

The Netherlands Turns Eurosceptic

After the Second World War, Belgium and the Netherlands stood together at the cradle of European integration. For both countries it was important not only that lasting peace should come to Europe but also that there should be intense economic cooperation. As exporting economies they were extremely interested in the development of an internal market. For many decades, Belgium and the Netherlands also worked together in their attempts to strengthen Europe. In addition, robust European institutions were needed if the major member countries were to be prevented from becoming too dominant. Naturally, there were a number of differences of opinion between Belgium and the Netherlands. The Dutch, for example, have always strongly emphasised Atlantic solidarity, while Belgium, following France's example, has begun to adopt a more critical attitude over the years - including towards NATO. Essentially, however, there was a strong pro-European attitude in Belgium and the Netherlands.

In the Belgian European doctrine, the construction of a powerful supranational Europe is as central a feature as ever. To talk about a federal Europe is not even a taboo in Belgium. In the Netherlands, however, the debate on Europe has taken a very different course in recent years. In an increasing number of spheres Dutch politicians as well as public opinion have adopted a more Eurosceptic stance.

In the course of the 1990s, it became clear that the European Union was acquiring quite a concrete influence on people's lives. Numerous regulations were European in origin. Europe came closer, and seemed to be eroding the power of the separate member countries. In Belgium, where a process of state reform has been taking place for decades and the federal state is dissolving anyhow, that is apparently viewed as less problematic. In the Netherlands, the steadily increasing impact of Europe led to incomprehension and evidently to a basic distrust as well.



In an increasing number of specific dossiers, the Netherlands started to question things. In negotiations on the long-term budget, the Netherlands argued the case for a cutback on European expenditure. The European agricultural policy was questioned, as was solidarity with disadvantaged regions. Belgian attempts to further develop Europe, within the field of defence for instance, could no longer count on Dutch support. That became obvious, for example, when during the Iraq crisis an initiative was taken to expand the European headquarters. The Netherlands followed Great Britain's line on the issue completely, rejecting all proposals for a stronger European defence. Populist politicians, such as Pim Fortuyn, adopted a steadily more hostile tone when talking about Europe.

A crucial watershed was the referendum on the European Constitution that took place in June 2005. The Dutch population was for the first time able to express its opinion on the direction of European integration. A good 60% rejected this Constitution. At that moment, it became clear that the permissive consensus on Europe had completely crumbled. The politicians' reticence had a basis amongst the population, which had become far more critical towards the European Union. The result was that political parties started to steer an even more Eurosceptic course. Populist parties in particular, such as Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV), started a veritable crusade against European involvement and the entire European apparatus, one in which the added value of European attitudes was simply questioned. The more firmly established parties rarely expressed contrary views - and actually took over some of the sceptical discourse.

And the Netherlands is becoming increasingly less hesitant about being the sole member country to be contrary if necessary. The entry of Bulgaria and Romania to the Schengen zone is - at the end of 2011 - only being blocked by the Netherlands. And it was also the Netherlands which, as the sole country, spoke in favour of delaying the approach to Serbia until the latter clearly indicated that it was willing to cooperate more intensively with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

During the Euro crisis, the Netherlands ranged alongside the countries that wished to keep solidarity with the peripheral countries to an absolute minimum. Proposals to introduce Eurobonds, for example, could count on little sympathy from the Netherlands. More discussions will have to take place in the months ahead on saving the European economy, with concerted measures presumably being decided on. It must be expected that these debates will be followed with keen interest in the Netherlands. Also when it comes to the discussion on the following European long-term budget (2014-2021), the Netherlands will adopt clear standpoints that differ to a

significant extent from the pro-European course that Belgium will advocate. Possibly the Netherlands will once more be in favour of a smaller European budget and call on the Union to concentrate on a few core issues, such as the expansion of the internal market. A more ambitious European course is probably not to be expected from the Netherlands in the near future.

HENDRIK VOS

Translated by John Irons



The Belgian prime minister Elio Di Rupo.

A New Federal Government for Belgium after 541 Days

King Albert of Belgium was clearly enjoying it very much. On the 6th of December 2011 he finally gave a reception for his country's new government at Laken Castle, following 541 days of political negotiations and one deep crisis after another. Smiling and joking, he worked his way along the line of ministers and secretaries of state with raised hands who were swearing allegiance to himself, to the constitution and to the laws of the Belgian nation.

But if anyone still thought that at the end of the interminable process of forming a government nothing had changed in the country of King Albert, that view was no longer valid after the 6th of December. For who among those present took the oath, with self-assurance, in their own language alone? Almost all the Dutch-speaking

ministers and secretaries of state. And who did it all in both French and Dutch? The French-speakers, who, according to many Flemings, prefer to speak only their own language, and expect everyone else to adapt to this.

As a spectator you couldn't help thinking that the French-speaking members of government had been given a serious talking-to by the prime minister, the French-speaking socialist Elio Di Rupo. Di Rupo, whose Dutch is not very good either, was very aware how threatening the political crisis had become for the unity of the country. The differences of opinion between the Dutch-speaking north and the French-speaking south of the country seemed to be making Belgium ungovernable. The fact that it had now, nonetheless, been possible to form a government didn't mean that the danger had disappeared just like that. The new government had a majority in the Belgian Parliament, but not in Flanders.

And according to opinion polls, Belgium's largest party, the Flemish nationalist N-VA, who want independence for Flanders, had gained strength.

For more than a year the French-speaking politicians had been saying that the N-VA, who had won the elections in 2010, *must* be in the new government. The Flemish Christian-Democrats (CD&V) were also increasingly saying the same: without the N-VA leader, Bart De Wever, they would not participate. And De Wever himself was saying that he would very much like to see his party in the government. Not everyone believed that, but, according to the Flemish Socialist Johan Vande Lanotte, one of the 'royal intermediaries' in the formation of the government, he had very serious negotiations with De Wever.

It may never be completely clear why nothing came of all this. Who precisely didn't want to co-operate with whom? The N-VA says that they 'were forced out'. The other parties say the N-VA gave up. The breaking point was a memorandum in the summer from Di Rupo, the person charged with forming a government at the time. The N-VA rejected it, the others broke off negotiations.

There was relief among the French-speaking media: without the N-VA success was in sight at last. But De Wever's Flemish Nationalists were fierce fighters. In the discussions about a reformed state the Flemish Christian Democrats, in particular, felt threatened by them – if we're into 'Flemishness', N-VA is their chief rival. During the negotiations over a social and economic policy it was the Flemish Liberals (Open Vld) in the main who found them a nuisance: the N-VA is not only Flemish nationalist but also right-conservative.

But there was no way back – either by means of a new attempt at negotiation or fresh elections. Because that could only make the N-VA really important and powerful. In September there was an agreement over a new way of organizing the state of Belgium, with more powers for Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, and a settlement was also reached on the fiercely disputed electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, a

symbol for decades of the tensions between Francophones and Flemings.

It was still months before the parties were also agreed on a social and economic policy, which needed to find savings of more than eleven billion euros. The Flemish Liberals and the French-speaking Socialists were diametrically opposed to each other. According to the Flemings, the Francophones were interested mainly in protecting their own unemployed and making no changes; according to the Francophones, the Flemings were only standing up for their own businesses.

Nonetheless an agreement was reached, under great pressure from the European Commission, which threatened to impose sanctions unless a budget was decided quickly, and from the financial markets – interest rates for loans to Belgium reached a record high. Di Rupo now heads a government with six parties: the Social-Democrats, Liberals and Christian Democrats from Flanders and those from French-speaking Belgium.

But he is not automatically the big winner and Bart De Wever the loser. From disclosures from after the formation of the government it appeared that Di Rupo, just like many other French-speaking politicians, is now taking serious account of the fact that Belgium may fall apart one day. They seem to have said that 'Plan B' is coming into operation. But Wallonia needs time to strengthen its position economically – the Francophones still can't do without the money from Flanders. The Francophone politicians must also have made clear to Di Rupo that they should grant their Flemish colleagues a lot of successes, otherwise at the next elections they'll stand no chance at all against the N-VA. And if that happens will it ever be possible to form a government again?

PETRA DE KONING

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

Land, Wind and Water

Eighty Years of the IJsselmeer Dam

This is a causeway that is visible from kilometres away. It shows up as just a strip on satellite photos. In reality this strip is more than thirty kilometres long and ninety metres wide. It is the *IJsselmeer Dam* between the *Waddenzee* and the *IJsselmeer*, the dam that separates the salt water from the fresh water. The road that connects the northern provinces of North Holland and Friesland. There is a pedestrian bridge over the road, so that people can cross from the *IJsselmeer* to the *Waddenzee*. Below, cars can now drive at a maximum of 130 kilometres per hour. The road along the *IJsselmeer Dam* was one of the first to have its speed limit raised by the cabinet under Mark Rutte, the Dutch Prime Minister, apparently so that the 32-kilometre stretch could be covered as quickly as possible. It's a dyke that is actually a dam. In fact a dyke is supposed to

protect the land from the sea. But there is water on both sides, so it is more appropriate to call it the *IJsselmeer Dam*.

Plans to build the dam were already in existence at the end of the nineteenth century. At that time the *IJsselmeer* was called the *Zuiderzee* and it was often rough, so the dam was intended to offer greater safety. In 1916 there were serious floods, again caused by a storm. The idea was to prevent the same thing happening in the future. The Netherlands was also in urgent need of agricultural land, which could be acquired by impoldering part of the *Zuiderzee*. The engineer Cornelis Lely devised the plan. In 1927 work began on impoldering and then on building the dam. On 28 May 1932 the last gap was sealed up and the *Zuiderzee* was closed off from the *Waddenzee*. The *IJsselmeer Dam* was ready for use, and the *IJsselmeer* was born.

Impoldering continued. The Urk fishing area was first to be drained. This gave rise to the



North-East Polder, which was followed by East and South Flevoland. Plans to build more polders were put on hold. The town of Lelystad was named after the man who conceived the plan, and hundreds of thousands of people now live on this polder land, where the old and savage sea once raged.

The *Zuiderzee* has been tamed and agricultural land has appeared in its place. But after eighty years the *IJsselmeer Dam* is in need of repair. Studies show that the dam no longer conforms to the required safety standards. Officially it should be able to withstand storms that only occur on average once every ten thousand years. The changing climate means that because of rising sea levels this will no longer be the case. On the *Waddenzee* side, the water level is continually rising, which is why more and more water is flowing into the *IJsselmeer*. However, safety is not so serious a problem that millions need to be invested in the dam right away.

In the summer of 2011 a commission presented four different plans for making the *IJsselmeer Dam* safer. The government is now looking to see which is the most realistic. There is a fair chance that the dam will be raised using asphalt, and grass will be able to grow on top of it. The advantage of this new construction is that it can be implemented in two phases. If it appears to be safe enough after the first phase, the second phase can be cancelled. Security is precious in the Netherlands, but so apparently is finance.

The *IJsselmeer Dam* is clearly visible from the air, but is fairly discrete from the ground. Somehow it never really became a great tourist attraction. The Delta Works in Zeeland, built after the floods of 1953, attract hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. There is even a dedicated museum there called *Deltapark Neeltje Jans*, while at the *IJsselmeer Dam* there is only a look-out post and a small restaurant. But there are plans afoot to make the place more interesting for tourists. When the time comes to invest millions in making sure the dam complies with the required safety standards, it will also be time to look at

how that money can be clawed back. The Dutch state is willing to contribute 600 million euro to the renovation of the *IJsselmeer Dam*, but the total costs are likely to exceed that by 300 to 400 million euro.

The dam also continues to have extraordinary potential for power generation. There is fresh water on one side and salt water on the other. Energy can be generated from the transition from salt to fresh water. Discussions have been going on for years about this and there are concrete plans, but the power plant has still not been built. There have also been years of discussion about constructing a gigantic wind farm on the *IJsselmeer Dam*. Because it's extremely windy there.

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