

# A Day in the Political Arena

by Hans Kops

The Lower House of the States General in The Hague is Holland's prime political arena, the forum in which the multiparty system strikes a balance between conflict and consensus. *Holland Horizon* takes a look at the everyday business of politics.



A day like any other in the Lower House of Parliament. No more than a handful of the 150 members of the country's most powerful governing body have taken their seats in the plenary council room in the Binnenhof. A few members representing the left-leaning liberal party D66 have stopped by for a word with their fellow party member, health minister Els Borst. Her own party has tabled a motion opposing her plan to introduce a nominal fee for home nursing. According to the newspapers, the scheme has also come under fire from the Christian Democrats, one of the parties in opposition. The House looks set for a stormy session and the minister is trying to gauge the mood within her party. Another group has gathered just a few metres away. Near the table from which members of the government explain and defend their policies in parliament, member of the other two coalition parties, the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA) and the liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), are deep in discussion. The conversation seems friendly, enough — you might even say jovial. The Speaker bangs the gavel to signal the start of the afternoon session.

As the minister holds forth on the finer points of her plan, a rumble of voices can be heard in the corridor. Another issue is jostling for attention. The leader of one of the parliamentary parties is intending to resign. The story broke in the morning press, and the leaders spokesman is now surrounded by journalists. It turns out to be an unfounded rumour, after all, which he manages to nip in the bud. A French tourist taking stock of this, the heart of Dutch democracy, grins from a respectful distance. Behind her, a member of parliament scurries off to a meeting with a huge file tucked under his arm.

**Political Arena:** The Lower House is Holland's political arena. These are the august halls in which the nation's legislators prepare Acts of Parliament, debate bills and budget proposals submitted by the government and decide whether to amend, pass or reject them. The directly elected Lower House conducts parliamentary debate and scrutinises government policy. Once a bill has been passed, it is sent to the Upper House, whose main function is to ensure that the proper procedures have been followed in the decision-making process. In recent years, however, the Upper House has had more than its usual share of the limelight. It has opposed several major pieces of legislation passed by a majority in the Lower House. The bicameral system dates

back to the first Dutch parliament, established 200 years ago. The actual parliament buildings have an equally long history. The bicentenary of Holland first-ever elected parliamentary assembly — convened in the former Binnenhof Palace — was commemorated in 1996. Except for a brief interlude at the beginning of the 19th century, when Holland was under French occupation, the Binnenhof has always been the seat of the Dutch parliament. This labyrinth of corridors and halls is a meeting place for politicians, lobbyists, journalists, demonstrators, party leaders and anyone else who may wish to be heard before or during the decision-making process.

The political spectacle is a source of entertainment, but it also provides jobs. Over 900 people work behind the scenes at the Lower House, making it one of the biggest employers in The Hague. Teams of messengers, documentalists, stenographers, caterers, party secretaries and others, officially reporting to the Speaker, play a vital role in keeping the show on the road. The number of photocopies made in Parliament every year — over 17 million in 1995 alone — is an interesting pointer to the sheer volume of the work they do.

**Self-made Men and Women:** But more interesting still is the business of politics itself. Who are these 150 members of parliament and how are they elected? Although the Constitution lays down that the Lower House should mirror the Dutch population as a whole, its

members tend to have a better-than-average education. A recent study shows that 81 of the incumbent members are university graduates and another 29 at least have completed higher professional education. Six hold two university degrees or a doctorate. But there is also scope for individuals who have made their own way. Piel Keur of the VVD, for instance, who now helps to shape policy on agriculture, nature management, fisheries, transport, public works and water management, has a background in farming.

Members of parliament who once divided their time between politics and business or professional posts are finding that the complex issues of today's world demand a full-time commitment. And it's not an easy job either! In 1995, the Lower House scheduled a total of 9,900 meetings, ranging from plenary sessions to party or committee meetings. Nowadays, some 80 per cent of members of parliament have been forced to relinquish such outside activities. In the 1960s, the ratio was exactly the reverse. Only recently, a member of parliament resigned for this reason. "You can't live a normal life working an 80-hour week," she explained in an article on the pressure of parliamentary work, published in the daily *NRC Handelsblad*.

**Compensation:** Members of the Lower House receive salary, which is officially called "compensation". The average gross salary in 1996 was 155,740 guilders (US\$ 77,870), plus a standard allowance of 4,200 guilders (US\$ 2,100) a year to

cover expenses. In Holland, the public has access to all information about the salaries paid to state employees. Members of parliament are also allowed to top up their earnings by up to 14,946 guilders (US\$ 7,473) a year. However, they may not accept financial support of any kind from outside sources, just as it is strictly forbidden for political parties to accept donations or contributions. Some parties even require their parliamentary representatives to contribute part of their income to the party's coffers. Another source of revenue is the fixed contribution that all the parties receive from public funds. And finally, of course, they collect dues from their members. Parliamentary parties are also entitled to a contribution towards the costs of running their offices, the amount being proportional to the number of seats they hold.

Each of the fourteen political parties represented in the Lower House has its own system of nominating candidates for the four-yearly parliamentary elections. The four large parties appoint special committees to recruit new talent and screen prospective candidates. At present, the whole process is gathering momentum for the next election, scheduled for May 1998. In the VVD and CDA, local party managers play the principal role in nominating candidates. In D66, a party founded in the 1960s, candidates are nominated by a ballot of party members.

In Holland, like everywhere else, it helps to have a foot in the door. Two thirds of the

members of the Lower House built their reputations as municipal councillors or in provincial government posts. A relatively high proportion — almost 50 per cent — started out as public servants. The reason is fairly obvious. In the preparatory stage of the political process, members of the Lower House have unrestricted access to the civil service apparatus that helps and supports them in their work. As a result, well-connected public servants have a head start. Only a handful of parliamentarians — fifteen at present — came into politics from the business world. The reason most often heard is that salaries fall short of those in the private sector.

**Research:** Members of the Lower House spend only part of their average working day in the Binnenhof itself. They hold responsibility for several, often highly specialised portfolios within their own party, which requires a good deal of research and fieldwork. Negotiation plays a prominent role in Dutch politics in general and is an important aspect of work in the Binnenhof.

Meetings of one kind or another are part of the parliamentary routine. There are, of course, the plenary sessions in the House itself, every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. But far more time is spent in committee meetings in other parts of the building, some but not all of which are open to the public. Every member of parliament is on at least one committee in which policy is discussed with the relevant ministers and efforts are made to gauge the political feasibility of new initiatives.

On top of all this comes a seemingly endless succession of party meetings. The parliamentary week opens on Tuesday mornings, when the parties meet in their own offices in the Binnenhof. Here they discuss the political issues of the day, plot their strategies for the rest of the week, formulate their positions and decide how they will vote. In theory, members of parliament have the right to vote according to their own conscience and responsibilities. But here, as in all other situations, they have to contend with the restrictions of party discipline.

**Informal Talks:** The sessions euphemistically referred to as "informal talks" are a hallmark of Dutch politics. Many of the sessions conducted before the television cameras in the assembly room of the Lower House have been carefully rehearsed in advance. The real issues tend to be fought out in informal exchanges in the Binnenhof's bars and restaurants rather than in the house itself.

# Dutch Lessons in Water Management

ALMOST every delta in the world where major water development activities in the water are being carried out, the Dutch influence is clearly present. The Dutch are involved in design, construction, and advice of all kinds on water-related works, such as dams, bridges, harbours, dikes, polders, and dredging. This certainly also holds for Bangladesh.

Why is it that The Netherlands and the Dutch became so famous and wanted in this field? Why is it that recently even the eldest son of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, Prince Willem Alexander, revealed in an television interview that he would like to play a major role in promoting Water management worldwide? Let us take a look in Dutch history and see why the Dutch became such water experts, and what lessons they learned that can be of use here in Bangladesh.

## The Dutch Lowlands

The Netherlands, Holland, the Low-lying Countries; three names for the same small country in the delta of three European rivers — the Rhine, the Meuse and the Scheldt. More than 1000 years ago, people tried to make a living there, living in swampy area that was constantly threatened by rain, wind, river and sea floods and even by waterborne diseases like malaria. In short, a marginal area. If today's economic evaluation criteria would have been applied, no Development Bank would even think one single minute about spending money for developing this waterland.

But people in those days did start development. Why? Were they literally pushed into this area, where the boundary between land and water was not visible? Was there no alternative for them? Or did they have a clear vision and perseverance? Whatever may have been the case, in those days the people did indeed reclaim these swampy lands. And that start was also the beginning of an never-ending fight against the water.

## Keys to Success: Time, Technology, Water Boards

What were the factors in this successful battle? Firstly, there was the factor time. The long time span in which the development took place allowed people to learn from their environment and adapt themselves to it. In the course of centuries, and by trial and error, understanding of, for instance, the

physical processes could develop and had to develop, because there were hard lessons to learn. Any unbalanced intervention against the laws of nature was ruthlessly corrected with major consequences — floods, death tolls, and a declining economy. So, in time, the Dutch learned the hard way how to build with nature.

The second factor was the state of technology. At several distinct moments in Dutch history, the discovery of new technologies, like the famous Dutch windmill and the steam engine, came just in time to protect polders against destruction. These new technologies even gave the opportunity to (re)claim back what had already been lost.

The third — and often ignored — factor for success was the gradual development of an institutional framework for water management. From the very beginning of polder development, it became clear that a strong cooperation between the polder inhabitants was essential for their survival. The ever continuing battle against the common enemy water required a high level of organisation. Without that, men could not even be considered to play a significant role in this battle.

Let us further look at this aspect. In the Middle Ages, when there was no central government whatsoever, a unique organisation had to develop at local (polder) level: the Water Board. In time, these (small) water boards developed a sound and basic principle: Interest-Pay-Say. What does this principle mean? As stakeholder (farmer, inhabitant, house owner) in a polder one has to pay for the services of the water board. The more land one owns or uses, the higher one's interest is in a well-functioning water board. Thus not only has one to pay more money to the water board, but also, the higher one's influence is: the say. Every four years, the governing bodies of the water boards are elected by the stakeholders. A higher say means that one's vote as stakeholder during these water board elections is more powerful when one's property is more valuable. But, as said before, it also means that one has to pay more to the water board.

## The Dutch Experience

This century, The Netherlands became most famous by its impressive Lake IJssel Reclamation works (165,000 ha) and the Delta Works. However, in terms of its effective water management, its unique organisational structure should be valued even more highly. The Dutch experience with their Wa-

ter Board System can be summarised by the leading principles of building with nature and building with people. These two principles have formed the basis for many European water administration and management structures.

In the 1960s and 70s, major technical development in the water sector were undertaken in many developing countries in order to improve the prove the performance of the water sector and to cope with the sharply increasing demands for good quality water for drinking water supply and irrigation. However, the effects of these projects were often much below expectations. Evaluations showed that in the majority of cases it was not due to failing technology. No shortcomings resulted from inadequate institutional frameworks. So, although formerly development aid concentrated on technical measures, nowadays the challenge is to create such conditions that what has been built can indeed be operated and maintained, preferably in a sustainable way in harmony with the surrounding environment.

## Bangladesh Water Development Board

Bangladesh also has a Water Board: The Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB). In contrast with the Dutch Water Boards, the BWDB is primarily a centrally driven national institution; which can be compared with the Dutch Rijkswaterstaat (a department within the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management). In the last 25 years, BWDB particularly focused on water works construction. Almost 550 sub-polders were built, which can be considered an enormous achievement. But, like elsewhere in the world, these sub-polders were planned and developed with too low an involvement of the stakeholders. Therefore, insufficient attention has been paid to the operation and maintenance of the new polder schemes. It is encouraging to observe that today's management of the Board is becoming more and more aware of this shortcoming. Water management in Bangladesh can indeed be more sustainable, through a drastic change towards participatory water management. The challenge for the BWDB is to facilitate and to guide this process. Fast action is needed forward to make the large investments of the past more effective. One thing is for sure: the Dutch look forward to being at your side. And perhaps, his royal highness Prince Willem Alexander may join!

**Heartiest Felicitations to the Government and the People of the Netherlands on the occasion of the National Day of The Netherlands**



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