

A Senate with Indirect Power The First Chamber in the Netherlands

In May 2015 the Dutch go to the polls for provincial elections. These are regional elections with a serious national character. Rutte's cabinet anticipates the results with considerable apprehension, as it is through the provinces, rather than directly, that the 75 members of the Senate, or First Chamber, are elected. The Senate in the Netherlands has existed for 200 years. Its task, as a nineteenth century minister put it, lies 'not in doing good, but in preventing evil'.

At the start of the 19th century, after French rule, when the Netherlands acquired a king, a new constitution was written. There was a political organ, the States General, but there was also a need to divide the power of the States in two, so the House of Representatives (*Tweede Kamer* in Dutch, meaning Second Chamber) was founded to make laws, and the Senate (*Eerste Kamer*, First Chamber) to check them. That Senate was known as the *Chambre de réflexion*, a term still used today.

The Senate currently has 75 members, precisely half that of the House of Representatives. They meet one day a week. The members generally do their work alongside another job, while

members of the House of Representatives cannot hold other jobs.

Since the foundation of the bicameral system, the role of the Senate has been debated. Over the last 200 years there have been various proposals to abolish this chamber. Parties arguing for abolition continue to take their seat in the Senate. Relinquishing that right on principle would leave them politically hamstrung, as the power of the First Chamber prevails undiminished. This Chamber cannot directly change laws, nor immediately dismiss a cabinet, but it can do so indirectly. It is therefore a Chamber with indirect power.

The members of the Senate can only reject an entire law; they cannot make amendments. However, the government may still amend a law slightly. This is called a *Novelle*. If this amendment is first approved by the House of Representatives, then it passes to the Senate.

The Dutch cabinets over the last 200 years have always had to give proper consideration to the politicians sitting in the Senate, not only because of the power of the Senate itself, but also because of the individual members, who now tend to be older statesmen and women who have won their spurs in national politics, former party leaders and ministers, a stray captain of industry

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or former head of a trade union, and sometimes former high-ranking military officers.

From the foundation of the Senate the members have been 'eminent' people. Two hundred years ago, when the Netherlands and Belgium were still one country, the Southern Netherlands predominantly wanted members of the aristocracy in the Senate. There were fewer aristocrats in the north of the country, so they came to a compromise. Aristocrats were permitted to become members alongside men who 'had rendered services to the State, who by their birth or wealth belong to the most distinguished men in the country'. The king appointed the members of the Senate for life.

When Belgium became independent in 1830, initially little changed in the functioning of the Senate. Over the course of about a century, various changes were implemented. In 1848 it was decided that the members should be elected by the States Provincial. Just forty years later it was decided that the members' personal financial wealth was no longer important. The Senate was also open to citizens (men, that is) who held high office, such as professors. Women became eligible from 1917.

For all these years the core of political decision making in the Netherlands has remained in the House of Representatives, but the Senate can make or break the government, especially at moments when that government does not have a Senate majority. If the cabinet falls, there are new elections for the House of Representatives. The elections for the Senate are fully independent of this. They take place once every four years.

The elections of May 2015 will take place halfway through the term of Rutte's liberal social democratic cabinet. From time immemorial governments able to count on a clear majority in both chambers have had few worries about the result of Senate elections. This government lacks such a majority, so these provincial elections will directly, rather than indirectly, affect national politics.

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Between Myth and Reality

Andreas Vesalius

The year 2014 saw the five hundredth anniversary of the birth, in Brussels, of Andreas Vesalius, the revolutionary anatomist and medical reformer. His work has had enormous repercussions, both on the development of medical science and on the way we look at the body. Vesalius defended the idea that medicine should be founded on the scientific knowledge of the healthy body.

In his masterpiece, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), he was the first person in history to produce a description of the human body in minute detail. Not only was the text revolutionary, but the copious illustrations were also of exceptional artistic quality. For centuries Vesalius' 'muscle men' were the model for painters and sculptors. Above all they exemplified the positive manner in which the body was experienced and presented from the time of the Renaissance on.

In this respect the significance of Vesalius goes beyond his direct influence on the medical profession. Vesalius grew to be one of the central figures in early modern science who succeeded in distancing himself from his predecessors and prepared the way for critical and empirical research into nature. But this same veneration provided an appropriate breeding ground for countless myths. As early as the seventeenth century the tale was being spread that, as personal physician to the Spanish court, Vesalius had been condemned to death by the Inquisition, following the autopsy of a nobleman, whose heart, apparently, was still beating. It was only on the intervention of Philip II that Vesalius' punishment could be converted to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a journey that eventually proved fatal for him. This myth, which is entirely without historical foundation, developed in the nineteenth century into a more generalised depiction in which Vesalius was the first to defy the ecclesiastical ban on anatomical dissection and so break the taboo on opening up the human body.