

'Strange Men on the Land' **More Than Fifty Years of Natural Gas** **in the Netherlands**

It was on farmer Boon's land, or rather under farmer Boon's land. Early one morning in 1959 the first natural gas in the Netherlands was brought to the surface there. Farmer Boon's land lies in the Groningen hamlet of Kolham, near Hoogezand. At that time, it was unclear how much natural gas there was and in what way the extraction of the natural gas would change the Netherlands. In the meantime, we're fifty years and 170 billion euros further on.

In the first few years it seemed as if the Netherlands wasn't really aware of just how important the discovery of the gas field actually was. As the fifties drew to a close, even the oil companies didn't take the idea of natural gas that seriously. Gas had been released while drilling for oil but little was ever done with it. One Shell director said at the time: *'Forget gas, it'll never be profitable.'*

Farmer Boon was extremely sceptical when strange men came onto his land: *'One day they came back and started to drill. The place was a hive of activity.'* When it finally sunk in just how special the find was that happened to be lying under his land, farmer Boon called it a *'sensational feeling'*. When asked whether he had now become the richest man in The Netherlands, his answer was brief and to the point: *'ha, ha, ha, ha'*. But it did not make him rich. In the Netherlands, the yield from the earth's mineral resources goes to the state and not to the owner of the land. But the farmer did get some compensation for the work carried out on his land.

The newspapers at the time hardly covered the discovery of the gas field. That all changed a year later when, during a Strasbourg debate on European energy policy, the Belgian Senator Victor Leemans stated that *'in the north of the Netherlands a natural gas reserve of no less than 300 billion cubic metres'* had been found. A lot larger than anyone in the Netherlands had assumed. There finally turned out to be ten times more natural gas than this beneath the soil of the northern Netherlands.

In 1959 natural gas was discovered, in 1963 its exploitation began and as early as 1965 work started on laying 1,200 kilometres of gas piping throughout the country. Once the enormous size of the field had sunk in, everyone in the Netherlands wanted gas. Every single house had to be connected to the new network. This also heralded the end of the collieries in Dutch Limburg. The Dutch state preferred not to shout their new riches from the rooftops. A former secretary of state, the social democrat Marcel van Dam, said that it was difficult to enforce drastic cutbacks when you were raking in millions from the proceeds of the natural gas.

The price of natural gas was linked to the price of oil. During the crisis in the early seventies, the revenue from natural gas exploded dramatically. Politicians of the time admitted that they gloated over this. *'It was a lubricant. When it was uphill going in the cabinet we'd delve into the natural gas revenues and everything was fine again,'* said Van Dam. However, according to Notenboom, a Catholic politician, too much money was being earmarked for the social services in the early seventies. *'The expansion of the services was a good thing, it just went much too fast. Money was no object.'*

Without the proceeds of the gas, the Netherlands would have become a totally different country. According to the left-wing liberal Jan Terlouw, a former Minister of Economic Affairs, the Netherlands is financially a good deal more stable than other European countries. *'The unions have had little cause to call for strike action. That's why, among other things, the port of Rotterdam has become so successful. The natural gas boom meant that there was more than enough to pump into social security. That's how the famous Dutch polder model came into being.'* And yet, gas has to some extent made the Dutch lazy, says Terlouw. *'When money is no problem, you don't feel motivated to work hard.'* Of course, in these uncertain times, politicians would love to use the proceeds to balance the budget, but that's not allowed any more. In the nineties, it was decided to place the lion's share of the money in a separate fund reserved for major infrastructure projects.

Now, more than fifty years later, there's no more gas under farmer Boon's land. But in the meantime, the

search for gas goes on elsewhere in the Netherlands. For instance, under the Waddenzee. There's hope that the Netherlands will be able to extract gas for another fifty years.

Joris van de Kerkhof
Translated by Gregory Ball

