

**T**he

## Myth of Dutch Progressiveness

### *The Netherlands as 'Guide Land'*

Several years ago, I gave a talk at a large American university, outlining how Dutch nationalism had waned since 1945, as the Dutch, for both practical and principled reasons, forsook 'God, the Netherlands and Orange' in favour of European and globalist commitments. Afterwards, a prominent Flemish historian told me, in a friendly but vigorous way, that I was absolutely wrong in this respect about his northern neighbours. '*The Dutch are still exceedingly nationalistic,*' he insisted, '*and they remain as convinced as ever that they are more right than anybody else.*'

'Nationalism' of course, is a tricky word, full of definitional pitfalls. But the adjacent Belgians are, perhaps, uniquely suited to see just how chauvinistic the Dutch can be concerning the superiority of their own country. Traditional Dutch condescension toward the Belgians, however, is only one form of this chauvinism, whether we choose to call it nationalism or not. As an American boy of tender years, I, too, was confronted with many sermons against the iniquities of my own country from Dutch friends and relatives.

My mother was a Rotterdammer by birth. In 1960, at the tail end of the post-war immigration comet, she immigrated to the United States to marry my father, an American. I grew up in Iowa, not far from the South Dakota line. Apart from the Luxembourgers at its eastern edge, my county was settled largely by Dutch Calvinists, people whose parents, grandparents and great-grandparents had left the Netherlands for a better life on the Plains. It was in this milieu that I spent most of my life, a stability given variety by almost annual visits to the Netherlands during the summer months.

Travelling to and from Iowa and Holland, I grew up living between two worlds which were rapidly growing apart, religiously, culturally, politically. The Netherlands in the year of my birth (1963) was a rather conservative place. But whereas the mental world of my Iowa community – and that of my own family – changed only slowly in the course of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, my Dutch relatives and friends rapidly developed views often in radical opposition to the certainties still firmly embraced back in Iowa. Members of my Dutch family liberalised their theology considerably or dropped out of the Dutch Reformed Church altogether, joined parties like the Political Radicals (PPR) or the Dutch Communists (CPN), and articulated

highly critical views of America and its backward policies, both in domestic and foreign affairs. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, some of them were quite active in the peace movement that chiefly aimed at preventing the stationing of cruise missiles in the Netherlands. This last political project occurred precisely at the time that the Reagan Revolution, and a new, more militant cultural conservatism was sweeping over the American heartland in general and over my small Iowa town in particular. By the standards of my hometown, my family was rabidly left-wing; by the standards of Dutch relatives, we had become hopelessly conservative.

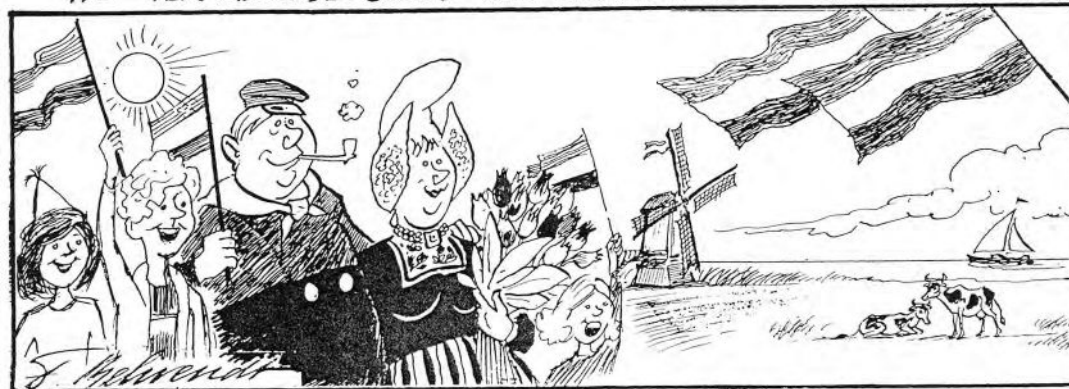
For this reason, I have always been particularly sensitive to the way many Dutch people spike their arguments with at least the insinuation that their own viewpoint is more 'progressive' and 'enlightened' than those with whom they disagree. This form of argumentation of course, is not restricted to post-sixties Holland; it is at least as old as the Enlightenment, and one could argue that its roots go even farther back. Still, the Dutch are masters of 'we-are-more-progressive-than-you' rhetoric because they are particularly unreflective in applying it. Other Europeans and Americans seem to value a field of tension between 'tradition' and 'progress,' in which the proper middle ground is the best choice for a given issue or problem. Not the contemporary Dutch, who play little ('none' would go too far) lip service to 'tradition.'

It's not that the Netherlands is a traditionless place; one of the great realisations of my research years in Amsterdam during the early 1990s is how

Cartoon by Fritz Behrendt.  
The caption reads: 'The changed image of the Netherlands is once a year...the old one again' (Queen's Day 1995).



HET VERANDERDE BEELD VAN NEDERLAND IS EENS IN HET JAAR..



.. WEER HET OUDE.

(KONINGINVEDAG 1995)

deeply attached the Dutch are to order, and to certain time-trusted conventions that maintain this order. I mean rather that the Dutch often avoid articulating sentimental or ideological attachment to 'tradition.' The Dutch public's relationship to the monarchy is instructive here. A great number of Queen Beatrix's subjects will insist that they have no particular fondness for the House of Orange, and that if it ceased to rule over the Netherlands after four centuries, they would not miss it. But, they hasten to add, Beatrix does a fine job as queen, and she deserves, by virtue of her personal merits alone, the respect of her subjects. It is a curious distinction, and it may be a disingenuous one. But it illustrates, among other things, the Dutch relationship with tradition: a principled hostility to it, to things that seem to belong to the past, all the while sneaking traditional attachments back in under some pragmatic guise.

But this is not the same thing as saying that the Dutch really are just as tradition-bound as everyone else, only they won't admit it. The rejection of 'tradition,' and the unusually high attachment to being 'progressive,' does make a real difference in the substance and style of Dutch society. I think this culturally-embedded commitment to 'progressiveness' helps explain how the Netherlands changed quite quickly, even relatively painlessly, from a 'conservative' society in the 1950s to a society that by the 1970s was hailed – and condemned – as the 'anything goes' capital of the world. This shift during the 1960s was the subject of my book, *Building New Babylon*, which, thanks to my Dutch wife, appeared in Dutch several years ago. Initially, my project stemmed from my own personal yearnings to understand how, to put it baldly, Holland and Iowa had parted ways in the 1960s. But the book gradually turned into a cooler and more distanced work, accounting for why Dutch 'elites' made such easy concessions to religious, cultural and, to a lesser extent, political change. What I argued was that the Dutch leadership in various sectors of society, although castigated by 'radicals' who wanted to change society as quickly as possible, had themselves come to believe in the necessity of change – in the unavoidable demands of 'progress.' In a changing, dynamic world in which the Netherlands itself was being transformed, there seemed to be no choice, no fixed traditions and beliefs to which to cling. Thus the Dutch 'cultural revolution', such as it was, was actually facilitated by often cautious elites making concessions to, as they often put it, 'the demands of the age'.

The 1960s also unleashed a new, more militant form of Dutch moralism, which as a teenager I would encounter in subsequent years. Moralism had hardly been absent from Dutch society before the 1960s, but a new idealistic élan, sustained by the belief that the world could be transformed, helped sustain the idea that the Netherlands was somehow a '*Gidsland*' ('Guide Land'), a nation whose moral example could inspire other nations toward better behaviour. It is important to note that this 'Guide Land' ideal long predated the 1960s, and that it pertained almost exclusively to foreign policy. The Netherlands as the moral pathfinder for other nations stemmed from the 'small is better' thinking of the statesman J.R. Thorbecke in the 1830s, who sought a new, above-the-fray role for Dutch foreign policy after Belgian independence had stripped his country of big power pretensions. It was this ideal of a moral, principled neutrality which enjoyed its heyday in the first decades of this century until the German invasion of 1940 put an end to it.

It was this ideal which resuscitated itself in the late 1960s, when many Dutch began to question the morality of a bipolar arms race and deep inequities in income across the globe. Perhaps the most tangible evidence of this ideal at work was in the large amounts of development aid given by the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s. But it was the peace movement, with its strong criticism of NATO defence policies, which received the most attention abroad. It certainly animated conversation at my family reunions. And by 1981, the Dutch seemed so in danger of reverting to their old neutralism that the American critic Walter Laqueur warned of the 'Hollanditis' that threatened to undo the Atlantic alliance.

Those days, when the Dutch, including my relatives, had something prophetic to say about global affairs, are now largely a thing of the past. Now, with the end of the Cold War and deep doubts about the efficacy of foreign aid, the Dutch have largely abandoned their hortatory task of bringing other nations, and especially their chief allies the Americans, to their moral senses. In 1995, Foreign Minister Hans van Mierlo suggested an international peace-keeping force, just as the 'Guide Land' prophet Cornelis van Vollenhoven had done before him in 1913. But that same year was marked by the debacle of 'Dutchbat' forces in Srebrenica, who failed to protect thousands of Muslim men from mass execution. In many ways, Srebrenica can be seen as the failure of the Dutch 'Guide Land' ideal with its sad but important lesson: it was superpower-sponsored force, rather than good offices of peace-loving nations, which brought an end to Serb aggression.

But if Dutch foreign policy as a moral example to the world is all but moribund, it is clear that since the 1970s the Dutch have also touted their own *domestic* policies as progressive, humane and tolerant, worthy of emulation. Tolerance as (self-) image, of course, easily antedates the 'Guide Land' ideal – the Netherlands as a renowned bastion of tolerance is at least four centuries old. But in the last 25 years or so, many Dutch have argued that their own views on homosexuality, on soft drugs and euthanasia, to name just a few salient issues, are models that other nations should adopt. It is in these domestic issues that the 'Guide Land' ideal continues to thrive, even though Dutch drugs policy in particular has come under extremely heavy fire from the French, Americans and others in recent years.

There is something in this Dutch posture that I find a bit annoying. The Dutch have a right, like any other nation, to determine their own domestic policy. I would furthermore assert that in the aforementioned issues and others they offer alternatives that other nations would do well to consider; I myself am personally charmed by some features of euthanasia, drug and homosexual policies in the Netherlands. But too often the assumed 'progressiveness' of these policies, whether implicitly or explicitly held, gets in the way of the Dutch evaluating their policies in the proper light. In the first place, it prevents the Dutch from seeing criticisms of their policies as anything but ignorant and reactionary – or at the very least, as a misunderstanding of their policies. The assumption seems to be on the part of many Dutch policy-makers that if once foreigners of an intelligent, humane, and progressive nature *really* understand what they are doing, they will be in full agreement. How could they not be? In this case, the myth of Dutch progressivism sometimes gets in the way of Dutch officialdom talking with their critics, either in or outside the Netherlands.

There is an even more shadowy side to the myth of Dutch progressiveness. Most Dutch are not likely to consider their own showcase policies as retrograde. Part of the reason why in the late 1940s many Dutch opposed relinquishing Indonesia to Sukarno was their belief that the Indonesian people could not *possibly* be ungrateful for the progressive trusteeship – the word ‘colonial’ was often avoided – with which the Dutch had so beneficently provided them. The tendency is also apparent today. Forced euthanasia during the Nazi period has required the Germans to painfully consider the ethical ramifications of voluntary euthanasia. But surely, many Dutch seem to think, their own progressive and humane doctors and jurists have nothing to learn from Nazi Germany? Indeed, the analogy between them and German doctors of the 1940s may well be entirely spurious. But it would be less damaging if the Dutch understood that they need to prove rather than to assume the absurdity of the analogy.

The Dutch have good reason to consider themselves a ‘Guide Land’, even today. Nor is the myth of their progressiveness merely built on empty self-image – the Dutch really are so, in fruitful, appealing ways. But all nations are prone to hubris by the magnification of their own strengths – ‘freedom’ is one magical American word that has brought more than its fair share of tragedy and irony. And through my own personal experiences and scholarly research, I sense that if the Dutch ever step out of bounds and offend the gods, it is likely to come from an all-too-complacent trust in their own progressiveness.

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