

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Prof. mr. Roel Bekker, ICT Overheidscongres 2010 (Collaborate today, maximize the public value tomorrow), 13 October 2010, Kurhaus, Scheveningen.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You may have heard this joke before. After a long hiring process, a department with a vacancy is left with three candidates. One by one, they come before the hiring committee and are asked the same question: can you count from one to ten? The first candidate, a former sergeant-major, says right away, 'Yes, no problem: one-two, one-two, one-two.' 'Thank you,' says the chair of the committee, 'you'll be hearing from us.' The second candidate, a former postman, says, 'Of course, nothing simpler: 1, 3, 5, 7....' 'Thank you,' says the chair of the committee, 'you'll be hearing from us.' The third candidate was previously a civil servant. Asked to count from one to ten, he says: 'Yes, certainly: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.' 'Excellent!' says the chair; 'can you continue?' 'Certainly,' says the civil servant: 'jack, queen, king, ace!'

I rather like collecting civil servant jokes. This one, like so many others, shows what people think about us: that we have easy jobs, are highly paid and don't do much. It's a French joke, actually, which shows that the prejudice isn't limited to the Netherlands. That's comforting. But it raises the question of where this prejudice comes from.

The general explanation is that government isn't popular, and so the civil service is tarred with the same brush. Government restricts what you can do, collects taxes and gives orders. People usually think that's ok when it happens to other people, but not when it happens to them.

What's more, people have to pay taxes without being allowed to decide what they will be spent on or what they'll get in return. As a result, those who act on behalf of government can expect criticism, verbal harassment and, increasingly, even physical aggression. The way that the media blow eventual government's mistakes out of proportion doesn't help foster respect for public servants either. And when incidents or accidents occur, government is blamed for not preventing them. No one believes any more in simple bad luck; they think it's the government's job to eliminate bad luck, or at least its consequences.

Another problem is that government is closely associated with politicians, who are not widely seen as trustworthy people. This is nothing new, but the problem has grown in recent years. A recent Dutch poll showed that trust in politicians has fallen below that in second-hand car dealers, which is a sorry state of affairs. Trust in government always used to be high in the Netherlands, and still is compared with other countries, but it is now at a much lower level.

The story behind this lack of trust is a complex one. An excellent study by the Kennedy School of Government, with the revealing title "Why People Don't Trust Government", has shown that not only government but all traditional institutions are losing public confidence. Established institutions like banks and insurance companies have outdone

themselves in this respect in the recent financial crisis. I think a lot of ICT-companies are in the same league.

Society has been rapidly individualised and digitised. On the one hand, this has increased people's uncertainty. On the other hand, it has made people less willing to be guided by traditional public and private authority figures. Now they can make their own decisions, and step easily across boundaries that were once clearly marked.

In this situation, where social tensions are rising and trust in authority declining, politicians are doing everything they can to show that they are taking action, responding quickly to crises, and supporting drastic measures that bring immediate relief. And they want to show that they are paying close attention to what the people want. Sometimes they can observe this first hand, but mostly they learn it from opinion polls, which show on an almost daily basis how approval ratings for specific politicians are going up or down.

In line with this trend, politicians regularly push for major reforms in the machinery of government, especially when elections are approaching. Election platforms often include calls to drastically reduce the number of civil servants, cut red tape and make government more user-friendly. Unfortunately, at the same time that politicians promise less government they also promise to do more: build more roads, improve public safety, provide more and better education, deliver much more health care and hand out more grants. To do more, in short, with far fewer civil servants.

Bureaucracy bashing is very popular, among the general public and among politicians. And, as I said, not only in the Netherlands but in other countries sometimes even more than with us.

That in my view is not deserved, since the civil service did in many cases an excellent job. Which is often highly appreciated, when you look at a lot of polls about client satisfaction about public services. There is a huge discrepancy between the general appreciation of the civil service on the one side which is rather low, I would say. And which is a major source of my joke collection, by the way. And the appreciation in specific cases on the other side, which is well in the 7 or 8 marks (on a scale of 10) , even when the message is not pleasant. This is sometimes frustrating but also something you have to live with as a public servant.

But nevertheless: the general opinion about civil servants in combination with permanent budgetary problems create a climate that favours huge cuts in the civil service. And I have to confess that in some cases our performance was not adequate. We sometimes accommodated too easily political wishes to introduce new ICT-systems without delay, thereby neglecting a proper preparation or management of projects. We sometimes didn't dare to say "no". Or we gave the impression that we were wizards, able to achieve the impossible. We sometimes gave too little attention to projects or refused to mobilise adequate staff for them.

Failures in governmental ICT-projects have become a common feature in the newspapers and in the political discours, and that is something the civil service and its management can take an important part of the blame for.

We also were often much too compartmentalised in our approach, trying to fit new challenges in society into our traditional pigeonholes. The use of ICT which was seen as a major

contributor to the greatness of a particular organisation, supported this compartmentalisation, causing an enormous variety of systems even within the central government.

I once said that if someone wants to establish a new Museum for ICT of the 20th Century, he only has to assemble the equipment and the software of the Dutch ministries to have a very complete and impressive collection.

And what we also did wrong was to focus relatively too much on our internal management systems, for finance and personnel for instance, and too little on connecting government to society.

So there was a good case for discontent on the one side and for improvement on the other. We accepted this challenge as SG's in 2007 and submitted a plan to the coalition partners of those days which was gladly accepted and became part of the cabinet program. It was a rather simple plan. Its motto was: Smaller and Better. We proposed to reduce the workforce substantially but in close combination with a vast program of improvements and innovations on a variety of subjects.

I think that the plan worked well. The reduction is on schedule, for the first time in decades the size of the civil service is substantially smaller than it was. And I'm talking about thousands and thousands. That has been realised without major disturbances of the service or protesting and strikes, also due to the fact that we used a scalpel and not a scythe and that we guaranteed a job for redundant people.

And also in the more important part of the program, the improvement of government, we made in my view impressive progress. We started a deregulation program which is much admired by the Worldbank and the OECD, in which we decrease perceived (and not only formal) administrative burden with 25 % in 4 years. And we changed our management by getting rid of the dominance of the compartments of the past by introducing a lot of shared service centres. We appointed a central DG for Management of the Civil Service as a whole, assisted by a CIO, responsible for a huge harmonisation of ICT-systems on the one side and a much better assessment of projects across the government on the other. The CIO had a very delicate job but he managed to deserve the trust of not only the governmental ICT-family but also of the general management.

To give you an example: we are on our way to have a standard digital workplace for all civil servants, enabling them to collaborate for 100%, which emphasizes that they are in the service of the government, and not of a specific ministry or department. That is a culture shock! As a matter of fact their workplace will become footloose in the future. You can imagine what that does mean for the way the work is done.

What was the secret behind this approach? I think there are three important factors:

- a. It was the combination of reduction with improvement, whereby we saved money in the staff but invested in for instance ICT. Investments not only in the digital workplace but also in for instance Standard Business Reporting or digitised support of legislation processes.
- b. It was a plan of civil servants implemented by civil servants in a very decentralised way. We avoided a very centralist approach and didn't appoint some kind of Czar with huge so called power but no real authority.

c. And we didn't communicate successes before they had become evident. "Don't tell but demonstrate", was our motto.

I think this approach was rather different from what we did in the past and also different from what I sometimes see abroad, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world where Big Czars come and go and announcing reforms seems to be more important than implementing them. Down to earth, that's our strength. We sometimes tend to underestimate the quality our own government and are too easily impressed by glittering presentations from elsewhere. Sometimes presentations from other countries. But also presentations of private companies trying to convince us that we should run the government as a business or change the whole organisation overnight. That is in my view a huge underestimation of the peculiar and difficult position of government which is much more complicated than even the biggest private firms.

Interesting is that for instance a country that I admire very much, Australia, announced as their goal to have the best public service in the world. Great ambition! But their more specific target was, as one of the Australian ministers said in a speech: to beat the Netherlands which in their view was ahead of them. I was flattered when they told me that.

But that was what we did the past 3, 4 years. We are facing a new situation today as a new cabinet will start its job tomorrow.

Some things have remained the same and will remain so until the very far future. Bureaucracy bashing again was a dominant theme during the last elections, and the reduction of the size of the civil service again was very popular. New was, I have to confess, that this time they also announced the reduction of the number of politicians.

But more important: in addition to the normal sentiments were this time the budgetary problems which would have forced any cabinet, left or right, to take drastic steps and severe decisions on the budget, also the staff budget. You can see that reflected in the coalition agreement.

This time there is not yet a sophisticated plan of the civil service, the circumstances are different perhaps. Instead of a program there is just the announcement of a huge cut in the expenses for government. It's about euros, not about the number of civil servants or the performance or quality of government, clearly demonstrating where the priorities lie.

But nevertheless it's clear that further reform is necessary, to spend less on the one side and increase performance on the other.

This time I'm not in charge so I can only give some suggestions, as an observer or consultant if you wish.

My first suggestion would be: notwithstanding the emphasis on budget cuts: make a plan! And make it a plan of and for the civil service in which you tune in on the need to spend less but also inspire the workforce by doing that in a fair and clear way. Don't wait for political initiatives but take the initiative as civil service.

Make a plan in which the mission of the government is connected to the volume of the civil service. Don't accept being heroic in cutting the staff on the one side but making no choices about what will not be done on the other, as so often is the case. "Less" is in politics a word

that is mostly used for the number of civil servants but not for the work that lies ahead. And don't forget to invest in quality, how difficult that might be.

Have the courage to confront politics with what is possible and what is not. The civil service still has a role to play in speaking truth to power and give frank and fearless advice. Not as a kind of sabotage but as an expression of the will to attain the goals of a better government which costs less and does more. Dare to say no when something is impossible. Civil servants don't have to be popular, popularity is something that belongs to the political domain.

Aim for an increase in efficiency and effectiveness, especially by making better use of the enormous possibilities of ICT. By developing a government wide ICT-agenda which is supported by all senior managers in the civil service. Important elements of this agenda would be: to develop ICT-projects which are an integral part of policy making and management. And not some kind of curious, be it expensive, hobby of the ICT-department that wants the newest features available and is always more in favour of building new systems than renovation or better use of existing ones. Though we are improving, there are still too many projects which are not part of a management strategy, there are too many projects which only become relevant for the organisation when they end up in mess. Which they too often do!

Make a government wide plan to further integrate information which is available government wide. Fort Knox would be a good nickname for the information bounties that are available if you manage to discover them. And talk about creating added value by abstaining from the compartmentalised approach we are accustomed to. Make a difference between your political relevant front offices which have to communicate with society, and your administratively relevant back offices which have to be organised along functional lines and not ministerial lines.

Further standardisation as we already started with, can contribute immensely to the efficiency and effectiveness of our processes but it demands that we continue to accept some central guidance and that we continue to break down the departmental walls. Interesting is to see that the flexibility and standardisation we introduced in the last few years in ICT, HRM and offices make it possible to adapt the organisation to new challenges much easier than before. The merger of four ministries into two was exactly along the lines which were set out in the new office plan we developed. I'm not sure whether everybody thinks that has been an advantage but undeniably it will make this transformation much easier than in the past.

I believe the administration will face a lot of problems which it cannot solve anymore by adding additional budget as we did in the past. We need a different approach, we need creativity to do more with less. Though in my view the Cabinet agreement on the management of the civil service lacks at the moment still the sophistication and the elaboration which you need to reach these goals and to achieve quality, I'm rather optimistic. Also this challenge is manageable. And leaning backwards and start complaining about the unfairness of the political process is in my view the worst option. That's for losers, and we don't need losers in the public service but winners.

After this view on the past and the present let me finish by taking a short glimpse on the future. I see further challenges ahead, much more inspiring than just implementing a huge budget cut. Let me mention some elements.

In the first place: government reform will be permanent and you better prepare for that. It's not an operation on a sick patient who recovers after the treatment, it's a lifelong fitness training for athletes who must compete on the highest levels.

In the second place: existing boundaries of the traditional government will disappear. Government will change from a stable organisation consisting of reliable, strong pillars and huge, autonomous compartments into a system of much more flexible units, connected to each other by a huge variety of instruments, formal systems but also new social media, devastating the traditional hierarchies government is so very well used to.

Traditional authority which is related to position and age will disappear rapidly, let's hope that competence will still play a role but don't be too sure of that. As you better be not sure of anything, nothing is to be taken for granted in future government.

This government can only exist when it attracts the best and the brightest, in sometimes new and uncommon labour relations, equipped with the best ICT available. This government beats the Baumol Law which claims that productivity in government cannot increase. This new government is looking for partnerships within and outside government, whereby again ICT is a huge catalyst.

The workforce of the government has to be very competent and very flexible, integrating with society on a scale we haven't seen before and making traditional procedures for the exchange and transactions between administration and society quickly obsolete.

Such a government performs better and can build bridges where there are gaps today.

Will this mean that there will be no more jokes about civil servants in the future? As I said I'm optimistic but I am realistic as well, so I think that is one step too far. But I hope that a close cooperation between the civil service and politics will lead to a government which can play its role as the essential infrastructure for a well functioning society. I hope that politicians eventually will share this ambition which is already clearly the ambition of the civil service.

To quote Thomas Friedman who can not be suspected of leftist sympathies and is well known as an opponent of big government:

“One of the most enduring competitive advantages that a country can have today is a lean, efficient, honest civil service”.

We are on our way to achieve this and ICT will help us to do that. I wish you a very fruitful conference.