

LECTURE OF PROF. ROEL BEKKER, INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT,
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Let me first introduce myself. My name is Roel Bekker. At the moment I am Secretary General (which is similar to your Permanent Secretary) for Government Reform in the Netherlands. I used to be Secretary of the Department of Health, Welfare and Sports. I started working for the central government in 1970, and I have done almost everything there is to be done.

It is an honour and a pleasure to be here. I have met your director Michael Bichard in the past. He once visited the Netherlands and we had lunch with the British ambassador, Colin Budd. I remember well one of his quotes during our lunch conversation. Talking about the challenges for his ministry, he said the challenge was: “to remain the most important adviser of the minister”. We met again, I believe, when we visited with our Board of Secretaries General our British counterparts and had a memorable dinner in the presence of Mo Mowlam, at the time minister of the Cabinet Office. Since I was president of the Board, I sat next to her. I have never heard so many dirty jokes in one evening! When I read that Michael had become director of the Institute, I sent him an e-mail asking for the opportunity to talk to him in that capacity. I was welcome, he said, on the condition that I would give a presentation. That’s not a very difficult condition to fulfil, so that explains my presence here.

I mentioned the dirty jokes, but I like collecting civil servants jokes. You may have heard this one 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!’

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.

It’s not that I’m some kind of masochist, most of the jokes are just funny, based on exaggeration, like Yes, Minister which by the way a lot of people think is a documentary and not a comical series. And which is still the basis of most ideas in the political arena about the civil service. That’s our fate.

This is the normal climate for a civil servant everywhere in the world and you have to live with it. But a few years ago, in 2006, we faced a somewhat different situation.

It was the period of the preparation of the last elections, in 2006. Of course reduction of the size of the civil service is always a major issue during election time. But this time it was somewhat different from what we were used to. As far as the civil service is concerned people usually did not know where they were talking about. They hadn’t the faintest idea how many civil servants there were for instance. I happened to be a member of a panel discussion that took place a few weeks before the elections with the chairman of the employers and a Member of Parliament. The MP seriously stated that he was in favour of reducing the number of policy making civil servants with 30,000.

I could reply that I liked that kind of heroic politics since there are only about 10,000 civil servants working in the policy area.

So the claims in the election programs for reduction were not a surprise. But there was a difference with the past. Normally the right wing parties were in favour of huge cuts of the staff, the Labour Party wanted sometimes even an increase of the staff and the Christian Democrats were in the middle, as always. But this time the Labour Party was talking about the biggest cuts in civil servants, while the Liberal Party (our right wing party, be it not the more extreme variety we know today as well) had the most modest target. After being member of the government for four years they had - perhaps to their surprise - discovered that civil servants could be useful!

In our meetings we had a strategic discussion about this. What was better? To batten down the hatches and hope that the storm would pass? Or take the initiative as civil servants and show that it is in fact possible to slim down the civil service and at the same time raise its efficiency?

We chose the second option. While the government was still being formed we presented a plan, which the coalition partners adopted. Political parties forming a new government are always flooded with plans, which generally end up unread in a filing cabinet – but for us, the civil servants who normally play no role at all in forming new governments, they made an exception. Somehow we had struck the right note and managed to convince the parties that our plan was serious. And in the process we had solved a couple of unresolved problems for the negotiators. Our plan delivered savings that they needed. And it ended their fruitless discussion about government reform, in which some wanted cuts

mainly in social programmes and others in intermediate levels of government like the provinces and water authorities.

This proposal by the Secretaries General became part of the coalition agreement, and a special Secretary General was appointed to implement it. That has become my job.

The plan is made up of two parts: smaller and better. ‘Smaller’ gets the most attention, unfortunately. I owe my nickname to it: ‘the butcher of The Hague’. I have tried to trade this in for a more subtle nickname, but in vain. When I told Jane Halton, my close Australian colleague of Health at the time, about my new job, she sent me a cheerful email back: ‘Congratulations! We have someone like you here; his nickname is Dr Death. Good luck!’ All over the world people want to get rid of civil servants.

To mention a few of the main points: first and foremost, we decided not to try to create the government of the future, but to focus instead on the government for the future. It’s a small difference from many past efforts, but an important one. We did not focus on predictions or blueprints about the future organisation of the government. Instead we concentrated on developing capabilities to tackle future challenges without exactly knowing which challenges that would be and what kind of organisation and people we exactly would need in that case. An example: almost nobody had predicted the financial crisis, but nevertheless we could mobilise an organisation that proved to be rather adequate.

We also did not set out to draw up a blueprint or carry out a large-scale restructuring – which usually leads to total paralysis. Instead we decided on a gradual approach, one whose implementation is highly decentralised.

Another major characteristic of the plan the government adopted is that it was, as I said, proposed by the civil service, and chiefly concerned the civil service itself. In addition, implementation of the plan is being supervised by a civil servant. This dedicated Secretary General for Central Government Reform – my current position – is charged with overseeing a major series of measures, but he is not a central project-director implementing the measures himself, as was sometimes done in the past. In practice, the appointment of some tsar to do the dirty work turns often out to be a perfect excuse for the rest of the organisation to do nothing.

The plan does have the usual goals: smaller and better government. It provides for permanently reducing the size of government by 13,000 full-time-equivalent jobs in the four years from 2007 till 2011, out of an initial total of 180,000. But the cuts are carefully targeted: twenty per cent of policymaking positions are to be eliminated, but civil servants actually implementing laws and policies are to be spared as much as possible. And the whole area of security, justice and police was left aside or could even grow.

The plan is being carried out as we speak. We have not wasted time on long drawn-out negotiations with trade unions about whether there will be involuntary redundancies. Instead we quickly guaranteed that there will be none, as long as staff members are willing to be very flexible. To implement this we set up a Mobility Organisation, responsible for finding a vacant job in an individual case, inside or outside the government.

Far more important than the number of public servants is of course improving the quality of public service. As President Obama said in his inaugural address, the question ‘is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works’. This part of the plan is as simple as it is far-reaching: we have

improvement plans for each individual ministry and ones that cut across ministerial divides. The latter are divided into improvements in internal management and improvements in policymaking.

In management the main theme was: increasing flexibility and co-operation. “One Government”, was our motto. What we did was to abandon all kind of barriers for co-operation. For instance: we decreased the number of job descriptions from more than 30,000 to less than 50! You can imagine what that means in terms of flexibility. We are abandoning the traditional appointments in the service of a specific ministry and will change that in appointments to the government as a whole. We decided to abandon the principle of ministries having their own office buildings and to concentrate all policy making civil servants on a maximum of 10 minutes walking distance of each other. We are implementing a standard workplace for all civil servants so that they can work everywhere and communicate easily, even from their homes which a lot are doing. We give all policy making civil servants across the service an entry pass to enter all government buildings, so making it easier to meet each other. And on top of that: we gave the government one logo instead of the more than 100 we used to have. It seems trivial but that proved to have a very powerful, symbolic value.

That about management. In the policy area we developed plans to increase our policy making capabilities. For instance: we invested a lot in law making skills, by setting up an Academy for Law Making. In general we also invested a lot in specific professions, like lawyers, accountants, financial specialists etc. We concentrated a lot of communication activities, having Postbox 51 as the central address for all kind of questions of citizens. We decreased as a matter of fact our policy campaigns in order not to overwhelm society with a flood of messages. We harmonized the procedures for granting subsidies and could decrease the so

called “control tower” which was immense. We built a new knowledge infrastructure, by merging governmental research and survey institutes and advisory committees. They used to be organized along the lines of the departmental organisation, thereby strengthening the silos. Merging them contributed to joined up working.

Another important part of the plan is its strong emphasis on reducing the administrative burden. To this end we’ve adopted an extremely forceful method that has been highly praised by the OECD and the World Bank. The result has been that the administrative burden on business since the start of the programme has been reduced by 10.5 per cent. That represents a saving to business of a billion euros. We developed the same kind of plans to tackle the administrative burden on professionals, government and the public, sharply reducing red tape. This has not gone unnoticed: in a recent survey, government as a whole was rated 7 out of a possible 10 points, an increase from past levels.

In our communication with civil servants, our staff, we have stressed that improvement is the responsibility, not of some central authority or of general management, but of each individual staff member. And we have made clear that this type of operation is not fun nor is it an interesting challenge, and thus should not be presented as such, as has sometimes been done in the past. It is a deadly serious business and should be implemented as quickly as possible so that our everyday work does not suffer, without a lot of external publicity or so called success stories and boasting interviews in a much too early stage.

This has been a disappointment to the media, which were very eager to continuously report about all kind of organisational frictions, failed projects and embarrassing mistakes. They are mainly interested in incidents and horror stories about victimised civil servants.

“Don’t tell, but demonstrate”, demonstrate that we become better in delivery, that has been our chief communication principle as far as the general public is concerned.

What has been the progress so far?

We just finished two progress reports to Parliament, one on the numbers and another about the improvement. The average message is rather dull: we are on schedule.

Until now we have cut more than 4,000 jobs, where the planning was 3,000.

It’s more complicated to verify whether we have managed to improve the service. We didn’t have a survey of the quality when we started. And measuring the quality of the public service is a difficult job anyway.

We developed some ideas to make more or less reliable statements on the progress.

First: we assumed that our improvement projects would lead to improvement. That’s a fair assumption. We had an investment budget for improvement of more than € 300 million. We invested that in a substantial number of innovative projects, especially projects to increase co-operation within the government and communication with the outside world. Most of the projects are on schedule and prove to be a success.

In the second place we asked a few professors in Public Administration to assess some aspects of our work. They reported recently. One report was a history of

60 years of governmental renewal. It's a wonderful story of hope and despair, of high expectations and a lot of political disappointments, of frustrations also. One of the conclusions was that the most ambitious plans, covering not only the civil service but all other aspects as well, with a lot of political leadership, haven't been very successful. On the other hand a more modest, technocratic approach focusing strongly on small steps in management and support seems to have much more effect.

Another report analysed the co-operation in 13 major projects and concluded that we had made much more progress than everybody thought we would.

Thirdly, we collected data of e.g. the OECD, in the comparative study among 10 countries where also the UK participates in.

In the fourth place we analysed the number of complaints, lost cases and negative remarks of the Audit Court.

We had interesting benchmark data to compare not only overhead but also policy pressure which showed that there was only a vague relationship between policy pressure and the size of departments. That gives us the instruments to shift workforce to places where it is needed, where today the size of departments is mostly based on tradition and history.

And we collected data about citizen's satisfaction and tried to analyse them in a meaningful way.

The whole of this exercise gives a picture of the development of our performance. And much to our joy we could see improvement. For instance: the

National Ombudsman reported last week that the number of complaints about government had decreased last year by more than 6 %.

The client satisfaction surveys were an eye opener. Some organisations seemed to hide these data as if they were top secret, even when the results were rather positive. And most were. The Employment Agency for instance measures in detail client satisfaction of the more than 12 million people calling the agency annually. Not the easiest clients, I would say, but nevertheless they scored a 7,8! Very interesting was for instance what one prison did: they measured the satisfaction of the prisoners. A few years ago their judgment was very negative. But thanks to changes in policy and management the satisfaction is now just negative!

It's interesting and one of the frustrations you have to live with that citizens seem to be very positive about the specific services but negative about the government as a whole.

And another aspect is that satisfaction about positive events is higher than about negative. The procedure concerning birth certificates is no doubt judged positively, but the procedure for death certificates negatively, while it's the same procedure, the same waiting time, the same staff. Interesting!

So we think that we are on track, and it's a pity that we are confronted with a cabinet crisis which causes a break in the program. But there is no doubt the new cabinet will continue and at least we, as Secretaries General, told our people that we will pursue the plan.

One of the very interesting side effects of the relative success in cutting the size and improving the quality is: we can say to politics: now it's your turn. Stronger

still: for the next phase we need political changes. We did our job but it doesn't make sense to focus only on the civil servants part. Simply put: efficiency gains are not endless, as some seem to think.

Let me have a short view on the future.

I already mentioned that for major steps for the future government you cannot restrict attention to the civil servants, and aim to decrease their numbers endlessly. Major actions are necessary to be made in the political domain. I mention subjects like: the election system, the very strong focussing on incidents, the eagerness to abandon all kind of risks, the very strong influence of the media which did to our politics exactly the same as John Lloyd has written about your politics. And the quality of the leaders not to forget. Two not so very old political leaders have recently resigned from politics because they couldn't or wouldn't combine it with a normal life with wife and kids. If we can't have leaders that can live a normal, be it exhausting life, than we have flaws in our system. In general: the nervousness of the system has to decrease in my view, the temperature is too high.

A second important issue in the political domain is nicely illustrated by an article in *The Economist* of a few weeks ago, with the meaningful title: "Stop!" It's about the need to abstain from policy making for all kind of problems, to prevent all kind of risks, to be present everywhere.

This is also influenced by the program of policy reviews which was started with the aim to decrease our budgetary problems. We expect the results tomorrow; the groups have been requested to produce proposals for budget cuts up to 20%, which is € 35 billion a year. No doubt these cuts will play a dominant role in the election campaign and will have an immense impact on the new government,

whatever coalition there will be. It's clear that that will have a major effect on the way politicians behave in the future. "The party is over", the political system has to shift its focus from growing interventions and the suggestion of solving all problems to a more modest approach in which responsibility of the population itself will become more important.

There are more important subjects: the labour market for the public service will become more and more difficult, which makes it necessary to increase labour productivity. That has never had much attention, sometimes people are even claiming that you have to accept the fact that the public sector can't increase productivity. Unacceptable, in my view.

A final remark deals with the disappearance of traditional boundaries for government. I have pointed out that that has been an important driving force behind our plans. I think all kind of social, technological, international and other developments will make the traditional, sharp divisions in governmental structures, authorities and competences, with their vertical, hierarchical organisations and clear lines of reporting and responsibilities, more and more obsolete. We already can see the frictions where demands of society collapse with the constitutional boundaries. A lot of complaints exist where government organisations have to co-operate with each other and with partners from outside government. Youth care is an example, social cohesion, climate, you can mention the whole portfolio of policy priorities.

We have to find in my view new ways to tackle this kind of challenges. Government and government officials, politicians and civil servants, have to operate in complicated, overlapping networks, thereby taking responsibilities and using problem solving techniques like negotiating and mediating, instead of looking at their exact job-description and produce the traditional governmental

output. For instance: we are experimenting more and more with working in programmes, with programme-ministers but also special officials who have to make new combinations. Recently a special Official for our Delta-program, a huge program to protect the country against the rising water, has been appointed. That's completely different from the way we did it in the past.

Final question: how good are we? Are we better than other countries or not? It is useful to compare countries that confront the same kind of problems. The UK is very interesting for us, as are some other countries like the Scandinavian countries, Australia and Canada. The constitutional context and the governmental systems are different but the governance principles are to a certain extent comparable.

What I like about the Anglo Saxon countries is their focus on results and delivery, and where I'm always jealous about is how wonderful you can tell big stories about big changes in government, I heard so many, perhaps too many. It's not our style, we are incremental and sometimes plain dull, which is not very sexy but in our situation mostly effective. Our strong points are our policy preparation quality, including our capability to find compromises. And also a certain pragmatism. I could spend a whole new lecture on this kind of comparison, but that has to wait. The best advice is: come and see, you are more than welcome.