

Politicians and civil servants: a complicated affair.

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Last year one of our junior ministers had a hard time in Parliament. She is responsible for public transport, and was questioned about difficulties with the railroads. It turned out that a critical report of the Inspectorate was not sent to Parliament, although the former minister on this post had ordered to do so. But a civil servant, a policy director, had decided that it would be better to wait a little and combine this report with other reports. That would place the report -which was not a very profound one, just a quick scan- in a better perspective. Of course the critical report became public, as you better assume today that everything in government becomes public, sooner or later, and Parliament was very upset about not being informed properly. The junior minister, who couldn't do anything about this, apologized for the mistake, perhaps not too convincingly, but nevertheless.

So far, so good, such things happen. But Parliament was not satisfied, smelt blood and increased the pressure which led the junior minister to explicitly blame the civil service for the mistake and in general it's lack of political sensitivity. Disciplinary actions were under consideration, she said. She even announced that all civil servants would be sent to a course to increase their feeling for politics. Instead of deflating the crisis these remarks made things worse causing a lot of stir and indignation among the civil servants who thought that they had become the scapegoat for an incident that was basically purely political.

The general feeling was that the junior minister was right in reprimanding the civil servants, or even taking more severe disciplinary actions. But always internally, not as a public execution. Blaming civil servants as an excuse and announcing severe disciplinary actions in Parliament was not considered a proper action. In this case it harmed the reputation of the junior minister who was described as lacking experience and judgment.

It's a clear example of what can happen in politics and especially with the delicate balance between politicians and civil servants. Their relationship is full of tensions and dilemmas which was also the reason for the title of my oration about this subject as professor: *Liaisons dangereuses* (I used the more intriguing French title of the movie, 'Dangerous liaisons' it is in English). This relationship is not a stable one, and there have been a lot of developments in this relationship the last 30 to 40 years. Not only in the Netherlands but also in a lot of other countries. And remarkably enough: in many countries these developments were to a certain extent rather similar, which points at more general trends.

To illustrate some of these developments I should like to take you back to the start of my career and my first years as a civil servant. I started in 1970. Life was rather simple in those days. We had reconstructed the country after the War but still had to build a lot of houses. We also were in the middle of changes in society and developing new systems for education, social security et cetera. The Cold War was the dominant factor outside. Governmental authority and respect for the administration was sometimes questioned but generally accepted. We had capable ministers who were highly trusted and could do their job without much outside interference. Their job was difficult

enough, the challenges were great, new issues like environment came up, we had the development of the EU. And like today politicians in the Netherlands had to work in rather 'subtle' political coalitions, as is the unavoidable result of our electoral system.

We also had strong civil servants, real strapping men, remarkable characters. Experts in their policy domain with a vast and very reliable network. 'Mandarins' is a common qualification for the high ranked civil servants, but they were sometimes not only the power behind the throne but occasionally even in front of it. But always very loyal to their political bosses who were carefully guided through the minefields of policy and politics and protected for political damage by pre-emptive strikes or whatever other actions. Giving ground sometimes to indictments about bureaucratic power, the 'Fourth Power' as one professor said in those days, the Civil Service separate from the traditional three powers of Montesquieu.

Politicians and civil servants were very effective partners. Each played his part. Mutual trust was high and politicians relied completely on the support of their top guys (no women made it to the top in those days). If a civil servant made a mistake, the minister obviously could become very angry, but always inside the chambers of the ministry.

But that started to change, in the eighties, not from one day to another but gradually, sometimes not even palpable for the people inside.. That was not so much caused by that wonderful TV-series from the UK, titled 'Yes, Minister', which a lot of people considered to be more a documentary than a comedy series. A caricature it was, but also a near-real life description of how things happened in a ministry. Confirming the omnipresent bias about ministries. It was not the result of a specific policy. It also had little to do with new methods, like New Public Management which is so often claimed by academicians as the basis for changes in government.

In my view it was different. First: it had much to do with changes in society (not to forget technological changes, and especially ICT, internet and the like). And second: with changes in the characters and attitudes of people in government. These two developments were interdependent and strengthened each other.

Citizens became much more emancipated, especially because of the general increase in the level of education and the penetration of good education in all parts of society. Globalisation became a fact, later on further stimulated by the rise of ICT. Traditional borders disappeared. However the government was still very vertically organised, with rather autonomous silo's responsible for the big policy areas like housing, education, transport and health. But problems in society, like social integration, environment, youth and security, didn't fit into the traditional pigeonholes of the government. In many cases it was unclear which ministry was responsible, and co-operation and joint-up approaches were needed but not easily implemented. The very bureaucratized, not so flexible ministries had huge problems to find a new, more problem oriented, integrated way of working. It was contrary to their style and their systems, the silo was still the organisational principle.

Trust in government was rapidly declining, again not only in the Netherlands but in a lot of western countries. New forms of co-operation and partnerships had to be developed, sometimes flagrantly against the political instinct of politicians to profile themselves more than the team or the partners. On top of this the media got a role which was hitherto unimaginable, whereby every minor incident could become in a few hours a major political scandal, a development which in the past 10 years is even amplified by the new social media.

All these developments very much affected the relationship between politicians and civil servants. It has changed the whole 'life in the village', as the typical biotope of a few square kilometres in many capitals is often described. The village where politicians, lobbyists, NGO's, media, civil servants come

together, speaking a language they are the only ones to understand, where 'yes' means not always 'yes', and 'no' not always 'no'.

Politicians became more and more political, political in the sense that power had to be combatted for in an intensive dialogue with a lot of competitors but also the general public, and the media as very relevant interfaces. They had to fight on an almost daily basis for their existence and survival. They started to distrust the traditional partners of the past. They were expected to show power and emotion, and had to take immediate action, sometimes contrary to the civil service advice which in many cases was to wait and see, as has been so successful in the past. A huge number of opinion polls also showed the immediate effect on their reputation and were closely watched, in order to correct tactics as rapid as possible. Strategy and planning became words with a completely different meaning compared to the past. The short term was 'today', the medium term was 'this week' and long term 'not much longer than one year'. British writer and journalist John Lloyd wrote a book about this, with the significant title: 'What the media did to our politics'. Not a lot of good, was his verdict.

The civil servants also changed. They used to be the real experts with a monopoly in a policy domain that was earned through years and years of experience. But they became more and more generalists, available for a variety of policy issues. And instead of being the best and only expert, they focused more and more on the general management of the organisation and the management of policy. Or they had to take responsibility for huge new projects. That was much to their own liking as well, considering that this new generation of civil servants was interested in a lot more subjects and challenges than only one for the rest of your life.

The civil servants no longer dominated the discussion in their policy area and also became more careful in their operations, to avoid any political risks or to feed the impression that they were more powerful than their political bosses. They were not supposed to have an own network with members of parliament or journalists any longer; contacts that in the Netherlands were even formally forbidden. They had lost their monopoly in their partnership with the ministers who relied more and more on outside sources or their own political advisers.

So there arose a gap between the political domain and the domain of the civil service, a gap some countries already had for a longer time but was new in some other. Politicians complained more and more that civil servants didn't understand them and were more an obstruction than a help. 'Not fit for purpose', as British minister John Reid once said about the Home Office.

Where the partnership between the two used to be the guarantee for proper policy making and proper administration, the gap and the subsequent distrust sometimes became detrimental to the effectiveness of the development and implementation of policy.

The gap I described exists in my view in a lot of countries but there are differences in circumstances and in reactions to the phenomenon I talked about.

In France and Belgium for instance there has already been for a long time a sharp distinction between the political system and the civil service system. Ministers, who are in France under the authority of the President, appointed their own cabinets that were responsible for policy making and communication. The civil servants were in charge of the execution of policy but almost not involved in the formulation of policy. Due to the developments I mentioned the position of the cabinets has become even more powerful.

Also in the USA the political dominance, in this case of the President, has been embedded in the system for a long time. The so called spoils system entitles the newly elected president to appoint several thousands of high ranked officials, all of whom are his political allies or friends, dedicated to implement his political vision and selected for that purpose.

Perhaps this high level of politicisation of the whole policy process explains to a certain extent why these countries sometimes face such big problems in implementing policy. Implementation of policy is very often an underestimated part of the policy cycle, for which you need more the characteristics of a marathon-runner (as I use to describe civil servants) than of a sprinter (as politicians can be qualified).

In the UK there have always been quite a lot of political executives on the one side and a strong Civil Service on the other. But under Prime Minister Blair a third party came up, the political advisers, which has grown immensely. Their role was to give political advice which produced the new profession of spin-doctors whose job it was to frame the information to promote the position of the government. These advisers became sometimes very powerful, having much more power than their legal accountability would let you assume. It led eventually even to a special code of conduct for these advisers. Other countries with a somewhat similar organisation like Canada and Australia had similar developments. In Australia for instance the Secretaries got a five years contract instead of the traditional appointment for life and also lost their traditional prefix 'Permanent', to underline that their job was not permanent at all. Several of them lost their job recently when a new cabinet was installed before the contract was finished.

In the Netherlands, in Germany and in the Scandinavian countries, the independence of the civil service was upheld, but civil servants also had to accept that their power and influence were limited. Illustrative is perhaps the famous Danish TV-series 'Borgen' in which you get a clear picture of the developments in Government but in which only one civil servant, the Permanent Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office, plays a very minor role in the background. (I don't talk about the driver of the Prime Minister, a civil servant, who played a major role in the well-being of the PM).

In these countries there is not such a big separation between policy making and implementation. That sometimes creates a certain slowness but also more of an open eye for the implementation and the practical difficulties.

In the Netherlands we have seen the same growing of the gap I talked about though we belong to the countries where the gap is relatively rather small. But nevertheless civil servants became more and more careful, avoiding to attract publicity and avoiding being considered as powerful or a competitor to the politician in the political debate. Their attitude became more and more risk averse, they didn't want to become the scapegoat. That was even further accentuated by new procedures for appointing the high ranked civil servants (especially the Top Management Group, the Secretaries-General and the Directors-General, 60 people altogether) and for limiting their tour of duty, the last also to prevent them from accumulating power by monopolising the relevant networks.

Since the seventies we have political advisers, but they have not gained much ground in our country. And during several crises (the banking crisis, the financial crisis, infectious diseases) the co-operation between politics and civil servants turned out to be rather effective. But the traditional values of civil servants and their preference for proper research and careful preparation, for having an open eye for problems in practice, not being influenced by the issues of today but by long term considerations, came under strain and contrasted with the political wishes to react instantly. Politicians also expressed their preference for civil servants who could assist them in their way of tackling problems rather than for the thoughtful and often speaking-truth-to-power-characters of the past.

Interesting is to see how this works out in the EU. There we also witness increasing politicisation on the political level. And there also the civil service staff which is a powerful but non-political bureaucracy, although political elements play a role in the appointments especially related to the HRM-quota of specific countries. They are civil servants in the traditional sense, not supposed to take political positions or to be very active in public. But in the EU we have the EU-commissioners who are something in between. They are evidently selected on political merits and recruited from the

most reputed national politicians available. And they act and behave like politicians, having their own cabinet in the French style. But their role is to implement political decisions, like civil servants. One of my colleagues at the University, Anchrit Wille, wrote a very interesting book about the development of the EU Commission which I can recommend you to read.¹

So the gap between politicians and civil servants is widening everywhere, but in a variety of ways and also with varying dimensions. What will be developments in the future and especially what are sensible strategies to improve the problems that are caused by the gap I signalled?

In the first place one has to accept that life in the village will remain complicated and become even more complicated in the years ahead. The developments I described, very much determined by the disappearance of traditional boundaries and a huge influence of the media, will continue, whether we like it or not. We will see a more networking government, smaller perhaps in size and on the national level with less power because of the increasing power of supranational governments. Politicians will have a difficult job, permanently struggling against a very volatile public that is easily triggered by media or opinion polls. Politicians will increasingly behave like the actors in a Theatre called Politics. And like in the world of actors: some will have a long and successful career on the stage with a lot of applause but others will -deservedly or not- be yelled at from the very beginning.

It would be wise to invest in the reputation of politicians, which is today on the level of second hand car dealers as some recent surveys showed. It's popular to bash politicians, and politicians themselves are among the first to do that, also sometimes claiming that the less politicians there are the better it is. That's not a good strategy, it's an honourable and difficult job for which only the best and the brightest should be elected and we should aim for strategies to guarantee that to happen. Showing respect and even proudness by politicians themselves for their important and difficult job is a good start for that strategy.

We should also avoid compensating a decreasing number of politicians or filling the gap between politicians and civil servants by appointing more hybrids like special or political advisers. Who are powerful but have no political accountability on the one side or have to obey to written and unwritten civil service rules on the other. If there is a lot of political work to do, you better appoint enough publicly accountable politicians (e.g. junior ministers) than resort to an increase of political advisers, in my view.

The civil service in my view has its own responsibility to develop its quality and productivity. They can take initiatives for reforming the bureaucracies they are responsible for. If the civil service waits for political incentives or initiatives in this area, they can be sure that the result is not optimal. Politicians are basically not interested in the long term quality of the civil service, only in its size, its costs and its loyalty to the responsible politicians of the day. The civil service should invest in developing its traditional values like neutrality, competence and the capacity to speak truth to power. That also means that they have to invest in rigorous and fair selection and recruitment procedures in order to get the best people available, and pay them accordingly. And invest in additional training programs, to develop their skills and to teach them what life in the village really is like.

The flexibility of the civil servants has to increase a lot, in order to be able to mobilise a competent staff rapidly if a new issue comes up. In the Netherlands we changed for instance the appointment system. Civil servants used to be appointed in the service of a specific ministry but are now appointed in the service of the government as a whole. And the number of job descriptions changed from the almost unbelievable 30.000 (on 120.000 jobs) to less than 50, which increased flexibility enormously. It's a wise strategy to invest in mobility of high ranked civil servants. That can contribute to their ability to work across borders and to avoid the plague of the past: the rigid

¹ Anchrit Wille, *The Normalization of the European Commission*, Oxford University Press 2013.

compartmentalisation of government. But mobility not at all costs: there has also to be a place for the real expert who knows everything about a specific subject. If the civil service can't provide this expertise, who else should? In the Netherlands we are very positive about having special policy research organisations within the government, civil servants of whom their independence is guaranteed and who carry out research on the highest level on economic policy, environment, social and cultural issues, crime et cetera. They play a very important role in stimulating evidence based policy.

Again: I think the civil servants themselves have to take initiatives in this area and not wait for politics. In the Netherlands we did that as Board of Secretaries-General 6, 7 years ago, by developing a huge program for a smaller and better government. We managed to convince the cabinet about the merits of our proposals and got the task to implement it ourselves, which by the way became my job from 2007-2010. Since it was a plan *of* civil servants *about* civil servants, it had a very good fundament and was generally very well accepted, much better than in case it would have been forced upon the civil service by some outside power or implemented by someone from politics or consultancy.

Am I optimistic about the future? Dutchmen are always a little sceptical, preparing for the worst and not believing in miracles. I think it's wise not to raise expectations too high and not to announce that we will restore trust in government by some short term measures regarding the organisation of government. But it's my conviction that investment in the quality of the partnership between politics and the civil service, and initiatives to improve the civil service - especially from within - could contribute a lot to a better government.

I conclude. Perhaps it's interesting to tell what happened after the incident I mentioned at the beginning of my speech and what the Secretary-General of the ministry did to restore self-confidence and trust. No disciplinary actions were taken. The junior minister became convinced that the intentions of the civil servant had been good. The Secretary-General organised a number of internal meetings in which also the minister and the junior minister participated. In these intensive meetings the incident was discussed and similar cases as well. And they explored what should be done in similar circumstances. Understanding for each other's position has grown substantially and working relations improved. So at the end of the day the skies were clear again, or even clearer than before. It shows that the liaisons between politicians and civil servants are dangerous indeed but can produce very good results as well, at least when both sides are prepared to invest in real love and understanding. That's not easy, as we all know, but worthwhile.