

was granted full independence in 1975 and Aruba seceded from the Netherlands Antilles in 1986, becoming an autonomous entity within the Kingdom on the condition that it would get full independence in 1996.

In fact Aruba never did become independent, preferring to remain within the Kingdom in exchange for a number of concessions on good governance and inspiring the drive for other islands of the Netherlands Antilles to attain the same level of autonomy. During the ensuing twenty years, different strategies were explored and tested in referenda. These have resulted in the recent new structure in which the Kingdom of the Netherlands consists of four 'states' - the Netherlands, Aruba, Curaçao and St Martin - and, since the 10th of October of this year, the 'state' of the Netherlands includes three special Caribbean municipalities - Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba (BES).

This new political construction has created an interesting transition period for the partner 'states' within the Kingdom of the Netherlands: new relations have to be built up, new governments have to be established and new legislation has to be drafted and implemented. Illustrative of this process is the complexity of the legal construction in the BES islands. Though officially they are a municipality of the Netherlands and one would expect Dutch law to apply there, large parts of old Antillean law still remain in effect. Having become part of an EU Member State, i.e. the European part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, one would also expect the BES islands to be part of the European Union. On the contrary, the BES islands remain OCTs (Overseas Countries and Territories), countries which are related to an EU Member State. The new structure of the Kingdom implies huge legislative and administrative transformation within the new 'states' and within the new municipalities of the Netherlands; this transformation can only be achieved by gradually bringing existing law and administrative structures into conformity with the new situation.

The re-engineered relations between the 'states' of the Kingdom of the Netherlands will probably have a big influence on the exchange of Dutch and West Indian culture. Due to the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles, the different islands have more

direct relations with the Kingdom; as a consequence the relations between, for example, Curaçao and the Netherlands could become closer, resulting perhaps in increased exchanges of cultural, educational and social projects, which could lead to an improvement in mutual understanding. On the other hand, the complexity of the new construction could also put more distance between the partners within the Kingdom

At present the Kingdom of the Netherlands acts as the binding factor between the Netherlands and the West Indian islands. This relationship between the Kingdom and the 'states' which constitute the Kingdom is re-enforced in the current political construction, but it is very clear that the Caribbean discussion about autonomy and independence is not yet finished, and that the Dutch call for political and budgetary transparency within the Caribbean territories of the Kingdom still exists. The new construction leaves some parties dissatisfied, and these parties will continue to raise their voices and to question their responsibilities within the Kingdom and the responsibilities of the Kingdom towards the Caribbean 'states'.

Eric Mijts and Viola van Bogaert

Surrealism Comes to the Low Countries

The Difficult Political Situation in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Belgium and the Netherlands have a chaotic political year behind them. The magic of the polder model, which used to be so highly commended, and the famous democracy of consensus seem to have lost their efficacy. At one time the Low Countries were known for the hidden talent that enabled them to find an ingenious compromise in the most hopeless situations, which would long since have caused other political systems to collapse into argument, division and chaos. The Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart, who won international recognition for his fascinating work on the politics of accommodation, attributed the stability in the divided Belgian and Dutch societies to an original game of co-operation, arising from a highly specific political culture aimed at consensus and broad agreements.

At present there is no such political stability in the Low Countries. Holland is now back on track, albeit in a locomotive with a two-stroke engine that could come off the rails at the slightest provocation. In the Netherlands many people are currently wondering how long the teetering cabinet can survive, particularly as the reason for its existence – Geert Wilders' PVV party is proving to be a fickle and unstable partner. Sure enough the Belgians are even worse off, though in the land of Magritte people are used to a fair dose of surrealism. There people are wondering if there is any possibility of a government by the summer of 2011 as a result of the June 2010 elections. The formation of the Belgian government threatens to be the slowest in history, they have only the Iraqis to beat. Because of this quite a lot of people are wondering whether in the Netherlands and Belgium, too, in the logic of the majority, ideas of power, confrontation politics and populism have gradually taken over from efforts to reach an agreement.

In both Belgium and the Netherlands the government fell before the end of the legal term of office. The reason for the premature dissolution of the cabinets

was not the same, but in both cases the initiator had party political motives in view. In both countries politics seems to have increasingly become a consumer product and statesmanship has to be a match for the opinion polls.

Balkenende IV (the Christian Democratic CDA / the Socialist PvdA / the austere Protestant Christian Union) fell on the 20th of February 2010 as a result of the decision-making process concerning the possible extension of the Dutch military mission in the Afghanistan province of Uruzgan. CDA wanted to keep open the option of extending this mission, but Deputy Prime Minister Wouter Bos (PvdA) wanted to be out of Uruzgan for good by the end of 2010. Indeed the coalition partners had agreed on this in 2007. However, according to some commentators the PvdA hoped it would be able to count on the sympathy of the electorate if it allowed the government to fall over Uruzgan. The PvdA had done very badly in the opinion polls at the beginning of 2010 and the general prediction was that it would be badly damaged in the municipal elections on 3rd March 2010. Moreover Bos's strategy seemed to work, because an electoral massacre was avoided. According to the PvdA leader the party was back, something that also appeared to be the case from the relatively good election result in the Second Chamber elections, in which the PvdA was the second largest party in the Netherlands.

In Belgium the initiator of the fall of the government fared less well. The Flemish liberals, Open VLD, wanted out of the Leterme II government because the party was failing to put a liberal stamp on policy. The new young chairman, Alexander de Croo, and his spin doctor, Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne, wanted to get a clearer liberal alternative going and could do this better from the opposition than from inside a government in which Open VLD were languishing. The persistent community negotiations to do with the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV)⁽¹⁾ question were a useful excuse for the Flemish liberals to demonstrate their decisiveness by quitting the government. The reason they gave was that the deadline to shelve the BHV problem for all time had not been respected. "Alea iacta est", tweeted Van Quickenborne from the corridors of the Wetstraat/

SHAME- protest in Brussels on January 23rd 2011, demanding a government, around 200 days after the elections.



rue de la Loi. There was no longer any option then but to bring forward the election dates.

The results of the Belgian elections were very clear. The Flemish Nationalists of the N-VA continued the positive trend of the previous year and improved upon it, to be delineated as the largest Flemish party. The chairman, De Wever, himself collected one of the highest personal returns in Belgian history. The French-speaking socialist Elio Di Rupo (PS) had a similar triumph in French-speaking Belgium. The result: two legitimate leaders who had a *once in a lifetime opportunity* to break through a period of institutional blockade. In addition to a clear mandate from the electorate it also appeared during the campaign that all parties saw the need for a solution to the BHV problem and a thorough reorganization of the state. In French-speaking Belgium too, with the exception of a few acid outpourings from community quibblers such as Olivier Maingain (FDF) and Joëlle Milquet (CDH), a new mentality seemed to be showing itself in embryonic form. The '*on est demandeur de rien*' of 2007, in which every reform of the state was rejected in advance, gave way to a pragmatic attempt at 'balanced reforms'. Thus in Belgium, from day one after the elections, it was evident that there was the potential to unravel the community knot and that the new government would be

formed round a PS-N-VA axis.

In the Netherlands it was all more obscure. The electorate had left a totally fragmented political landscape in which the liberal VVD only just had a majority over the PvdA and in which Geert Wilders' Islamophobic PVV made the traditional government combinations difficult. It was far from clear which parties could unite to form a government. It was a long and sometimes chaotic courtship dance with no natural leaders, in which from time to time no one knew which way to turn anymore. Besides the VVD almost every party could be part of the government, even the PVV. The most frequently suggested combinations were a centrist cabinet made up of the three traditional parties, a centre-right coalition of VVD, CDA and PVV and the so-called Purple-Plus Variant with VVD, PvdA, the leftist liberal D66 and the environmentalist GroenLinks. But none of the combinations was obvious, which meant that VVD leader Rutte's campaign wish to form a new cabinet by the 1st of July suddenly sounded very hollow.

In contrast, the time scale proposed by De Wever in Belgium of having a federal government on its feet by the 1st of September sounded courageous but, oddly enough, less unrealistic. There were clear leaders on both sides of the language barrier with the shared am-



The Dutch political leaders Maxime Verhagen (CDA), Mark Rutte (VVD) and Geert Wilders (PVV) at the start of the Rutte cabinet in 2010.

bition of carrying out a substantial reform. The only problem was, as became evident much later during the actual discussions, they each meant something different by this. But in the intoxication of the first few weeks following the elections there was the prospect of a rapid formation. Since then we have come to know better: the Belgian record of 194 days without a government was broken easily at Christmas 2010. Meanwhile it seems Belgians are aiming for the Iraqi world record of 248 days. The Dutch formation period, however, was much quicker, taking 'only' 127 days.

Despite the faster formation the Netherlands also experienced a problem that had surfaced very clearly in Belgium during the formation of the 2007 government: a lessening of the institutional desire for consensus. The politics of accommodation, in which the political elite manages to find a way to even out the contradictions in society, is not working so well. In the Low Countries the polarization has become so great that political leaders are no longer able to meet each other in private. The talent for understanding your political opponent and respecting each other's sensitivities seems to be withering. Together with the breaking down of pillarization, the blurring of ideological differences, the personalization and above all the huge mediatization of politics, the increased volatility of the

electorate is causing the political system to draw its horns in nervously. The outcome is interminable discussions on formation with whole series of people charged with forming a new government and cabinet, and other royal envoys.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands the Rutte cabinet rules, but the viability of this minority government of VVD and CDA supported by the PVV seems limited. The majority of 76 seats out of 150 is extremely narrow. One vote the wrong way is sufficient to give the government problems. That is no figment of the imagination, given that the one-man Wilders^[2] outfit is a group full of uncertain and unstable people. Moreover the fact that a number of CDA people are putting the Rutte cabinet's hard-line migration policy under a magnifying glass is not a good sign. It will be nothing short of a miracle if Rutte I goes the full term.

Despite these sombre prospects a look over the southern border may provide some comfort for the Dutch: at the end of January 2011 the Belgians were still without a government. All the difficult discussions about asylum, pensions etc still have to be held there. In Absurdistan (Belgium) everyone is so used to a government of unfinished business and crisis that no one bats an eyelid. And when, on 23 January, a bare 40,000 demonstrators in the streets of Brussels gave a signal