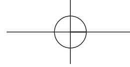
5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:42 pm Page 2

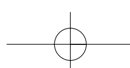


The May 2002 elections were a break from the norm. They were unpredictable, dramatic, tragic, emotional, even exciting. They involved impetuous politicians engaged in stark debate. They resonated with the impact of world events on domestic affairs. And they polarized the electorate in a manner suggestive of developments outside the country – particularly, although inaccurately, the presidential elections in France. As a result, the world's attention was drawn – albeit briefly – to an image of Dutch politics that is at odds with the country's reputation for consensus and that leans toward a more conflictive mainstream.

No matter how flattering, the world's gaze on the Netherlands has been misdirected. Where journalists and pundits have focused on the country's break with its consensual past, they have ignored the continuity behind the country's movement toward a more pluralist (and therefore volatile) relationship between voters and politicians and between rival political elites. The events that surrounded the May 2002 elections were unsettling. However, they should not have been unexpected – at least in broad terms. Evidence of the change in Dutch political and social organization has been accumulating for decades. In this sense, the persistence of Dutch consensus is more surprising than its demise. Of course no-one could have foreseen the assassination of Pim Fortuyn, yet the lesson to draw from that tragic event follows logically from the process of pluralization: the risks to politicians in a more openly competitive political environment are more extreme – in the Netherlands just as elsewhere.

This article explores the continuity behind the May 2002 Dutch parliamentary elections to consider whether the Netherlands has at last put to rest its tradition of political consensus. I argue that the movement toward a more conflictive version of pluralist democracy has clearly progressed. Such a movement is not, however, unambiguously progressive. Although Dutch voters may feel as though they have gained greater choice, and while Dutch politicians may find it easier to forge coalitions around contrasts than around consensus, the movement toward a more conflictive style of politics is costly. Looking to the future, policy-makers are likely to experience greater difficulty implementing macroeconomic adjustment or institutional reform. Nevertheless, Dutch rejection of consensus politics may prove inexorable. Indeed, the very fact that Dutch politicians have relied on consensus in order to foster macroeconomic adjustment and institutional reform has done much to engender a more pluralist admiration of conflict.

This argument is made in four sections. The first reviews the events surrounding the May 2002 elections. The second examines the Dutch ambivalence toward the politics of consensus. The third explains why Dutch consensus may prove



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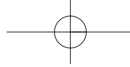


increasingly difficult to sustain. The fourth section concludes with implications for the future. When the world next casts its attention on elections in the Netherlands, it may hold altogether different expectations. Similarly, Dutch voters may learn to regard the politics of consensus with nostalgia rather than exasperation.

Electoral Surprise

The significance of any electoral contest is a function of results and context. The May 2002 Dutch elections are no exception. The results have been characterized as a shift to the right; the context suggests otherwise. The losers in the election came from all parts of the political spectrum – the left-wing Party of Labour (PvdA), the postmaterialist-liberal Democrats '66 (D'66), and the conservative Liberal Party (VVD). What the principal losers have in common has little to do with their view of economic justice; rather it is that they participated in the previous governing coalition. The winners came from the centre and extreme left of the political spectrum and from outside politics – the Christian Democrats (CDA), the Socialist Party (SP), and two newly formed populist movements, Livable Netherlands (LN) and the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF). These groups do not share an ideological perspective. What the winners have in common is that they did not participate in the previous government. Indeed, the political inexperience of the election's biggest winner, the populist LPF, is truly remarkable. Only a handful of the list's members had ever worked in the public sector, let alone held public office.

Seen in context, the government lost to its alternative – any alternative – and not for the first time. The landmark 1994 elections that ousted the Christian Democrats from power displayed much the same result–benefiting extremists from the right (CD) and left (SP), in addition to yielding vote gains for both the conservative (VVD) and the postmaterialist (D'66) liberal groups, and for a hitherto unknown union of pensioners (AOV). The seat transfers from government to opposition (or alternative) were greater in 2002 than in 1994, but the confusion of left and right was much the same. These electoral results can be found in Table 1, which gives the seat distributions resulting from the last four Dutch parliamentary contests – 1989, 1994, 1998, 2002. The relevant comparisons are 1989–1994 and 1998–2002. Those groups participating in the governing coalition are marked with an asterisk.

There is nevertheless a central narrative running through these electoral encounters. From the perspective of the May 2002 elections, that narrative can be broken down into three components: the collapse of the ruling coalition; the rise of the

5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 4

Table 1 Recent Dutch elections in context (seat allowance)

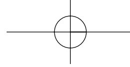
Political Party or Group	1989	1994	Change 1994-1989	1998	2002	Change 2002-1998
CDA–centrist Christian Democrats	54*	34	-20	29	43	+14
SGP–Christian conservative	3	3	0	3	2	-1
PvdA-left-wing Party of Labour	49*	37	-12	45*	23	-22
Groen Links–green left	6	5	-1	11	10	-1
VVD–conservative Liberal Party	22	31	+9	38*	24	-14
GPV–Christian conservative	2	2	0	2		
RPF–Christian conservative	1	3	+2	3		
CU–Christian conservative					4	-1
D'66–left-wing Liberal Party	12	24	+12	14*	7	-7
CD–right-wing extremists	1	3	+2			
AOV–pensioners		6	+6			
SP–left-wing extremists		2	+2	5	9	+4
LN–left-wing grass-roots populist					2	+2
LPF–right-wing populist					26	+26
Total seat transfer from government to opposition			32			43

Note: Coalition partners marked with an asterisk (*).
Source: http://www.stembusuitslag.com

List Pim Fortuyn; and the return to power of the Christian Democrats. Taken separately, each of the three was predictable given the record of events (and, in fairness perhaps, with the benefit of hindsight). The surprise lay in the speed of these developments and in their congruence – which is to say, the pace and coherence of the narrative as a whole.

Consider first the fall of the ruling coalition on 16 April 2002. The proximal event was the release of a report on the government's handling of the crisis in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica during the Yugoslav wars of the mid-1990s. In 1993, the Dutch government volunteered to send a light battalion to Srebrenica in support of the United Nation's (UN) ambition to make that city a safe haven for Bosnian Muslims seeking refuge from surrounding Bosnian Serbs. The Dutch troops arrived in 1994 to find that the situation around the safe haven was far more complicated than expected. The conflict was intense, the combatants were heavily armed, and the atmosphere was almost entirely devoid of trust between the parties involved. By 1995, it became clear that the Dutch battalion was ill equipped and undermanned for any meaningful intervention between Muslim and Serb forces. As the Bosnian Serb armies tightened their encirclement of the city, this powerlessness became manifest. At its nadir, when the Bosnian Serbs at last overran the enclave, Dutch troops assented to a separation of Muslim men and women. The result was both the slaughter of the Bosnian

5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 5



Muslims who had sought refuge in Srebrenica and the humiliation of the Dutch battalion that could not protect them. Soon thereafter, in 1996, the Dutch government commissioned a report on Srebrenica from the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD). Six years later, on 10 April 2002, the NIOD report was produced. Six days after that, the government collapsed over the report's findings.[1]

On the surface, the crisis over the NIOD report on the massacre in Srebrenica looks like a long-overdue acceptance of responsibility by reluctant political elites. Deeper down it is more confusing. The cabinet that fell in 2002 may have been related to that which came to power when the Dutch troops went out in 1994, but it was certainly different from that which volunteered the commitment in 1993. Even accepting the transfer of responsibility from one government to the next, moreover, the fact remains that the report was not overly critical of the political handling of the crisis. Mistakes were made, to be sure. However, the report suggests that most of these could not have been foreseen far enough in advance to make a difference, and that alternative courses of action – such as returning fire – were not viable options. Indeed, the report's authors expressed amazement that the government fell in response to the their findings.

The problem for at least two ministers was not that the NIOD report was so damning; rather it was that it did not go far enough. The VVD Minister of Housing and the Environment, Frank de Grave, had held office in the Ministry of Defense during the tragic summer of 1995, and so asserted a personal responsibility for the handling of the Srebrenica safe haven. The PvdA Minister of Defence, Jan Pronk, assumed a more institutional commitment. When both ministers resigned only days after the publication of the report and less than a month before the May elections, the Prime Minister, Wim Kok, had little choice but to bring down the government. Meanwhile, reports in the media focused on the lack of party discipline within the coalition and the possibility of personal self-interest on the part of De Grave and Pronk.[2]

The fall of the government was dramatic, but it only preempted the inevitable. Judging from the polling data gathered during the first four months of 2002, there was little prospect that the coalition of PvdA, VVD, and D'66 would survive the May electoral contest in any event. Polling done in late February suggested that the 'purple' (red labour and blue liberal) coalition partners would return only 75 of the 150 seats available in the Second Chamber compared to the 97 they held in the sitting parliament. By mid-March, the coalition was projected to win just 61 seats. And by early April – before the release of the NIOD report – that number recovered, but only to 63. Neither the findings about

5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 6

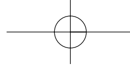
Srebrenica nor the fall of the government had much impact on these projections. Going into May, the Netherlands Institute for Public Opinion (NIPO) could conclude with some confidence that the public wanted an end to the government.[3] Moreover, this popular disaffection with the ruling coalition is likely to have had more impact on the political crisis over Srebrenica than the other way around.

Behind the collapse in popular support for the purple coalition lay the rise of Pim Fortuyn and his self-styled electoral list. Fortuyn's political prominence started only in the autumn of 2001. Although already well-known as a columnist, media presenter, and intellectual firebrand, Fortuyn's entrée into the political arena came through his sudden association with the emergent grass roots movement called 'Livable Netherlands' (LN). The leadership of LN brought Fortuyn into the movement in order to draw upon his media profile and his charismatic presence. In the November Congress of LN, Fortuyn was selected to head their electoral list. And, almost immediately, Fortuyn's iconoclastic views began to permeate public awareness and LN began to rise in the polls. When Fortuyn declared himself to be in favour of a 'cold war against Islam', almost 90 per cent of the Dutch electorate took notice, and almost 30 per cent agreed.[4]

This instant success was immediately problematic for the leadership of LN. While Fortuyn's reputation for anti-immigrant comments was well known, they were more attracted to him for his views on political modernization. At its foundations, the LN movement is about restoring power to the grass roots and not about closing the borders of the country. Yet as long as the immigration issue continued to capture the headlines, the modernization issue could not take centre stage in political debate. This contrast finally came to a head in early February when Fortuyn suggested that the Dutch constitution be changed in order to make it possible for the state to restrict intolerant religions – which he alleged Islam to be. The LN leadership responded by jettisoning Fortuyn from the party's electoral list; Fortuyn replied by setting up a list of his own.

The List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) was not so much a list of candidates as a platform for the man himself. Fortuyn did virtually all of the public engagements and his list members hardly if ever interacted. The advantage that this held for Fortuyn was not only personal but also intellectual. Because his was the only voice, he was able to deliver a complex message both charismatically and (to a certain extent at least) coherently. Hence where the LN struggled to communicate its concern for political modernization while overcoming the stigma of Fortuyn's anti-immigration rhetoric, Fortuyn himself had less difficulty expressing the wide variety of his views at once.

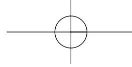
5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 7



The message Fortuyn conveyed was contradictory – at least on the surface. On the one hand, he denounced the inferiority of Islam (for example) and argued for the necessity for immigrants to assimilate Dutch culture. On the other hand, he insisted that only intolerance toward multicultural society can preserve the tolerance that is the hallmark of the Dutch way of life. Below the surface, Fortuyn's argument was somewhat more coherent. In essence his platform consisted of a concerted assault against the ordering principles of Dutch political life – religious or ideological devotion, political deference, consensual decision-making, and collective responsibility. Thus while Fortuyn insisted that the Netherlands 'is not an immigration country', he also provided an interpretation of Dutch political culture that is inclusive rather than pillarized or fragmented, and within which politics is an individual responsibility and not a group activity. As a result Fortuyn's vision of Dutch society was both less tolerant of immigration and yet easier for immigrants to assimilate to than the more highly structured vision of Dutch society of times past. And Fortuyn's rhetoric was both offensive and (at least potentially) attractive.

The LPF galvanized the electorate, with support surging to a projected 20 seats in the Second Chamber within less than a month of the list's creation. This support peaked in mid-March at a projected 29 seats (or 19 per cent of the electorate) only to stabilize during the month of April at around 23 to 24 seats (or some 15 to 16 per cent). Meanwhile, the LN looked set to claim something on the order of about 4 seats (or 3 per cent).[5] As it turned out, the share of the vote accruing to these two populist reformist movements in the May elections was approximately as expected. Looking again at Table 1, the LPF and the LN collected 28 seats between them – with the LPF benefiting slightly more and the LN slightly less than the pollsters had expected. Crucially, however, Fortuyn was assassinated shortly before the election took place. His assailant was a young Protestant Green activist who took issue with Fortuyn's stance on the environment – of all things one of the populist's least controversial positions.

As with such tragedies, the motive was irrelevant. What mattered was simply that it happened. The public outcry was immediate and sincere. Even those who disagreed with Fortuyn poured onto the streets to protest against his assassination. The political confusion was deep and palpable. Wim Kok, presiding over a caretaker cabinet, wrestled with the possibility of postponing the electoral calendar. In the end, it was only the campaigning that was put aside. As a result, during the interregnum between Fortuyn's assassination and the election date, the pundits (but not pollsters) speculated that the public anger at the violence committed against the LPF leader would push his electoral list to the top of the polls. Such concerns proved to be unfounded. As the pollsters expected, the LPF did no better



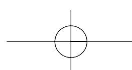
without Fortuyn than it was expected to do with him. What is more, the deceased populist received an impressive 1.3 million preference ballots, but he did not top the polls.

The surprise winners of the May 2002 electoral contest were the Christian Democratic CDA generally, and the CDA list leader, Jan Peter Balkenende, in particular. The CDA garnered just under 30 per cent of the electorate, and Balkenende received almost 2.3 million preference ballots – more than three-quarters again as many as the deceased Pim Fortuyn. Although many of the pollsters predicted that the Christian Democrats would emerge as the largest party, none of them anticipated the scale of the result. Indeed, the NIPO pollsters relied upon throughout this article projected that the CDA would attract just over 20 per cent of the voters two days before the election took place. Such expectations were broadly consistent with recent electoral performance. The CDA had done well in the March 2002 municipal contests but not overwhelmingly so. Certainly their performance at municipal level was greatly overshadowed by the gains made by local parties and by the LPF.

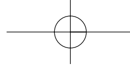
What was clear in the March 2002 municipal elections was that the purple coalition partners were losing ground among the electorate. Accepting that support for the populist LN and LPF stabilized in late March and early April, it was reasonable to expect that the CDA would be among the beneficiaries of the loss of confidence in the government – if only by process of elimination. The conservative Christian parties draw upon only limited constituencies. The left-wing SP is too extreme in its views to attract massive support (although it did nearly double its parliamentary representation). And the pollsters only slightly overestimated the support for the Green Left, which garnered only just over 7 per cent of the electorate, against a relatively stable expectation that it would gain closer to 9 per cent. Hence the surprise is not that the CDA won, but rather that it won by such an overwhelming amount. To understand the magnitude of the changes at work it is necessary to make the connection between the loss of confidence in the governing coalition and the fluidity of the electorate. The collapse of the government, the rise of the LPF, and the success of the CDA are all interconnected.

Change and Resistance[6]

The outcome of the May 2002 elections reveals a fundamental ambivalence within the Dutch electorate between stability and reform. Whatever the rhetoric contained in the CDA's electoral platform, the Christian Democrats are a force for sta-



5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 9



bility. Similarly, if we ignore for a moment Fortuyn's position on immigration, what is clear is that the LPF is an impetus for reform. Should these two groups join together in a coalition – as expected – they will bring this ambivalence into the government. Here too, the parallels with 1994 are acute. The original purple coalition was forged from stabilizing elements within the PvdA and more reformist elements within D'66. Then, as now, the VVD joined the coalition as a force for both stability and reform. Then, as now, the expectation was that the reformist elements could be co-opted over time. Then, as now, stability emerged as the imperative for political elites. For the original purple coalition, stability meant governing successfully without the Christian Democrats. For the coalition that is being formed, stability means reasserting the Christian Democrats' capacity to govern. The question to ask is how long the electorate will tolerate the elite's bias toward stability. The answer can be found in the notion of reform and in the changing structure of Dutch political life.

'Reform' is the theme that unites the three main components of the May 2002 electoral narrative. Reform is also the theme that connects the depillarization (*ontzuiling*) of Dutch society in the latter half of the twentieth century to the 'depurplization' (*ontpaarsing*) of Dutch politics at the start of the twenty-first century. In order to unpack this theme of reform, however, it is important first to examine what it is that needs changing and why, and in broad terms it is possible to highlight certain combinations of myth, institutions, and behaviour that have patterned Dutch political life.

The foundation myth is the great 'pacification' of the electorate at the start of the twentieth century. The argument is that the Dutch society of the time was so deeply divided as to be perennially unstable and therefore vulnerable to intervention from the outside. Dutch political elites recognized this weakness and so struck an accommodation across the different groups in society. The basic formula for this accommodation was simple. Sub-national cultures in the Netherlands would share the same geographic space without diminishing their distinctiveness. Indeed at the popular level these groups would if anything grow ever farther apart as they promulgated their own separate institutions for basic public goods like health, education, media, and welfare. Only elites would intermingle, trading off ideological pre-commitments in order to find a consensual basis for policy compromise across the different groups. In turn, followers within the sub-national cultures had to remain faithful to the concessions made by their elites. Hence, the politics of accommodation was foundational and continuous, institutional and behavioral. Consociational democracy – as Arendt Lijphart (1968) most famously called the Dutch politics of accommodation – was both the form and content of Dutch political life.[7]

5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 10

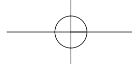
As with most great myths, the myth of pacification and the politics of accommodation contains both certainties and ambiguities – areas of obvious congruence with the real world and areas open to interpretation. Dutch society at the start of the twentieth century was divided across sub-national cultures, some of which were confessional – both Catholic and Protestant – and some of which were secular – as in Socialist or Liberal. Moreover, both the cleavages in Dutch political life and the basic institutions for public welfare tended to organize around these sub-national cultural divisions. Nevertheless, the fragmentation of Dutch society was never so complete as the myth of pacification suggests, and the institutionalization of divisions was never so comprehensive as the politics of accommodation may have required. Looking over the whole of the twentieth century, it is difficult to find sustained periods during which the pattern of Dutch politics followed the consociational norm (Koole and Daalder 2002).

Too close an examination of the politics of accommodation, however, risks missing the point. The power of the politics of accommodation as a myth lies in the fact that something like consociational democracy did operate in the Netherlands during and after the reconstruction and industrialization of the country from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. What is more, popular political discourse in the Netherlands presumes that the politics of accommodation was important to the country's economic successes as a result of that industrialization process (cf. Abert 1969). Hence as religious devotion and ideological affinity began to weaken as a basis for cultural identification during the 1960s, the sense of commitment to the role of accommodation in economic management remained. During the more conflictive period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, this commitment appeared in the efforts of economic elites – such as the heads of trade unions and employers' associations – to find compromises with which to contain conflict over the distribution of economic resources. These elites failed, but not for want of trying. What they lacked was the institutional capacity to enforce, encourage, or coopt the discipline of their followers.

The breakdown in the politics of accommodation from the late 1960s to the early 1980s was the first great expression of the ambivalence in the Netherlands between reform and stability. Those people who sought to abandon the discipline of religious or ideological organizations were the advocates of reform. Those who sought to maintain the capacity to negotiate economic policies through consensus were the advocates of stability. Given the broader social trends of the 1960s, the reformists clearly held the upper hand. The period of more adversarial – and less accommodating – politics was the result.

That shift toward adversarial politics was only temporary. The period running

5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 11



from the late 1960s to the early 1980s was not only one of political conflict, but was also a period of institutional consolidation.[8] The two most important changes lay in the fusion of confessional and secular trade unions into the FNV and the merger of Protestant and Catholic political groups into the CDA. Once assembled, these two institutions could claim to represent not only the bulk of unionized labour but also the hegemonic centre of the political spectrum – even though they no longer corresponded to the organization of the country along sub-national cultural cleavages. Moreover, the FNV and the CDA could negotiate over economic policy while remaining secure in the belief that their respective economic and political positions were relatively unassailable (or irreplaceable), at least in the short-to-medium term.

The two principal actors responsible for reintroducing political consensus to the core of economic policy-making in the Netherlands were also the leaders of the two consolidated institutions – Wim Kok of the FNV and prime minister Ruud Lubbers of the CDA. However, the ambit of this consensus necessarily extended beyond these two groups to encompass the other half of the social partnership, the employers' federation. And the process of negotiating a compromise over economic policy goals was stimulated as much by the threat of direct government intervention as by the desire to achieve consensus. Such qualifications of the argument are important in the historical sense. They are not important for the foundation of a new myth.

The agreement reached in 1982 between the trade unions and employers over the importance of wage moderation as a means to create employment (the 'Wassenaar Accords') founded a new pacification myth – one that did not rely on the existence of sub-national cultural divisions in order to legitimate a politics of accommodation. The danger at the start of the 1980s was not that the Netherlands was so deeply divided that only forced accommodation could prevent instability or intervention. Rather it was that the Dutch economy was so beset by world markets that only consensual economic policy-making could stave off ruinous distributive conflict. The new pattern for Dutch political and economic interaction was not consociational democracy; it was the 'polder model'.

The irony is that the myth of the polder model only emerged in the mid-1990s, and grew in strength toward the end of the purple coalition formed after the 1994 elections – in other words after the Christian Democrats had left office.[9] Moreover, the polder model was never as successful or as comprehensive as its advocates claimed: such consensus worked reasonably well in terms of wage policy but was often ineffective or even absent elsewhere (Visser and Hemerijck

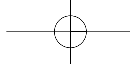
5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 12

1997). Nevertheless, for Prime Minister Kok, the ex-trade union leader, the myth of the polder model was important as a means to underwrite his capacity to govern in the absence of the Christian Democrats. Critics of consensus politics and of the polder model within the VVD, such as Economics Minister Hans Wijers, could dispute the economic mechanisms and analytic models, but they could not overturn the myth itself. Critics outside the government, like the German economist Alfred Kleinknecht, could argue that consensus approach to economic policy-making should be abandoned altogether, and yet virtually no-one would pay attention (Jones 1998: 168).

The great advantage of the polder model was that it recast consensus politics as a formula for success. The great disadvantage was that the polder model obscured the constraints implied by the need to reach consensus. These constraints operated within the institutions of government, where decision-making by consensus was often overly slow. But they were also felt in relations between politicians and voters. From an electoral perspective, too heavy a reliance on consensus creates the impression of an absence of choice. Both forms of constraint were evident during the second 'purple' coalition, as the pace of policy reform slowed and as the disaffection of the electorate with the politics of consensus became increasingly apparent. The collapse of support for the governing coalition and the concomitant rise of support for the political alternatives was the result. In broad terms this is not so different from the depillarization of the late 1960s that marked the end of the consociational system – with the 'pillars' being the subnational political cultures that lay at the basis of Dutch consociational democracy. Given the close association of the polder model with the purple coalition, however, the term for reform has changed from 'depillarization' to 'depurplization'.[10]

Any attempt to abandon the politics of consensus, however, must take into account the structure of political institutions. Just as institutional consolidation gave rise to a new pattern of consensus after the disintegration of Dutch consociational democracy, so institutional persistence is likely to complicate any efforts to move too quickly away from the polder model. In this context, it is important to stress that the purple coalitions benefited from the polder myth, and yet they did not create the politics of consensus even in its revised form. Arguably, the Christian Democrats did so, and it is the Christian Democrats who will be the largest party in any coalition to be forged after May 2002. The electorate may have rejected the purple coalition; the unexpectedly strong showing for the CDA nevertheless suggests that they may not have abandoned consensus. Hence, the balance between stability and reform remains ambiguous.

5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 13



Cause and Effect

Popular and elite attachment to the politics of consensus in the Netherlands is not irrational. Whatever the historical accuracy of the claims surrounding either the pacification myth of the early twentieth century or the polder myth of the early 1980s, the fact remains that distributive conflict in a small country such as the Netherlands would hurt all parties. Whether the conflict is organized around subnational political cultures or around the labour-capital divide matters very little. The vulnerability of small states in world markets is what counts (Katzenstein 1985).

The world markets are only the context in this argument. As such, they do not 'do' anything to make life in the Netherlands more or less difficult than life elsewhere. The agency lies in what the Dutch themselves do, and the danger is that they will engage in conflict over the distribution of economic resources. In turn, distributive conflict has the compound effect of undermining performance, institutionalizing inequity, and rigidifying institutions. This is true in general terms but has particular resonance with reference to markets. While groups are fighting – as during strike action – production is diminished. Once one group or another is vanquished, the winner is likely to institutionalize its victory. Should any future group attempt to undo such institutions, they are likely to find that past victors remain powerful even when greatly diminished over time. These are the insights of comparative political economists across the institutionalist tradition, from Mancur Olsen to Paul Pierson. Where such analysts differ is not on the problem of distributive conflict, but on the appropriate nature of the response.

The Dutch response to the problem of distributive conflict is through institutionalized consensus, often in the form of neo-corporatist bargaining between representatives of government, labour, and capital. Katzenstein (1985: 207) would argue that this response is as much a function of 'historically shaped domestic structures' as of 'the pressures of the world economy'. Hence, in the early 1950s, Prime Minister Willem Drees was able to build on the institutions of consociational democracy in order to use corporatist negotiations as a means to implement wage/price restraint. In the early 1980s, Ruud Lubbers was a more reluctant follower of the same tradition – threatening to intervene directly in the labour markets as a means of coercing labour and capital to come to some agreement over the distribution of value-added. However, within this interpretation of Dutch performance in world markets the presumption posited by analysts like Peter Katzenstein and others is that such corporatist consensus is a lasting formula for success: 'corporatism does not magically transform social and political hostility

5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 14

into harmony. Instead it offers an institutional mechanism for mobilizing the consensus necessary to live with the costs of rapid economic change' (Katzenstein 1985: 200).

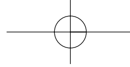
The fundamental problem is that the consequences of such corporatist politics are assumed to be acceptable over time as well as at the time in which the consensus is reached: different actors are supposed to remain as accepting of the system as they are accepting of any individual agreement. This is not a strong presumption in the sense that it implies that decisions will be distributively neutral. Rather it is a weak presumption in the sense that any inequities that arise around a particular decision are meant to be ironed out over time. Through the ongoing practice of give and take, all parties to consensus are expected to come away with something. By the same token, the exercise of corporatist bargaining should not have the effect of undermining those 'historically shaped domestic structures' responsible for making such bargaining possible in the first place.

The experience of the Netherlands during the post-war period suggests that such presumptions are over optimistic for two reasons – one exogenous and one endogenous. The exogenous reason derives from popular attitudes and preferences. The Dutch may choose to abandon consociational democracy or the polder model for reasons that have little or nothing to do with economic performance. They may stop going to church. They may take up non-unionized employment. They may ceased to mobilize around ideological concerns. And they may stop taking an interest in politics altogether. Indeed, much of the sociological analysis of depillarization, party attachment, and voting behavior in the Netherlands suggests that all these factors have been at work at the same time. Their combined effect is to weaken commitment to those domestic structures necessary to engender consensus. Hence the question is whether the Dutch political system can adapt. My suggestion is that the changeover from consociationalism to the polder model constitutes one such adaptation.

The endogenous factor is more important. To begin with, the relatively minor inequities of individual agreements negotiated between labour and capital tend to accumulate over time, rather than evening out. As a result, those institutions responsible for negotiating the agreements in the first place tend to lose both membership and self-discipline. By implication, the exercise of negotiated consensus is self-destructive. Institutions are necessary to make it possible, but these same institutions are destroyed in the process – at least over time.

The self-destructiveness of corporatist wage bargaining is a well known problem

5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 15



in the economics literature on price and incomes policies. However, political scientists such as Katzenstein have maintained that a supportive political environment can shore up this inherent weakness. The evidence from the Netherlands after the signing of the Wassenaar Accords suggests otherwise. To begin with, the FNV trade union federation suffered a dramatic loss in membership during the 1980s as workers became disillusioned with corporatist wage bargaining and so chose to exit from the discipline of organized labour. Second, although the transfer of value-added from labour to industry did help to create jobs by the end of the 1980s, these jobs were not in high productivity areas. As a consequence, employment growth corresponded with a slowdown in productivity growth. Since labour productivity is crucial in generating the surplus value-added both for investment and for redistribution via the welfare state, this slow-down in productivity growth implied a future fall in economic activity and fiscal resources (Van Zanden 1998: 173–178).

Such economic consequences are uncomfortable, but presumably could find political resolution through judicious use of industrial policy instruments. It is the third element of this endogenous problem that is the most destabilizing. Simply put, the distributive consequences of continuing wage moderation and deepening fiscal austerity during the 1980s and early 1990s were uneven across various groups in Dutch society. Most groups lost income during the period, even as the rate of employment gradually increased. Some groups, such as pensioners, the unemployed, rural communities and small farmers, lost disproportionately. The impact was felt in the 1994 elections, where both parties in the ruling centre-left coalition lost votes. The effect was most pronounced for the Christian Democrats, who continued to haemorrhage support throughout the 1990s (Jones 1999).

The reaction of the major political institutions to these consequences of the polder model has not been to enhance their capacity to generate consensus. The FNV was able to recover membership during the 1990s, but only by expanding to include part-time workers and by strengthening representation of interests in the service sector. The effect of the broadening of the union has been to multiply the number of interests to be reconciled prior to corporatist negotiation – particularly with reference to wage bargaining. For the unions this means that they must spend more time working on issues related to working conditions and other services that might be provided outside the traditional ambit of collective bargaining. However, if we accept the conclusions of Visser and Hemerijck (1997), these are precisely the areas in which the polder model has been least effective. For its part the CDA has responded through efforts to broaden its appeal to the general electorate. Some of these efforts involve adopting the rhetoric of reform. Given the increasing volatility of CDA electoral support, this strategy may be an

5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 16

essential one. The question to consider is whether it is consonant with the aspiration for consensus – whether only in economic terms or even more broadly.

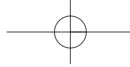
Politics beyond Accommodation?

The coalition formed in the aftermath of the May 2002 elections will be the test of whether the Netherlands can sustain its pattern of consensual policy-making despite the change in government, or whether Dutch politics may at last have moved beyond accommodation. The conditions for engineering such a test are propitious – which is to say that the newly arriving government faces considerable challenges both domestic and foreign. On the domestic front, the electorate has expressed a strong preference for increased investment in health care at a time when the Central Planning Bureau indicates that the government's fiscal situation offers little room for manoeuvre. On the international front, the dramatic downturn in business confidence in the United States and in Europe is stretching the capacity of Dutch manufacturing to maintain export markets. Meanwhile the trade unions are expressing little desire for enhanced wage moderation, and some willingness to push their claims despite the possibility of conflict.

The positive news is that the LPF seems to have shed its more strongly anti-immigrant overtones and to have adopted a constructive approach to cabinet formation. Indeed, at the time of writing (late June 2002), the formation of the post-May 2002 cabinet looks to be more rapid than has been witnessed in a long time in the Netherlands. Such positive notes only underscore what observers of Dutch politics have recognized all along. The LPF – even with Fortuyn – was a symptom and not a problem. As a symptom it indicated a desire on the part of the electorate to abandon the politics of accommodation. It also indicated the inability of political elites to maintain consensus without electoral cost. As long as the economy is doing well, this tilt in the balance toward political reform should not prove too problematic, and may even open up Dutch politics in a positive manner. Should the economy turn down, however, the need for consensus may be great at a time when the capacity to generate it is weak. Dutch voters may be happy with the choices they have made in the present, but they may learn to desire a return to the politics of accommodation in the future. And they may find it is more difficult to construct supportive institutions than it was to dismantle them.

NOTES

1. A summary of the report and an inventory of the correspondence surrounding it can be found on a special website set up by NIOD: http://www.srebrenica.nl



2. Both the *Volkskrant* and the *NRC* maintain archival dossiers on the Srebrenica crisis, and both papers were critical of the government's fall.
3. These polling results can be accessed from the NIPO website: http://www.nipo.nl
4. This polling was done by NIPO on 10 December 2001.
5. Again this polling is taken from NIPO. See note 3, above.
6. Much of this section is abbreviated from Jones (forthcoming) and the references cited therein.
7. The major works on the politics of accommodation (which is itself a Lijphart coinage) have been cited so often as not to bear repetition. Rather I would like to draw attention to a collection of essays commissioned to mark the 30th anniversary of Lijphart's original work on consociational democracy (Steiner and Ertman 2002).
8. The crucial role of institutions is also highlighted in Van Waarden (2002).
9. Much of the following discussion has benefited from the insights provided in Hendriks and Toonen (2001).
10. The *NRC Handlesblad* ran a series of policy analyses during the coalition negotiations after the May 2002 elections under the heading 'Serie Ontpaarsing' or 'Depurplization Series'.

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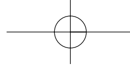
5-Jones-61-78-x 23/10/02 2:43 pm Page 18



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