

Summary

The Elastic European Ideal *European integration and Dutch politics, 1947-1968*

The Elastic European Ideal is part of a wider research programme entitled, 'The Nation State: Politics in the Netherlands since 1815', which has focussed on the connection between political culture and the nation state.

The Elastic European Ideal takes issue with the dominant 'realist' and 'neo-realist' views in Dutch historiography, in which European integration is considered as a specific form of foreign policy, in which a major role is attributed to national interests in the process of integration and which devalues the role of ideas and ideals in the integration process. The Dutch national interest certainly played a dominant role in the discourse of civil servants and ministers on the question of European integration, but *within* the political parties ideological arguments were emphasised.

In the Netherlands, the experiences of the horrors of totalitarianism during the Second World War spawned enthusiasm for the European cause in the 1950s, as indicated by a consultative referendum held on 17 December 1952 in Delft and Bolsward, two towns with populations politically and religiously representative of the Netherlands as a whole. The vast majority of the voters voted in favour of the idea of a European government, overseen by a democratically elected European Parliament.

Dutch politicians regarded the integration of Europe as a necessary condition for economic rationalisation in general, which they expected would increase production and wages, and bring down prices. In doing so, it would also diminish socio-economic inequality. As Mark Mazower has pointed out, the Second World War had intensified the demand in West European countries for social solidarity. Alan Milward advanced the thesis that the national political response to this intensified demand was an important driving force for the European integration process. Economic integration provided the conditions and the means for the creation of national welfare states in Western Europe. But the experience and fear of totalitarianism could also lead to criticism of the welfare state,

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1 as can be seen in the attitude towards European integration of the Dutch
2 orthodox Protestant Antirevolutionaire Partij (ARP).

3 In addition to linking Europeanisation with prosperity, many Dutch
4 politicians of the 1950s seemed to think of European integration as not
5 only a necessity but also a historical inevitability. In accordance with the
6 pan-European thinking of the interwar years, European integration was
7 presented by Dutch politicians both as a part of, and an adequate administrative
8 response to, a process of growing global interconnectedness. This core belief
9 was explicitly put into words by the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Wim
10 Beyen in Parliament in 1954. It is true that Beyen was a convinced 'European'
11 – he would become one of the fathers of the *relance européenne* after the
12 blocking of the European Defense Community (EDC) in the French Parliament
13 in 1954 – but even self-proclaimed European sceptics believed in the inevitability
14 of Europeanisation. For instance, the Labour Member of Parliament Evert
15 Vermeer made clear that he himself was not a European enthusiast who regarded
16 Europeanisation as a panacea for all the illnesses of modernity. Nevertheless,
17 he claimed, the West European position in the world was in decline to such
18 a degree that the national sovereignty of West European states had already
19 become a fiction. According to Vermeer, the West European nation states had
20 no choice other than to unite, if they did not want to 'capitulate' to one
21 of the two new global superpowers. Hardly anyone in Dutch politics openly
22 opposed the integration of Europe, not even the Labour Prime Minister Willem
23 Drees. In 1950, he kept secret his fears that the government policy of low
24 wages to promote postwar economic reconstruction might be endangered by
25 the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).
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27 In spite of this shared 'inevitability paradigm', the motivation behind
28 the enthusiasm of different political parties varied widely. Jérôme
29 Heldring, a renowned Dutch journalist, wrote in striking terms of the
30 'elastic' European ideal. The staunchest supporters of European integration
31 in the late 1940s and 1950s were the so-called 'Renewers' (a group of
32 reformers in the Labour Party). They strove after a European (or even a
33 global) order based on federalist subsidiarity; they preferred deliberation
34 and compliance to power politics. The Dutch Labour Party regarded 'Europe'
35 as the middle ground between economic 'planning' and 'freedom'. The ECSC
36 combined the benefits of economic liberalisation and economic planning,
37 and thereby formed the perfect socio-economic 'third way'.
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Many politicians of the 'anti-statist' ARP, however, regarded the economic integration of Europe in the 1950s as an alternative for the creation of a 'totalitarian' welfare state. In this line of reasoning, enlarging the economic space would diminish the danger of a future society patronised by 'Socialists'. This view corresponded with that of the Catholic political leader Carl Romme, and that of his future successor (in the 1960s) Norbert Schmelzer, who had stated that Europeanisation could deliver 'Socialist' aims without 'Socialist' means.

Around 1950, Europeanisation in Dutch party politics was primarily a prospective project, driven by self-images of the Netherlands and of a future 'Europe'. These expectations, and the 'Europe' that actually emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, also had unintended side-effects on Dutch domestic political culture. Most Dutch political parties presented European integration more or less as a means for achieving their respective ideological aims. But at the same time, the expectations of 'Europe' reinforced and accelerated a process of ideological restraint, that had already been partially set in motion. Some Dutch Labour politicians and their supporters believed that the domestic political compromises made between the Catholic Party and Labour, which dominated Dutch politics until 1958, served as an example for a future 'truly democratic' 'Europe'. Moreover, they saw the vindication of Labour's post-war domestic policy in the anticipated Europeanisation of political decision-making. Secondly, the collaboration of the ARP with her sister party the Christelijk-Historische Unie (CHU) and the Catholic Party at the European level made a difference to their self-perception: the three Christian parties realised that they had similar views on practical politics. In 1980 the three parties merged into the Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA).

From the 1960s onwards, enthusiasm for the integration of Europe slowly dwindled, partly because the 'European' project seemed to run aground, and partly because the focus on Europe was replaced by a more fashionable global perspective.

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