Democratic Reform
Between the Extreme Makeover
and the Reinvention of Tradition;
The Case of the Netherlands

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Democratic Reform Between the Extreme Makeover and the Reinvention of Tradition: the Case of the Netherlands

Frank Hendriks

Abstract

Democracy in the Netherlands, like in so many other western countries, is under substantial reform pressure. The problem with the democratic system in the Netherlands, according to democratic reformers, is that it is out of step with the fast and major changes taking place in modern society. As a rule, Dutch reformers look to sweeping, large-scale and all-encompassing plans for democratic reform, achieving, however, little success. Major constitutional changes have been planned time and again, but eventually the institutional structure has remained largely the same. This paper presents a critical analysis of the standard recipe that democratic reformers often prescribe – radical makeover – and outlines a viable alternative that can also be derived from the Dutch case – reinventing tradition. Reinventing tradition implies a mixture of change and preservation, of movement and counter-movement. It is, arguably, the only way for democratic reform to go, at least in a consensus democracy like the Netherlands. Dutch history shows that large-scale blueprint reform almost always fails to be implemented. And that small-scale adaptive bricolage, part of the incremental ‘reinvention of tradition’, can be significantly more successful as a reform strategy.

1 Introduction

Democratic reform is a precarious thing. To have any chance of success, democratic reform must be sensitive to situational circumstances and cultural idiosyncrasies, as well as creative in uniting disparate views of democratic change. The fact that rationally designed reform need not be superior in this respect to incrementally unfolding reform is demonstrated by the case of the Netherlands, where democratic reform goes back on a long and instructive history. For this reason, and because sound reflection on democratic reform should always be case-specific, the Netherlands is central to the present paper, drawing attention to a tried and tested alternative (reinventing tradition) to the kick and rush remedy (extreme makeover), which democratic reformers often prescribe.

Like so many of their foreign counterparts, democratic reformers in the Netherlands tend to start at the end, with the remedy they have in mind. Jumping to conclusions is their wont. It would make more sense to start by making a sound diagnosis first: what is actually the matter? After a section outlining the analytical starting point of the present analysis (Section 2: Framework), this question will be dealt with explicitly in a section analysing the problematique of democracy under reform pressure (Section 3:

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Diagnosis). After a critical analysis of the standard recipe that democratic reformers often prescribe (Section 4: Standard Recipe), and a section explaining the lack of success of this recipe (Section 5: Clarification), a viable alternative that can also be derived from the Dutch case – reinventing tradition – will be discussed (Section 6: Alternative). In the final section, it will argued that democratic reform should always be tailor-made, never one-size-fits-all.

2 Framework: rivalling models of democracy

Building blocks of democracy

The concept of democracy is essentially contested. Behind an apparently simple principle – the merging of demos and kratia, the people that govern – lies a manifold world of thought and action. Hendriks (2006) reduces the complexity by distinguishing four basic models of democracy: pendulum democracy, consensus democracy, voter democracy and participatory democracy. These four models result from the juxtaposition of two basic distinctions – direct versus indirect democracy; integrative versus aggregative democracy – which used to be dealt with separately in the existing literature:

- **Aggregative versus integrative democracy.** The key question here is: how are democratic decisions being taken? Are they taken in an aggregative (majoritarian) process, in which a simple majority of 50% + 1 eventually tips the scales, even if this majority is up against sizeable minorities? Or are they taken in an integrative (non-majoritarian, deliberative) process, in which people attempt to reach the widest possible – preferably complete – agreement? Is it ‘the winner takes it all’ or is it a process of consensus building? Is it majoritarian ‘voting’ or deliberative ‘conferring’?

- **Direct versus indirect democracy.** The key question here is: who is eventually taking the decisions? Do citizens designate representatives who eventually take the decisions (the indirect democracy option)? Or do members of the community eventually take the decisions themselves (the direct democracy option)? Is it decision-making ‘by themselves, for themselves’ or is it decision-making ‘in other people’s stead, for the benefit of all’? Is it a democracy of ‘lookers-on’ or a democracy of ‘do-it-yourselfers’?
Pendulum democracy refers to the general model of democracy whose best-known manifestation is the so-called Westminster democracy. Pendulum democracy is fundamentally indirect in nature: citizens cast their vote every so often, and the elected politicians then take it from there. Decisionmaking is largely an aggregative, majoritarian procedure: in constituencies, the winner takes it all; on representative councils, there is a majority rule. In pendulum democracy, broad-based citizen participation is appropriate in the brief period surrounding periodic elections. Agenda-setting, policy preparation, implementation, and control are taken away from citizens by politicians as much as possible. It is a major advantage of pendulum democracy, or so its champions feel, that the signals given off in general elections make themselves vigorously felt in popular representation and then in government and policy.

Voter democracy combines aggregative decision-making with direct representation. A specific manifestation of voter democracy is the New England town meeting, where citizens take decisions in assembly (through/by show of hands, count of ayes and nays, and majority rule). A more large-scale manifestation of this type is the California-style decision-making referendum, in which a common majority decides binary questions (for or against; aye or nay). People participate in voter democracy by casting their votes in ballots, either on a small scale, as in town meetings, or on a large scale, as in referendums. Such ballots are foreshadowed by opinion polls, residents’ surveys, consumer surveys, and the like, which may also be aggregated numerically. Its proponents feel that the strength of voter democracy lies in citizens’ non-dependence on others for having their voices heard: a critical mass of preference indicators enables them to compel attention and force decisions.

Participatory democracy combines direct representation with integrative decision-making. In a participatory democracy, a minority can never be overruled by a simple numerical majority: minorities must not be excluded but should be included. Counting heads only takes place in the final stages in participatory democracy and serves to confirm choices rather than to take decisions. Decision-making is

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<th>Aggregative (voting)</th>
<th>Integrative (talking)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Pendulum democracy</td>
<td>Consensus democracy</td>
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<td>(representation)</td>
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<td>Direct</td>
<td>Voter democracy</td>
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first and foremost a process of engaging in lengthy talks to search for consensus. The widespread participation of all involved – in policy preparation, implementation and control – is considered the best way of warranting the legitimacy of collective decision-making. In a participatory democracy, everyone has the same right to raise an issue, and relations are largely horizontal, open, and ‘power-free’, that is, no one can issue an ultimatum from a position of power.

Consensus democracy refers to a general model of democracy, specific versions of which can be found in countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, and other divided societies. Consensus democracy is basically of an indirect kind. Deputies do most of the decision-making, and they go about their business in a special, integrative, and consensus-seeking way. Collective decision-making largely tends to take place in co-producing, co-governing, and coalition-oriented ways and aims to establish consensus and broad-based support. The majority preferably does not overrule substantial minorities. In the agenda-setting and preparatory stages, representatives of social interest groups and sections of the population are widely consulted. In implementing policies, civil-society organisations are also widely involved.

Building and rebuilding democracy

The basic models of democracy are like the primary colours: the real world displays a multitude of mixtures or hybrids, drawing, to a greater or lesser extent, on different modalities. Pendulum democracy may be most prominent in some countries, and consensus democracy in others (c.f. Lijphart, 1999). But this never occurs in an exclusive or uncontested way. Democratic systems in which consensus democracy is strongly institutionalized, the Low Countries for example, are challenged and to some extent also balanced by majoritarian elements, as well as elements of voter-, and participative democracy (Hendriks, 2006).

Democracy is the result of a dynamic process of push and pull. The four contesting models of democracy bring with them competing feedback mechanisms. Institutions of consensus democracy tend to feed back positively to compatible (integrative, indirect) patterns of democracy and they tend to feed back negatively to non-compatible (aggregative, indirect) patterns. Institutions of pendulum-, voter-, and participative democracy tend to do the same in their own rivaling ways (see figure 2 and 3).
Figure 2: Perspectives on ‘pure’ versus ‘impure’ democracy

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<th>‘Pure democracy’</th>
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<td>Participatory democracy</td>
<td>direct and integrative</td>
<td>indirect (representative)</td>
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<td>aggregative (majoritarian)</td>
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<td>Voter democracy</td>
<td>direct and aggregative</td>
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<td>integrative (non-majoritarian)</td>
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<td>Pendulum democracy</td>
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<td>integrative (non-majoritarian)</td>
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<td>Consensus democracy</td>
<td>indirect and integrative</td>
<td>direct (self-determining)</td>
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<td>aggregative (majoritarian)</td>
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Figure 3: Feedback Mechanisms

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<td>Pendulum democracy</td>
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<td>Direct</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voter democracy</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>← Participative democracy</td>
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= positive feedback

= negative feedback
3 Diagnosis: democracy under reform pressure

Democracy in the Netherlands, like democracy in so many other western countries, is under substantial reform pressure: the democratic system is expected to adapt to a changing context at a pace, to a degree, and in a way that it can hardly muster.

Democratic system
In the Dutch system, the consensus model has been the dominant model of old with deep historical roots going back to the Middle Ages. Joint consultation (‘integrative’) by guardians (‘indirect’) has been the dominant collective decision-making pattern for centuries. In successive epochs, this tradition has been reinvented time and again: in the Middle Ages (particularly from the 14th century onward, when the cities began to flourish), the Republic of the Seven United Provinces (late 16th to late 18th century), the Kingdom of the Netherlands (from the early 19th century), the days of pillarisation (late 19th till far into the 20th century, and even the era of depillarisation (since the 1960s). Officially, the country has been a consensual democracy only since 1917, when it introduced general suffrage, but its dominant characteristics had already been in the making for much longer.3

The consensus model has been the cornerstone of a functioning system, recognised as such, for a very long time. This system has done quite well in terms of effectiveness, that is, its ability to make a difference, and in terms of legitimacy, that is, its ability to make this difference with the consent of all involved. It enabled the Dutch to keep their feet dry, to cultivate and parcel out the land effectively, and to boost prosperity and well-being to heights that inspired awe abroad. In a strongly divided society, with the conflict potential of Northern-Irish magnitude, the system managed to keep everyone together in a practical sense.

The mutual relations governing this system were also considered proper for a long time. Consensus democracy favours a particular type of citizenship and a certain kind of administrative leadership. Citizenship in consensus democracy is typically of the compliant and trusting kind, with citizens generally acting as spectators and occasionally as speakers (insprekers in Dutch). Leadership in consensus democracy is typically of the ‘regency’ type: not a grand and stirring affair but caring and careful. This is the time-honoured and accepted pattern of relations.4

The inclination toward integrative democracy has been so powerful and persistent that aggregative democracy never got much elbowroom in the Dutch system. Establishing broadly based public support, consensus-building by conferring, pacifying and adjusting points of view, all these things have always been considered more proper than simply counting heads and then let the winner take all.
This was regarded improper, rubbed out, and distanced.\footnote{5}

As of old, there has never been much scope for direct democracy either, except, perhaps, on the lowest tier of the multi-tiered system of representation. In the old days of the Dutch Republic, the multi-tiered system – from Republic, province, town, ward, down to the matter at hand – was so deeply rooted in society that, in fact, it amounted to a hybrid between a consensus model and a participatory model. In townships, fraternities, guilds, citizen’s militias and the like, we see the rise of a precursor of participatory democracy (\textit{avant la lettre}), which, however, was never entirely autonomous but always in some form of co-government embedded in the wider context.\footnote{6}

Over time, people specialising in such co-government developed more and more into a class of ‘regents’, which caused participatory democracy to lose prominence without ever vanishing altogether. The fire might die down, but, every now and again, it would flare up again, as it did most recently in the 1960s and 1970s of the previous century.

Voter democracy – direct and aggregative – has never been given much latitude. Proposals tending in that direction (proposals for decision-making referendums, for example) have always been kept at a distance: for a long time, they were considered ‘alien stains’, out of place in the Dutch system of home administration. Patterns of indirect-integrative democracy have been reconfirmed over and over again.\footnote{7}

\textit{Context of the democratic system}

The democratic system cannot be properly understood when it is separated from the situational and cultural context in which it developed. Two historical circumstances are crucial here.

Firstly, there is the ever-recurring struggle against the water, which has compelled the Dutch to work together at all levels for many centuries. From as early as the eleventh century onward, feudal lords in low-lying peat bogs allocated cultivation concessions to free farmers and property developers, who set about draining their lots with such fervour that it caused the land to settle and drop. When water levels rose, this caused flooding problems, which required mutual attuning and bottom-up collaboration, for such problems could not be solved in any single-handed way: all townships, villages and each and every farmer had to pull their weight and do their bit to protect the land with dykes. Such collaborative enterprises then gradually gelled into water boards and, subsequently, polder boards, united into a multi-tiered system that may be regarded as a main breeding ground for administrative practices in the Netherlands.\footnote{8}

Secondly, there is the country’s early, widespread, and intensive urbanisation. As from the early Middle Ages, we see the rise of a series of urban centres, \textit{within which} – for there was not a single group that dominated all others – and \textit{among which} – for there was not a single town that dominated all others – there developed a structure of mutual dependence and a culture of reciprocal accommodation and
collaboration. So it was not a strong nobility or church but a strong civil society that was the distinctive feature of an urban culture that would grow into ever greater prominence over time. The building blocks of the illustrious Republic were the Dutch provinces, but the driving forces below it and behind it were the towns with all their interconnected and collaborating echelons: fraternities, guilds, citizen’s militias and the like. As in water management, there was a multi-tiered system of relations that shaped administrative processes and practices.

**Box 1: a short note on Douglasian cultural theory**

In this paper, shifts in the cultural context of Dutch democracy are described in terms of the ‘grid-group’ cultural theory developed by Mary Douglas. Douglas distinguishes four basic ways of life: individualism, egalitarianism, hierarchy, and atomism. The four result from the juxtaposition of two dimensions of sociality. The group dimension refers to the degree to which people’s thoughts and actions are driven by their engagement in a social group. In the ideal-typical low-group culture or ‘me-culture’, the individual operates as an autonomous being in its own right. In the ideal-typical high-group culture or ‘we-culture’, people are defined by the group that they have strong solidarity with and commitment to. The grid dimension refers to the degree to which people’s thoughts and actions are driven by position-related roles, that is, role prescriptions specifying how people are supposed to act in particular positions. The ideal-typical low-grid culture is one of ‘roles achieved’: people themselves decide about the script that they play out and are free and equal in doing so. The ideal-typical high-grid culture is one of ‘roles ascribed’: roles are allocated from the outside and are strongly specifying and guiding for people in particular social positions.

**Four types of culture**

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<tr>
<th>Low group (Me culture)</th>
<th>High group (We culture)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High grid</strong> (Roles ascribed)</td>
<td>Atomism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low grid</strong> (Roles achieved)</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
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Idealtypically, the grid-group taxonomy displays Wahlverwandtschaft or elective affinity with the typology of democracy presented earlier. Removing all intervening factors one might expect, logically and theoretically, that a magnet and a horseshoe will be attracted. Similarly, sociologically and culturally-theoretically, one might expect that participatory institutions and egalitarianism, in the field of democracy, will be attracted. The attraction is mutual: the former is a favourable ‘sociotope’ for the latter and vice versa. To what degree and in which way such elective affinity arises in real fact is codetermined by intervening factors.

The genesis of this landscape of polders and towns boosted a towering urge to be autonomous and to put up a forceful resistance to oppression: be it oppression by ‘tyrant water’, imperilling town and country, or by ‘tyrant Spain’, posing a particular threat to regional, local, and sectional privileges. This landscape of
Polders and towns (mark the plurals) put its stamp on the cultural landscape, the physical and moral geography. It gave rise to a political culture that was dominated by a strong sense of oneness, which expressed itself in a special combination of egalitarianism and old-style hierarchy, that is, hierarchy not as a pyramid-shaped command structure but as a ‘holarchic’ responsibility structure, with strongly differentiated responsibilities (‘high-grid’ in terms of Douglasian cultural theory, explained in box 1) linked to communities that enveloped each other (high-group in terms of Douglasian theory). Such a structure resembles not so much a pyramid but rather a series of Chinese boxes, with the bigger boxes each encapsulating the smaller ones. In the Dutch Republic, this is how the administrative bodies – local governments, provincial councils, States General – were interconnected.

The ‘Chinese-boxes’ structure is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, it suggests a multi-tiered system of ascending responsibilities, as reflected in ever grander terms of address appropriate for members of a particular tier. On the other hand, all were aware that the enveloping administrative bodies were highly dependent on the administrative bodies they contained within them. The States General could only make a decision if none of the provinces disagreed; all provinces had to take the towns’ interests into account; and all towns, just like the provinces and the country, had a polycentric structure. This structure of mutual dependencies engendered Consensus, Compromise, and Consultation, the renowned three Cs of the Dutch conference-room culture, to which we need to add the fourth C of Co-optation: appointment to membership by invitation of the existing members. The politics of pacification and accommodation is driven by caretakers – by regents and, subsequently, governors – who owe their positions to a relatively small circle of regents and specific grassroots communities and who, in their turn, pass them on to their own kind.

Over and above hierarchy as holarchy, this pattern of interpenetration and interdependency also cultivated a high degree of egalitarianism. Responsibility was usually borne collectively by ‘mates’ (gezellen in Dutch) that were equals, not only in boards, councils, and states, but also in wards, fraternities, guilds, and citizens’ militias. This is cognate with the classically Dutch virtue of gezelligheid, originally referring to a close association or fellowship but to be understood as consociation, the cooperation of different social groups. There would always be a foreman or chairman, but this individual was no more than primus inter pares: first among equals. The pattern of relations sketched here encourages the spread of an egalitarian culture: low-grid and high-group; a great deal of equality within tight-knit groups.

A truly individualistic culture (low-grid and low-group; equality without tight-knit groups) would not spread among large sections of the population until much later. The spread of such a culture was aided by the fact that an important ingredient of individualism, the sense of equality, had already been around in relations and practices for a long time. Precursors of individualism can be found in such historical figures
as the shrewd merchant and the artful dodger, who were quick to grasp the idea of enlightened self-interest. Self-interest was taken to be enlightened if it also served group interests. The individualistic culture of ‘be yourself and do your own thing’ would not arise until much later.

A large-scale atomistic culture (high-grid and low-group; strongly regulated and, at the same time, strongly thrown back upon itself) is another phenomenon that would not arise until much later. For a long time, the rise of such a culture was dammed up by the high-group culture in all its manifestations. Single persons, widows, orphans, the poor, and the elderly were taken care of in homes and institutions that were usually tightly regulated but also offered protective shelter: ‘gezellig’ or consociational in a strongly disciplined connection.

Hierarchy as holarchy, substantial egalitarianism, controlled individualism, and restrained atomism: this is what, in bold brushstrokes, the cultural context was like for a long time. The dominant consensus model has the closest affinity with the holarchic form of hierarchy but also branches out into other cultural patterns, especially into the egalitarian cultural pattern. The Dutch consensus model is not unlike a tumbler, which has a preferential position but can also move in several directions, depending on the pressure and resistance it is up against.

Reform pressure
For quite a long time, this system (a dominant consensus model with an undercurrent of participatory democracy) was reasonably well attuned to the situational and cultural context (a landscape of polders and towns, with an egalitarian and holarchic-hierarchical disposition). The context, however, would change more rapidly than the policial-administrative system could keep up with.

One crucial development has already been mentioned: the rise of individualism. This development accelerated when the process of depillarisation gained momentum in the sixties of the previous century. In essence, depillarisation is a process of de-hierarchisation: the sharply defined boundaries between social compartments became blurred; the sharply defined division of tasks between a responsible elite at the top of the pillar and a compliant mass at its base lost its legitimacy. Large groups began to break away from the holarchic-hierarchic culture of pillarisation and started to explore alternative ways of life. The egalitarian culture, which had flourished before, flourished again, especially in the 1960s and 1970s.

What was relatively new, though, was that the cultures on the low-group side of the cultural spectrum were also moving into favourable wind, aided by some additional developments in the 1980s and 1990s. Individualisation, informalisation, informatization, and internationalisation were all on the up, according to the Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands (SCP). This fanned not only the individualistic low-group/low-grid culture but also the atomistic low-group/high-grid culture. The difference between the two lies in the degree to which the ‘depillarised’ managed to gain control over their
lives. Where this control was weak – where the social setting, with group ties crumbling, still tended to be controlling rather than controllable – atomism describes this way of life more aptly than individualism.25

In any case, the changes in the situational and cultural context put the in-place political-administrative system, always less flexible by its very nature, under pressure. The limited institutionalisation of voter democracy and pendulum democracy increasingly came to be defined as a problem. The limited influence of citizens as voters was increasingly regarded a deficiency. Integrative decision-making along group lines, characteristic of consensus democracy and participatory democracy, increasingly came to be considered as old-fashioned.26

Especially the dominant consensus model had to pay for it. It was called a patronising and meddlesome model, if not expertocratic and insensitive. From being a nation with strongly moderated public emotions, which would only serve to stir things up, the Netherlands speedily became a ‘champion of emotion’.27 Emotionality, personalism, and expressionism in politics, kept at arm’s length for a long time, have now become much-prized commodities. Consensus democracy does not offer much scope for these items, in contrast to pendulum democracy and voter democracy, fraught as they are with the excitement and suspense of plebiscites and elections ‘that really matter.’ The Anglo-Saxon instances of these, especially the US ones, flood the Dutch the living rooms in full-colour splendour.

Democratic innovators who wish to strengthen aggregative democracy in the Netherlands, therefore, are now sailing before the wind. The processes of change observed by the SCP (individualisation, informalisation, internationalisation, and informatisation) make large-scale reform inevitable, in their view. Computerisation and mediafication (the omnipresence of media for receiving and sending information) play a special role in this process. Mediafication boosts the development of media democracy: the democracy of political media personalities who use the mass media to get the pendulum to swing. Computerisation enables fast voting procedures, without guardians intervening, of the type that suits voter democracy.

4 Standard recipe: new structures

The problem with the democratic system in the Netherlands, according to democratic reformers, is that it is out of step with the fast and major changes taking place in Dutch society. As a rule, they look to sweeping, large-scale and all-encompassing plans for reform to address this issue, achieving, however, little success.
Sweeping plans for reform
The solution that is invariably proposed to address the issues outlined above is the extreme makeover of the consensus model as the foundation of Dutch democracy. The institutional expressions of consensus democracy – appointed governors, coalition politics, compromise policies, cushioned political oppositions, curbed administrative thirst for action – need to be rubbed out; alternative expressions need to be rubbed up. This, in a nutshell, is the gist of the critique of Dutch democracy.

Critique of democracy is a tidal phenomenon in the Netherlands, with alternating high and low tides. Sometimes, the critical approach is less pronounced, and a more sympathetic approach to consensus democracy gains the upper hand, witness the appreciation of the polder model in the second half of the 1990s. However, criticism is never drowned out altogether and resurfaces time and again.29 Critics of consensus democracy are not confined to just one political party or movement; they come from all political directions.29 Initiatives and pleas for distancing consensus democracy come from all three rivalling models of democracy:

From the quarter of voter democracy:
- pleas for an expanding referendum practice, not only consultative and local but also decisive and national; large-scale referendums leading directly, without the intervention of representatives, to an aggregated aye or nay;
- initiatives for permanent voter and user surveys via consumer surveys, public opinion polls, and other forms of large-scale research among citizen populations, searching for tendencies and majorities that are regarded as being directly representative.

From the quarter of pendulum democracy:
- pleas for strong elected governors, backed by a clear voter mandate: elected instead of appointed mayors; a Prime-Minister designated by voters rather than by coalition parties;
- initiatives for having ‘elections that really matter’, that parcel out the political landscape into big and clear lots, and that clearly represent tendencies and majorities among the electorate.

From the quarter of participatory democracy:
- pleas for communicative policy-makings, deliberative planning, participative scenario workshops, open brainstorming, and related forms of citizen participation and deliberation;
- initiatives for civil self-government, such as the adoption of neighbourhood budgets that are to be spent by citizens themselves in joint consultation; projects such as ‘Can Do’ or, before that, ‘social renewal’ initiatives.
From the quarter of participatory democracy, reforms have been propagated every now and then, but over the last few decades, proposals for reform emanating from the quarters of pendulum democracy and voter democracy have tended to attract the greatest attention. Especially the Anglo-Saxon examples of aggregative democracy appear to be seductive.

The UK type of Westminster democracy continues to be regarded a paragon of clear pendulum democracy. This is where they manage to hold elections that are exciting, bring about clarity, and provide a solid voter mandate for the government to go about its business with resolve and decisiveness – or so its proponents feel. The US democracy has the attraction of pendulum democracy – governors with clear voter mandates – with the added attractions of voter democracy. The traditional variety is the New England town meeting. The contemporary Californian variety of voter democracy, however, driven by civil initiatives and referendums and their informal precursors in the form of opinion polls and consumer surveys, is currently getting a greater following.

Voter democracy and pendulum democracy are often put forth jointly as models of reform. The Dutch social-liberal party D66, a democratic-reform party, has been on this track for several decades now. Pim Fortuyn, the standard-bearer of system reform who was assassinated in 2002, was a great champion of self-governing voter democracy and, at the same time, strong elected governors. In the turbulent years following his death, this reform concept has been carried on by his immediate political heirs, but, remarkably enough, also by politicians such as Wouter Bos (PvdA/Labour) and Jozias van Aartsen (VVD/Liberals). Giving voters and elections greater ‘decision power’ is their response to the 2002 citizens’ revolt and its sequel with the referendum that rejected proposals for the ‘European Constitution’ in 2005. PvdA/Labour has had a movement supporting this option for some time, but it is significant that even the VVD/Liberals have begun to endorse it.

In 2003, the Balkenende II Cabinet created a separate post for a Minister for Political Innovation. The first Political Innovation Minister was D66 politician Thom de Graaf, who particularly devoted himself to introducing a new voting system and elected mayors. When his proposals for elected mayors stranded in the Upper House, he resigned and was succeeded by fellow party member Alexander Pechtold, who soon proceeded to present an agenda for democratic innovation. The two central items on this agenda are a National Convention, which is to rethink the nation’s democratic constitution, and the Citizens Platform for the Voting System, which is to draw up plans for a new voting system.

Besides such plans for political innovation, there are also plans for administrative reform, which, on the whole, urge the streamlining and simplification of domestic government, hoping this will generate greater clarity, decisiveness, and strength. The logic tends to be that of pendulum democracy, which, in domestic government, stands for streamlined structures: government with few tiers, transparent
administrative structures, and clear divisions of powers and responsibilities. Several plans have been
developed and elaborated for all three administrative tiers: national, provincial, and local government:

- At the national level: for many decades, plans have been made and discussed under the heading of
  ‘ministerial reorganisation’. The bone of contention is the both horizontally and vertically
  fragmented or, according to some, ‘shattered’ ministerial structure. Solutions are sought but rarely
  found in merging and streamlining government departments.\textsuperscript{30}

- At the sub-national level: for many decades, plans have been made and discussed that are to bring
  order and alignment (especially along the vertical axis) to the complexity of Dutch regional
  government, which is considered by reformers a hotchpotch of functional regional government on
  top of multi-purpose provincial government. In the metropolitan areas in particular, the lack of
  clear and decisive government is thought to be glaring. Rationalisation has been put forward to
  solve the issue. Constructions that have been proposed range from municipal agglomerations to
  urban regions, and from mini-provinces to maxi-provinces, none of which, however, have
  managed to secure a permanent place on the administrative map.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Lack of reform success}

The throng of reform plans is not matched by a host of success stories. Major structural changes have been
planned time and again, but eventually the overall structure has remained largely the same. For this
reason, Andeweg has called the Netherlands the prototype of ‘institutional conservatism’\textsuperscript{32}. This
characterisation is not entirely adequate if we look at the informal institutions (see the following section
on the reinvention of tradition), but from the perspective of formal institutions it is spot on. ‘Thorbecke’s
house’, the political constitution built with institutional and organic legislation by Thorbecke in the years
1848-1851 is by and large still standing.

Plans for administrative reform that have been realised in actual fact are very few. They would
include municipal amalgamation, drastically reducing the number of municipalities; municipal
‘dualisation’, putting the executive and the representative branches of local government more on a par;
and the introduction of the local referendum, which has added an element of voter democracy to local
democracy. The innovations these entail, however, are modest. Municipal amalgamation has only served
to alter the scale but not the type of municipal democracy. Dualisation of local government has tended to
bring local government even closer rather than less close to the ideal type of consensus democracy. The
local referendum, if and when applied, has remained firmly embedded in a consensus democracy
framework.\textsuperscript{33}

In every other way, the agenda for administrative reform has proved to be a boulevard of broken
dreams. Dreams of streamlining the administrative system – lean and mean structures, sharp and clear procedures, trimmed national ministries, ‘city provinces’, ‘mini-provinces’, ‘municipal agglomerations’ and the like – have all failed to come true and are still causing sleepless nights to those involved. The plans for all-encompassing reform that should have brought about political innovation have, for the greater part, gone the same way. The referendum, the constituency voting system, the elected mayor, the elected Prime-Minister: for forty years, they have been hatched, studied, and discussed in every possible way by various political parties. Their actual realisation, however, has been very limited indeed.

Even more so than the local referendum, the idea of a national referendum has been cut down to the bone little by little in order to make it fit into the existing framework. In the end, plans foundered. The same holds for plans that should have ushered in the elected mayor and, perhaps following in its wake, the elected Prime-Minister. Plans for introducing the constituency voting system have tended to get bogged down in the decision-making process if they did not preserve the proportionality of the political system, which is crucial for consensus democracy.34

5 Clarification: Why Large-Scale Reforms Rarely Succeed

Situational mismatch
One main reason why large-scale plans for democratic reform have proved to be so hard to implement is that there is a mismatch between such plans and the reality of practical policy issues. In policy studies, policy issues are arranged according to the degree to which the standards and values they embody are shared (is there consensus or dissensus about what needs to be done?) and to the degree to which the policy areas concerned are empirically knowable (is there consensus or dissensus about what is actually the matter?).

If we look at how these two dimensions connect (see Figure 4), we observe a simultaneously rightward and downward movement. Particularly the category of wicked problems (in the bottom right-hand corner in Figure 8.1) is becoming increasingly important. Processes of de-pillarisation and fragmentations are making Dutch society ever more an example of ‘the unknown society’, as some commentators have coined it.35 Policy areas are increasingly distant from what, in old administrative models, was represented as a ‘controlled system’: a system that could be known and manipulated. Value pluralism and value relativism, on the other hand, have increased in the wake of processes of multi-culturalisation and postmodernisation.36 Missions and goals of policy systems are the endless subjects of controversy and debate.
Public policymaking systems have responded to this movement with forms of network government, characterised by reciprocal and interdependent relations. In the Anglo-American literature, this has been labelled ‘governance’, a neologism for something that has been around in the Netherlands for a long time. Patterns of network government and politics of pacification and accommodation have been mobilised for ages. Recent developments may have provided them with a new impetus and with new names: ‘co-production’, ‘interactive government’, ‘multi-level governance’, etc., but if you look carefully, they are not really something new but reinventions of something old: a long-established administrative tradition, which is essentially of an integrative (decision-making by consultation) and indirect (consultation by guardians) kind.

It is a complex paradox that the tendency towards network-type governance is reinforced by social developments (individualisation, informalisation, internationalisation, and informatisation) that are also seized upon by democratic innovators who would like to see the establishment of more direct and aggregative kinds of democracy. They would like to streamline and verticalise the system, but what they get is yet more complexity and horizontalism, which only serves to strengthen their calls for reform and system shifts. Democratic reformers want one thing, but policymakers, who need to solve practical problems, often do another thing.

### Cultural mismatch

Major plans for reform have also foundered on their tendency to connect poorly with established cultural patterns. Such plans often fail to take into account the fact that culture, besides admitting certain changes, also retains considerable constants and continuities. Despite against-the-grain movements, which have also been present, Dutch culture has remained to a large degree high-group; and the democratic culture has remained to a large degree grafted on a stock of integrating, uniting, and sharing forces, in line with an unremittingly potent ‘we-culture’.

Tendencies towards aggregative democracy – counting individual votes rather than developing

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**Figure 4** Policy issues arranged

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Normative consensus</th>
<th>Normative dissensus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empirical consensus</strong></td>
<td>Type A issues</td>
<td>Type B issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(terra cognita)</em></td>
<td>Regulation problems</td>
<td>Pacification problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empirical dissensus</strong></td>
<td>Type C issues</td>
<td>Type D issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(terra incognita)</em></td>
<td>Knowledge problems</td>
<td>Wicked problems</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
shared visions – thus meet with considerable resistance. The established institutions continue to be largely rooted in consensus democracy, and these institutions continue to have a solid basis in society. When the wages are at issue – or the pensions, or health care arrangements, or what you will – Dutchmen still urge close consultations with the institutionalised custodians of these interests. In such cases, everyone reverts back into ‘polder mode’, including all those so-called individualised employees, residents, and voters – not to mention all the officials involved. The latter may take a shine to the idea of aggregative democracy in theory, but when this threatens to encroach upon their own positions – with real up-or-down elections, or with voters managing to arrange things without them – they tend to change their minds.

The tendency towards aggregative democracy also meets with resistance from the quarter of participatory democracy. In comparison with earlier decades (particularly the 1960s and 1970s), participatory democracy may have faded into the background somewhat, but from this position in the background it continues to be influential. Habermassian thought on democracy is still current, less so in administrative practice, but all the more so in academia, where it goes by the name of ‘deliberative democracy’: direct participation of all those concerned, trying to find common ground through talks and arguments, without resorting to ultimatums or abusing unequal power positions.41 Pleas in favour of strong governors of the Westminster kind or voter democracy of the Californian kind continue to meet with opposition from this quarter.

**Plans versus realities**

The modest output of democratic reform in the Netherlands cannot be explained by a lack of ambitious, consistently well-thought-out plans, but rather by its reverse: an abundance of rigorous plans, each based on a specific idea of democratic order. Time and again, solutions have been proposed in one particular direction: democratic cleansing in conformity with a specific idea of democratic cleanliness, to be accomplished by means of a particular technical intervention, such as another voting system, or an elected governor, or a referendum, etcetera.

What is considered ‘pure democracy’ by some, however, is considered ‘impure democracy’ by others (see figure 2 again). Referendum legislation has supporters of voter democracy going into raptures, but supporters of participatory democracy are dead set against it. What the former want to rub up is what the latter prefer to rub out. Different cleaning strategies, inspired by different beauty ideals, are almost ceaselessly working against one another. Carrying out reforms with any kind of effectiveness and legitimacy in this condition is virtually impossible. ‘Thorbecke’s House’ - an often-used metaphor for the constitution of Dutch government, referring to its framer, J.R. Thorbecke - can be cleaned without end, over and over again. A ‘conservation of (reform) energy’ law seems to be at work.
Alternative: Reinventing Tradition

Learning from other places and earlier times
The standard Dutch recipe for democratic reform – radical makeover – goes hand in hand with a surplus of short-sightedness and a lack of learning. Dutch reformers could have learned more from earlier times and from other places than they actually have. From a comparative point of view they might have learned that the Anglo-American examples of aggregative democracy, besides manifest advantages, also have disadvantages that should not be underrated. They might also have learned, that embedding such variants in the Dutch context, if feasible at all, will have effects that are different from when those variants are integrated into a culturally compatible Anglo-American context.

From a historical point of view they might have learned: that the Dutch institutions of democracy, besides manifest disadvantages, also have advantages that have proved their value over time; that these institutions are quite tenacious and cannot be rubbed out; that large-scale democratic reform in the Netherlands almost always fails to be implemented; and that small-scale adaptations, part of the incremental ‘reinvention of tradition’, have proved to be more successful in the past than extreme makeovers. Reinventing tradition implies a mixture of change and preservation, of movement and counter-movement, of compensation without overcompensation. It is, arguably, the only way for democratic reform to go in the Netherlands. It makes use of the hidden elasticity, the élasticité secrète, that Simon Schama considers central to Dutch culture.

Reinventing tradition in the past-continuous
Reaching consensus has been a dominant theme in Dutch government for many years. Many variations on this theme have come and gone over time. In various epochs – in the Middle Ages, in the Republic, in the decentralised-unitary state, in the days of pillarisation, at the time of de-pillarisation – the Dutch tradition of pacification and accommodation has continued to resurface in new guises.

In the Republic, forms of cooperation and consultation, handed down from the Middle Ages, were cultivated and adjusted to serve the collegial governance of ‘regents’, who needed each other because power in the Republic was highly disintegrated and dispersed. In the decentralised-unitary state, the tradition of decentralised, consensus-seeking government was continued in a changing framework: a unitary state with federal characteristics, conceived by Thorbecke as a system of mutually restraining and influencing bodies. This system, in its turn, generated a compartmentalised system characterised by politics of pacification and accommodation.

With de-pillarisation and de-hierarchisation of society, the pressure to change has been
increasing. The necessity of pacification and accommodation has remained, but people’s readiness to leave it to others – to regents or to governors – has decreased. This has taken the reinvention of tradition into a new stage, which, for the time being, has not evened out into an acceptable new balance. With adapted forms of network government, interactive policymaking, and co-production, tradition continues to be reinvented. But more is needed: a new wave of combining old and new democratic institutions is called for. Ideally, new institutions would be connected with the existing model of democracy in such a way that its downsides are compensated and its upsides are actualised as much as possible. Let’s first recapitulate (through figure 5) the upsides and downsides of the Dutch brand of consensus democracy.

Figure 5: Strengths and weaknesses of consensus democracy in the Netherlands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integration, collaboration</td>
<td>Viscosity, coagulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportional representation</td>
<td>Effect of elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal basis in policy networks</td>
<td>Accountability in formal terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channelled multiformity</td>
<td>Cartel and backroom politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative expertise</td>
<td>Technocracy, expertocracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacification and accommodation</td>
<td>Avoidance and ostrich behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated policy programmes</td>
<td>Compromise policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring approach</td>
<td>Paternalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping things together</td>
<td>Making all contingent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing responsibility</td>
<td>Fragmenting accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All have a say</td>
<td>No one is responsible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Actualising strengths in the present-tense**

Pacification and accommodation along vertical lines is presently put under the heading of ‘multi-level governance’. Dutch administrative expertise in this area goes back a long way but is also in need of reinvention. Multi-level governance in the Netherlands has become too much “governors’ government”: governors at different administrative levels conferring with one another. Such conferring needs to be enriched with input from society, that is, from citizens and social organisations joining in debates, objecting if necessary, and, above all, carrying out reality checks on governors’ government.

The same holds for pacification and accommodation along horizontal lines, which is presently discussed as ‘interactive governance’. Interactive governance goes back a long way in Dutch consensus democracy but has become all too dominated by the conference-room experts. When social parties are listened to, this commonly takes place through the established guardians of umbrella organisations and other institutionalised interests. Such conferring with the established polder parties should not be avoided
but needs to be widened to include parties that are not normally and self-evidently involved in collective
decision-making. Dutch polder politics needs to cultivate ‘new polders’, new arenas for policy
interaction, in addition to the old ones. Citizens who complain they are not being taken seriously should be
given serious openings.

Pacification and accommodation, in other words, should stay less confined to the traditional
domain of consensus democracy – seasoned governors and professional co-governors – but should spread
its wings both horizontally and vertically. This might cause the manifest weaknesses of consensus
democracy to be compensated, at least in part.

Compensating weaknesses in the present-tense
The combination of consensus democracy and participatory democracy can be tried, as it has been tested
before. The effort might be renewed by seeking selective matches with forms of deliberative, communal,
and other participatory versions of democracy. Such matches need to be made selectively because
participatory democracy in a vacuum – without proper links with the framework of representative
democracy as this has evolved – would be neither realistic nor sustainable. Participatory democracy is
supplementary in the sense that it has something to offer that consensus democracy is not naturally
endowed with: attention for and connection with those involved beyond the circle of professional
guardians; attention for and connection with people’s real-life experience beyond the abstract world of
institutions and systems.

Another quality that consensus democracy, as it has evolved, is not endowed with naturally is
personality, emotionality, and expressionism. Consensus democracy has always verged rather towards the
rational, the moderate, and the objective. This is not so bad in principle, but a political system can have
too much of it. If you get too much of a good thing, it may work out perversely, causing the government to
be experienced as insensitive and faceless and citizens to feel bypassed and recognised. This would help
to explain why pendulum democracy and voter democracy are often proposed as alternative models of
democracy: they add ‘spice and play’ to a system that tends to be rather bland. Elements of pendulum and
voter democracy could and should be added quite selectively. Rushing in with big, formal, structural
changes would not work. Extreme makeovers tend to overcompensate rather than compensate to the
required degree. Also, it will be clear by now that big, formal, structural changes are granted a hard time

Elements of pendulum democracy and voter democracy may be added to the system without
requiring major reform operations, as evolving practice shows. Elements of voter democracy such as
consumer surveys, citizen surveys, opinion polls and the like have drifted into the system in the slipstream
of the New Public Management, which had an early and rapid dispersion in Dutch governance. Under
the influence of the commercial and the new electronic media, the phenomenon of ‘direct popular voting’ has snowballed. On the Internet, in newspapers, and also on radio and TV, public affairs are increasingly dealt with in direct and aggregative ways. Individual choices – relayed by e-mail, text messages, and phone – are aggregated swiftly into for-and-against percentages and pie diagrams. In some cases, as in the Fifth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning, such aggregative elements have already been added to interactive policymaking processes.

Under the influence of the modern media, we also witness pendulum democracy increasingly encroaching on the public domain. Competitive up-or-down elections, which are not strongly developed in the formal democracy, are gaining increasing scope in the informal democracy of the media. In a popular TV programme, for instance, Dutch mayors compete one against one for the viewers/voters’ favour, even if the mayors’ office, in a formal sense, requires them to be appointed. While the Prime Minister, formally, remains the primus inter pares, the media increasingly tend to present the PM as the nation’s political leader, who needs to prove himself as such.47

Modification, codification and learning

When modification of informal institutions continues, formal codification may follow. This is all useful to the extent in which first modifiers and then codifiers manage to (re)discover fortunate combinations and avoid unfortunate ones.

There are lessons to be learned and there is inspiration to be drawn from foreign examples, some clearly more relevant than others. If the referendum is to be arranged on a permanent footing, the example of Swiss voter democracy, embedded in a context of consensus democracy, is a great deal more relevant for the Netherlands than Californian referendum democracy. If mayors are to be appointed with greater citizen involvement, the example of the Belgian mayor, embedded in a context that closely resembles the Dutch one, is clearly more relevant than the example of the American strong mayor. According to custom, the Belgian mayor is the party leader of the coalition party that got a majority vote in the last elections.48 This only requires a political agreement, not a thoroughgoing formal reform.

7 In sum: towards tailor-made reform

Reinventing tradition in line with the above is less a matter of structure and more a matter of culture. Adding new elements to already evolved democratic institutions needs to be put into effect, first and foremost, in the behaviour of and the interaction between governors and citizens. To achieve this, structural change of the all-encompassing type is not required. This is not to say that structural change is a
taboo, but it should not be the launch pad, as it so often has been in post-war Dutch reform plans, despite their lack of success. Democracy is a multiform phenomenon, which, in being reformed, requires a multiform approach: tailor-made solutions, not one-size-fits-all.

Notes

1 The distinction between majoritarian versus non-majoritarian is well known from the works by Lijphart, op.cit., 1999. Cognate categorizations, such as aggregative versus integrative, have been made by March & Olsen, op.cit., 1989, or voting versus deliberating, in J. Elster (ed.), Deliberative Democracy, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.


5 A governor on a water board – an archetype of Dutch government – says the following: ‘During my term in office, we’ve only ever had to vote three times on a proposal. In all other cases, we always managed to reach agreement.’ (M. Kool, water board chairman, quoted in P. Brouwer, Een heel moderne overheid, Binnenlands Bestuur, 1 oktober 2004, p. 21.) This is characteristic for the democratic tradition.


9 No town in the Netherlands was ever at war with another town, in stark contrast with the Italian system of cities, to which the Dutch system is often compared. See Pleij, op. cit., 2005, p. 28.

10 H. Pleij, De herontdekking van Nederland: Over vaderlandse mentaliteiten en rituelen, Amsterdam, Prometheus, 2003; Pleij, op. cit. 2005. See Prak, op. cit., 2002; Israel, op. cit., 1999. The pyramid-shaped command-and-control structure is the most simplistic, modernist sub-type of hierarchy, erroneously considered by some to be the main type of hierarchy. The holarchical structure of responsibility is the more complex, classic variation on the theme of hierarchy.

11 The following are also used as shorthand: outlooks on life, ways of life, world views, and cultural biases.

See Thompson, Ellis & Wildavsky, op. cit., 1990, in a chapter devoted to the relation between Weber’s approach and Douglas’s approach to societal forms.

Here, types of culture are sketched inasmuch as these relate to democracy. In wider cultural categories, sub-varieties can be distinguished that do not relate to democracy, or are even hostile to the basic idea of democracy.


The pyramid-shaped command-and-control structure is the most simplistic, modernist sub-type of hierarchy, erroneously considered by some to be the main type of hierarchy. The holarchic structure of responsibility is the more complex, classic variation on the theme of hierarchy. See Douglas, M., Being Fair to Hierarchists, University of Pennsylvania Law Review, 2003, 151, pp. 1349-1370; See Th.A.J. Toonen, Denken over binnenlands bestuur: Theorieën van de gedecentraliseerde eenheidstaat bestuurskundig beschouwd, ’s-Gravenhage, VUGA, 1987 about ‘holarchie’ as main feature of the Dutch constitution by Thorbecke.


See W. van Vree, op. Cit., 1994, p. 172; Consensus-seeking proceeds mainly through informal agreement rather than formal unanimity.


Pleij, op. cit., 2003, pp. 27-29: ‘wise’ should be conceived as clever, sly, smart, and taking care of oneself and one’s family.


In the one case, such social decompartmentalisation is rather like ‘uprooting’; in the other case, it is more like ‘unchaining’.

There is increasing criticism of the viscosity of such institutions. See F. Hendriks, Stroperigheidskritiek en polderpraal: een discoursanalyse, F. Hendriks & Th.A.J. Toonen (eds.), Schikken en plooien: De stroperige staat bij nader inzien, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1998, pp. 15-35. Interest in reforms that give voters greater power is increasing. See Hendriks, op. cit., 2005. See also the following section on major plans for reform.


See H. van Mierlo, co-founder of D66, who argued for decades that the democratic system needed a thorough ‘spring-cleaning’. See E. van Thijn, former PvdA/Labour party leader, who, for many decades, also criticised the poor, mitigated, effect of elections in consensus democracy. See E. Brinkman, former CDA/Christian Democrat party leader, who expressed fundamental criticism of the viscosity of ‘deliberative democracy’. See J. Marijnissen, SP/Socialist party leader, who criticised elitist ‘backroom democracy’. See J. van Aartsen, temporary VVD/Liberal party leader, with his conversion to the D66 body of ideas after almost 40 years.


See M. Boogers & F. Hendriks, Middenbestuur in discussie: Analyse van en reflectie op de naoorlogse discussie
over middenbestuur in Nederland, Tilburg, UvT, 2005.


34 Plans for the introduction of the national referendum and the elected mayor didn’t pass the Senate. Plans for district voting have come to a hold because of the resistance of various political parties. A ‘Burgerforum Kiestelsel’ has been installed to forge a breakthrough in this dossier, but this Citizen Assembly has basically (and quite surprisingly to some) endorsed the status quo, with only a few minor changes proposed.


39 Aggregative and direct elements may have been added to it very selectively, but, in the main, network government remains of the consensus democracy type. See Hendriks, Reinheid en democratie: Over de zin van hervorming en de waarde van vergelijking, Utrecht, Lemma, 2005; Hendriks & Toonen, op. cit., 2001.


43 See, for example, initiatives for popular self-government and pleas for deliberative decision-making structures, in the ‘Sweeping plans for reform’ section.

44 Schama, op. cit., p. 11


47 His performance and that of other officials is permanently monitored and expressed in pass marks (pass or fail), and this in an administrative tradition that has traditionally been a collegial culture of collaborating governors.

48 The Belgian mayor is an interesting mix of the Dutch mayor, appointed by central government, and the US strong mayor, elected in a personal capacity.