

## Towards a Diploma Democracy?

### The Gulf between the Population and the New Regents

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[ MARC HOOGE ]

The second half of the 20th century will go down in history as the era of the educational revolution. University campuses throughout the Low Countries were expanded, more polytechnics were built, and the average education level rose visibly. Women, in particular, made up their centuries-long educational disadvantage relative to men within the space of a few decades. The benefits to society of this educational revolution have already been described at some length: Belgium and the Netherlands have evolved into knowledge economies, in which the services sector is much more important than industry.

At the same time, however, this increase in the average education level in the Low Countries has led to the drawing of new social boundaries. To simplify somewhat, a century ago a highly educated person was still the exception rather than the rule. In a typical rural village, only the doctor, the notary and the pastor had enjoyed a higher education; the education level of the rest of the population was much lower. The situation today appears actually to be reversed. For the younger age groups, in particular, going on to higher education has become the norm. Although less well-educated people have not become the 'exception', they are becoming increasingly marginalised. This is the unexpected side-effect of the trend towards a meritocracy, in which everyone is judged on their own merits. If we look back to the period before the 1960s, a person's education level was determined by that of their parents and by their social position. Even highly intelligent children could end up in vocational education if their parents happened to come from a less favourable social milieu. Today too, of course, there are enormous social inequalities in terms of participation in higher education, but the system has at least become far more objective than a few decades ago. Constant evaluations and an increase in support for pupils have meant that most children are now in the most appropriate form of education for them. This means that there is often no excuse for someone who ends up in a lower education track - they simply lack academic skills. Naturally, such a meritocratic education system is highly desirable. We want people to be judged on their own abilities, not on the size of their parents' bank account. At the same time, however, this means that the boundary between those with a high and those with a low level of education has become much harder to cross. The image of the highly intelligent and promising young people

who received insufficient schooling because of the poverty of their parents, but who later worked their way up through dedication and evening classes, has largely disappeared from modern society.

## Meritocracy

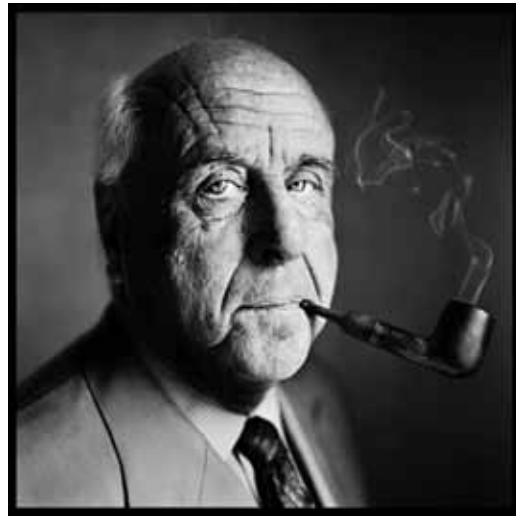
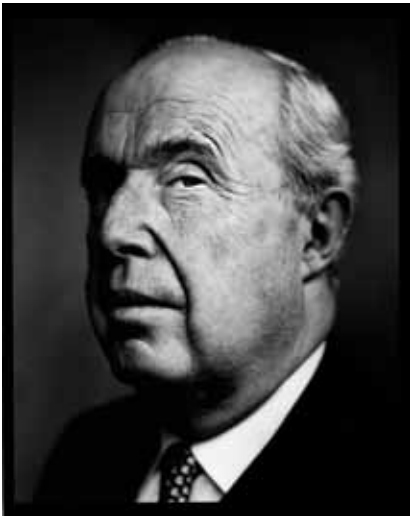
The line separating the highly educated from the poorly educated is therefore much more hermetic than in the past, and this is reflected clearly in the political system. In the past, the socialist parties, in particular, produced a number of politicians with working class backgrounds, often recruited via the trade union movement. That recruitment channel has completely dried up today. A glance at the Dutch or Belgian parliaments reveals row after row of very well-educated ladies and gentlemen, who are, in many cases, capable of reading a legislative text or even understanding



Edelare, 1994

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a budget. The Belgian House of Representatives contains just one member with genuine experience of physical labour. At first sight, this seems to be a sign of progress; the quality of our Members of Parliament has improved considerably in recent decades. The average MP is now younger, better educated, more active and also more often female than several decades ago. At the same time, however, this stricter selection means that our politicians have lost some of their affinity with social reality. After all, we expect our Members of Parliament to genuinely represent – and therefore reflect – the population. That is the ultimate argument for having more women in senior political positions. As more than half the population are women, our assumption is that women should also have a substantial share in operating the levers of political power. However, our reasoning changes when it comes to inequality in education level. We appear not to mind at all that members of the working class have disappeared entirely from Parliament. Despite the fact that the share taken by industry in total employment has declined, there is of course



Maurice Lippens, administrator, banker, 2002  
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still a large group of working-class people, and in many cases they still form the 'backbone of society'. It is just that it is no longer clear who represents them, or to whom they should turn. Should a blast furnace worker feel represented by a neatly dressed accountant who is able to explain to Parliament in fine detail the need for a new pension reform? For an office worker, having to continue working until the age of 67 is probably not an insurmountable obstacle, but someone who works as a labourer in industry probably has a slightly different take on the whole public and political debate about pensions.

This phenomenon of 'diploma democracy' has received a great deal of attention in recent years, especially in the work of the Dutch political scientists Mark Bovens and Anchril Wille. Their thesis is that this phenomenon not only occurs among senior politicians, but is also a decisive factor in the entire functioning of political parties. Even at local party level, it is those with higher education qualifications who have the biggest say, and that means that someone with a lower education level now has virtually no means of influencing politics. Social democrats, in particular, are missing an opportunity here, because they have traditionally targeted a public which is receptive to socioeconomic policy that favours redistribution and a strong social security system. As a result, that public has become politically homeless.

Numerous studies have shown that parties on the left in Western Europe are having difficulty reaching their traditional supporters. If we just consider the socioeconomic contrasts that is a strange state of affairs. A less well-educated labour force has everything to gain from a strong social-democratic party that can influence government policy. But apart from this purely economic approach, culture and values obviously also play an important role in politics, and a broad gulf has developed in these areas between the parties of the left and their traditional supporters. That gulf is probably nowhere more evident than on the issue of integration and multiculturalism. Left-of-centre parties are generally radically opposed to racism and exclusion, and are strong advocates of a more multicultural society. That line of argument scores well among well-educated left-wing voters, who understand that society is becoming more culturally diverse and that this trend is not likely to change any time soon.

This is much less obvious to those with a lower level of education, and a clear dichotomy has accordingly developed between the 'traditional left' and the more progressive left-wing ideas that we typically find among the highly educated. In the first place, less well-educated people more often live in neighbourhoods that are regarded as less advantaged, where they are confronted more or less directly with the presence of different cultural groups in our towns and cities. On both the labour and housing markets, they are also much more exposed to competition from immigrants. There will not be many lawyers or doctors who lose their job to competition from someone from outside Western Europe, but for a lorry driver or textile worker that is part of everyday reality. This heightened competition helps explain why economically vulnerable groups more often have a negative attitude towards migration. In addition, a phenomenon that is found time and again in research is the very strong correlation between education level and racism. It is evidently much easier for someone with a low education level to harbour prejudices against groups who do not share the same culture.

When taken all together, these elements mean that a wide cultural gap has opened up between the senior echelons of the parties of the left and their traditional supporters. Those voters have accordingly turned en masse to extreme right-wing, xenophobic and populist parties, which with their direct language and uncompromising stance on migration clearly respond to the feelings of these largely less well-educated voters. The irony, of course, is that this has created yet another dichotomy: these right-wing or populist parties generally also take a negative stance on the power of the trade unions, whose job is precisely to defend the interests of the working classes. So far, however, these parties have managed to keep this dichotomy in the background, focusing in their communications almost exclusively on cultural and ethnic issues and saying virtually nothing about the economy and redistribution. Groups in society which would objectively benefit from more distribution can therefore still feel at home with an extreme right-wing or populist party.

## **The acceptance of inequality**

Although the book by Bovens and Wille was very well received, articles in the scientific journal *Acta Politica* expressed a number of reservations about whether we are witnessing a genuinely new phenomenon. The research tradition on political participation has always pointed up social inequalities. As long ago as the 1950s, those with higher education levels participated in politics much more than the less well-educated. By its very nature, politics is about lots of meetings, debating, formulating ideas and trying to persuade others of their merits, and these are activities that more closely match the skills of those who have had a full educational career. This inequality is therefore nothing new. What is different today, however, is the public acceptance of this phenomenon. I myself have carried out research on political passivity, and among older people in particular I have often heard the statement: 'politics is not for me'. By that they meant that they do not regard themselves as competent enough to play a significant role in the political arena, partly because of their low level of education. Among the younger generation today, however, that acceptance of inequality has largely disappeared. We now assume that everyone has a right to their own opinion, and that it makes no difference whether that opinion comes from someone who has engaged in lengthy study

or from someone who simply blurts out what is on their mind. The public debate has in other words become democratised, and citizens are no longer prepared to accept the diktats of a highly educated elite. It is not so much the inequality that has changed, but the fact that we are no longer prepared to accept that inequality.

Bridging this new gulf between those with a high and those with a low education level is not easy. A first option might be simply to allow the new populist parties to grow further. After all, political parties do not last forever, and it is perfectly normal in a democracy that parties created in the 19th century should disappear to be replaced by political parties which evidently reflect more contemporary sensitivities. The problem with populism, however, is that it is very difficult to reconcile with normal, sound governance of a country. The Netherlands and Belgium have each followed their own paths in this respect. In the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV) led by Geert Wilders played a part in formulating government policy in the period 2010-2012 via a 'support construction'. This turned out not to be a great success, however, and the PVV proved not to be a very reliable or stable partner. In Belgium, the opposite strategy was followed and the nationalist Vlaams Belang party was meticulously excluded from every majority government formation. The party therefore had no influence whatsoever on policy, and has in the past even been convicted of making racist statements. Clearly, then, the big problem with populist parties is that their proposals simply cannot be carried out, either for economic or legal reasons. To cite just one example: it is legally prohibited to treat Islam differently from other religions because this would infringe the principle of non-discrimination.

### **Is there an answer to populism?**

The other, more traditional parties will therefore have to continue playing an important role, and they will have to provide an answer to the fact that a proportion of the population is no longer represented in the value discourse of the political elite. It is for this reason that the Belgian writer David Van Reybrouck calls in his pamphlet 'Plea for populism' (*Pleidooi voor populisme*) for what he himself terms a 'healthy degree of populism'. The political elite has everything to gain from engaging with the values of the public at large, including the less well-educated section of the electorate. Van Reybrouck rightly points out that our norms and values have undergone an incredibly rapid change over the last few decades. In matters such as equal rights, non-discrimination, multiculturalism and respect for animals and the environment, both the official discourse and legislation have changed extraordinarily fast. It should come as no surprise that some groups within society have difficulty with this. Half a century ago, cigarette brands were still able to promote themselves as the 'sportsman's brand'; today, even smoking in a bar is forbidden. There is a section of the population who have difficulty keeping pace with this rapid evolution. A typical example of this type of conflict is the rise of animal rights organisations, who express concerns about traditional horse-racing on unsafe courses, bloody cockfights or the harsh way that stock are treated at a cattle market. What is striking is how much these issues inflame the emotions, and in some cases they have actually led to physical violence. Cattle dealers have always treated their animals harshly, and they feel their way of life is under attack when highly educated young urbanites suddenly come and start



Moemoe, Bruges, 2005  
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telling them how they should treat a bull. This example demonstrates how difficult it is to translate that 'healthy populism' into practice. We can hardly go back to a system where cruelty to animals was tolerated, or where the antidiscrimination laws were watered down. The European Convention on Human Rights also stipulates explicitly that inflicting cruel forms of punishment on offenders is not permitted, despite the fact that a section of the population would probably like to see such punishments in some extreme cases. Moreover, our society is increasingly focused on control. Some sections of the population are undoubtedly hostile to the smoking ban in bars, but at the same time we want the government to do everything in its power to minimise the risks to our health. It is therefore anything but simple to give the populist tendencies a place in policy, and given the requirement to adopt more and more international and European norms in the future, that will not become any easier. The gulf between those with a high and those with a low education level is a real problem, and there is no reason to suppose that this new cultural divide will disappear rapidly. On the other hand, the assertion that the recipes of populism can simply be adopted as they are is rather too simplistic. A political system has to do two very different things: it has to interpret what moves the people, but at the same time must possess the necessary strength to rule. Combining these two tasks is becoming more and more difficult. As Aristotle remarked many years ago, a citizen is one who shares in governing and who is willing to be governed, even if he does not agree with the ultimate decision. Combining these two roles has never been an easy balancing act, and populism may perhaps render it impossible. ■

Translated by Julian Ross

#### FURTHER READING

Mark Bovens & Anchrit Wille (2011). *Diplomademocratie. Over de spanning tussen meritocratie en democratie*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker  
David Van Reybrouck (2008). *Pleidooi voor populisme*. Amsterdam: Querido