89	240

Figures

2.1	Divisions within Dutch society	25
2.2	Lijphart's typology of democracies	34
3.1	Average positions of party candidates on a Left–Right scale	75
3.2	Average positions of party candidates with regard to income differences and euthanasia	78
4.1	Voter turnout 1966–91	85
4.2	Distribution of the electorate over the parties' ideological heartlands and battlefield, 1989	102
6.1	Seating arrangements in the Second Chamber of Parliament	136
8.1	Growth of the public sector, tax burden, and premiums 1970–92	198

Exhibits

1.1	Important dates in Dutch history	11
3.1	Dutch political parties at a glance	60
4.1	What a Dutch ballot-paper looks like	82
4.2	Distributing parliamentary seats, 1989	88
4.3	Election results since 1945	105
6.1	The interior design of the Second Chamber of Parliament	135
7.1	Coordinating Dutch EC policies	183
8.1	The RSV story	203
8.2	The disability problem	204

Maps

1.1	The Netherlands: provinces and major cities	3
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Preface

The Dutch political system has long attracted the attention of political scientists outside the Netherlands, although the country ceased to be one of the world's great powers some centuries ago. It was put on the map of comparative politics largely through the writings of scholars such as Hans Daalder and Arend Lijphart, who used it as a theory-driven case-study to explain how deep social divisions need not preclude political stability. It has been not only as a consociational democracy that theoretical concerns prompted study of the Dutch polity: students of electoral systems were drawn by its extreme form of proportional representation; coalition theorists were puzzled by its stubborn deviation from the rule that governing combinations have to be minimal-winning; for those interested in the role of pressure groups, it was a showcase of neo-corporatist arrangements. Because so many aspects of Dutch politics featured in some debate in comparative politics, many papers, articles, and books were written for an audience wider than the relatively small but active band of Dutch political scientists. As a result, there is now a sizeable body of English-language literature on Dutch politics, but it is fragmented as each individual contribution is devoted to a single specific aspect. In English, or even in Dutch, there are few systematic treatments of the Dutch political system as a whole. This book is an attempt to redress that imbalance.

It would have been much easier, however, if we had set out to write this book some 25 years ago. Until the 1960s Dutch political culture, voting behaviour, the party system, and consociational and neo-corporatist policy-making arrangements all seemed impervious to change, as if they had reached the end-state of their respective developments. In the mid-1960s political life was full of change everywhere in Western Europe, but the changes seemed to be faster and more radical in the Netherlands. At the time of writing some features of Dutch politics, such as most of the institutional frame-

work, appear to have escaped change altogether and some of the changes have subsided, (perhaps temporarily), while others are still going on. The dust has not yet settled, and maybe it never will. In our attempt to explain Dutch politics it is often not sufficient to provide a snap-shot of the present situation; we have to describe how it was before, and in what direction it has been developing.

The first two chapters provide an introduction to the country and the society that form the basis for the Dutch political system. Chapter 1 provides background information on the country, its historical development, its people, and its economy. It points to the political effects of factors such as the artificiality of the country's borders, the struggle against the water, and the openness of the economy. Chapter 2 describes the divisions in Dutch society and their political consequences. It does so by reviewing the theory of consociational democracy and the critique of that theory, to the extent that both apply to the Dutch case. It discusses the extent to which developments in society and politics have brought an end to the era of consociationalism in the Netherlands.

Chapters 3–7 examine the principal structures of the Dutch political process and the key actors therein. We begin with the input-side of the political system, and gradually work our way to the institutions that are central in the conversion of demands into policies.

Chapter 3 introduces the various Dutch political parties, their historical and ideological development, and their organisation. It continues by analysing the party system, often described as one of the most multi of multi-party systems. The Dutch electoral system has similarly been described as an extreme version of proportional representation. Chapter 4 explains the electoral system and its effects on parties and voters. It ends with an analysis of voting behaviour in the Netherlands and makes clear why elections fail to produce conclusive outcomes. The absence of an electoral or parliamentary majority in the Netherlands has led to coalition government. Chapter 5 describes how these coalitions come about and to what extent they deviate from the predictions of coalition theory. It goes on to show the impact of coalitions on decision-making in the Dutch Council of Ministers. Chapter 6 is devoted to the Parliament and to executive–legislative relations. Although a parliamentary system, Dutch constitutional documents and political culture still retain elements of a separation of powers. The chapter traces this ambivalence through

time and discusses its consequences. Chapter 7 rounds out this part by examining decentralisation within the Dutch political system. It looks at the roles played by local government, and in particular by the Dutch bureaucracy and interest groups. Attention is given to the incorporation of interest groups into the system, as the Netherlands is often described as a classic example of neo-corporatist policy-making.

All these chapters take the impact of the important changes in Dutch society and politics since the mid-1960s explicitly into account.

Following the exploration of the policy-input and policy-conversion mechanisms in the middle section, it seems only logical to turn our attention to the policy outputs. This is easier said than done, as a comprehensive analysis of policy outcomes in all fields is well beyond our reach. We have, therefore, selected two policy fields, socio-economic policy and foreign policy, to serve as examples. Chapter 8 discusses socio-economic policy primarily because it is an example of a policy field that is well endowed with neo-corporatist arrangements. It describes the development of the Dutch welfare state (one of the largest in the world), and the government's reactions to recent socio-economic problems related to the size of the welfare state. Chapter 9 is devoted to foreign policy, because it stands for those policy fields that are relatively devoid of neo-corporatist organisations. Whereas domestic organisations are not very active in Dutch foreign policy, the Dutch government is the second most active country in the world when it comes to membership in international organisations. Foreign policy is, therefore, discussed in relation to three of these organisations: NATO, the EC, and the UN.

In addition to the contrast in the way policies are made, these two fields have also been selected because they achieved some notoriety in the form of two so-called 'Dutch diseases'. The socio-economic Dutch disease is understood as the excessive reliance on temporary sources of income (i.e., natural gas) to pay for permanent expenditure programmes (i.e., the welfare state). In international relations 'Hollanditis' is the second Dutch disease, referring to a perceived return to neutralism in the decade before the end of the Cold War. Chapters 8 and 9 in this part examine the extent to which these two diseases have been diagnosed correctly.

Chapter 10 concludes this book by discussing the political fragmentation that has emerged as a common theme in the preceding chapters: pillarisation, the multi-party system, propor-

tional representation (PR), coalition government, specialisation as a characteristic of elite recruitment, sectorisation and functional decentralisation. It places this fragmentation in its proper perspective by (re)introducing some of the integrating mechanisms that also exist in the form of an underlying consensus, the precedence of expert knowledge over ideological dogmas, the existence of tie-breakers such as the judiciary and scapegoats such as 'Brussels'. Chapter 10 ends by returning to a question posed at the end of Chapter 1 about the contribution of politics to the comparatively high level of life satisfaction in the Netherlands.

The aim of the book is to combine a detailed and up-to-date analysis of Dutch politics with a comparative perspective in a form accessible to both a Dutch and a non-Dutch speaking readership. Such a combination is difficult to achieve, even though it helps that one author is an American who has lived and worked in the Netherlands for 20 years, and the other is a Dutchman who studied and worked for some time in the USA and UK. We owe a great deal to the advice and assistance of others, not least to the foreign students and other visitors who led us to lecture them about Dutch politics and asked so many pertinent questions. We would like especially to express our gratitude to the Leyden colleagues who kindly read first drafts, pointed out mistakes and offered suggestions for improvements: Hans Daalder, Ron Hillebrand, Joop Van Holsteyn, Ruud Koole, Peter Mair, Hans Oversloot, Alfred Van Staden, Theo Toonen, and Jouke de Vries. We owe a special debt to Vincent Wright, who provided countless penetrating questions and critical comments, and to our publisher, Steven Kennedy, who cajoled us into finishing the book through many stern letters and faxes. In view of all this assistance and advice from others, it is merely out of respect for the time-honoured ritual that we acknowledge ourselves to be responsible for the remaining errors.

Leyden
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