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The Netherlands

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Introduction

In November 2012, a new cabinet took office in the Netherlands. The Liberal-Labour coalition had a majority in the lower house of parliament (*Tweede Kamer*), but it did not have a majority in the upper house of parliament (*Eerste Kamer*), nor had it signed a support agreement with one or more other parties to ensure a majority there. The year 2013 was the first in which this cabinet had to deal with this situation, operating as a minority cabinet in the upper house. It had to make *ad hoc* agreements with parties in parliament and interest groups in order to ensure political and public support for its plans. By the end of the year, the cabinet had developed an understanding with three centrist opposition parties – the so-called ‘constructive opposition’.

Election report

There were no national elections in the Netherlands in 2013. The upcoming election schedule is presented in Table 1.

Cabinet report

Second Rutte cabinet

The second Rutte cabinet was installed on 5 November 2012 (Otjes & Voerman 2013). The council of ministers consisted of seven members of the right-wing conservative liberal VVD (Liberal Party/*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*) and six members of the centre-left social-democratic PvdA (Labour Party/*Partij van de Arbeid*). The cabinet is chaired by Mark Rutte (VVD). In addition to the ministers, there are seven junior ministers (three VVD and four PvdA) and eight of the 20 ministers and junior ministers are women. The

Table 1. Upcoming election schedule in the Netherlands

| Type of election | Date |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| European | 22 May 2014 |
| Parliamentary | No later than March 2017 |

Table 2. Cabinet composition of Rutte II in the Netherlands in 2013

| | | | | | | |
|--|--|--------|---|--------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| Date of inception | 5 November 2012 | | | | | |
| Type of cabinet | Minimum Winning Coalition (MWC) ^a | | | | | |
| Date of initial 2013 observation | 1 January 2013 | | | | | |
| Date of final 2013 observation | 31 December 2013 | | | | | |
| A. Party and gender composition of Rutte II at initial 2013 observation, 1 January | Party seats in council of ministers | | Ministerial positions seats held by women | | Party seats in parliament | |
| | N | % | N | % (of party seats) | N | % |
| Liberal Party/ <i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie</i> (VVD) | 7 | 53.8% | 3 | 42.9% | 41 | 27.3% |
| Labour Party/ <i>Partij van de Arbeid</i> (PvdA) | 6 | 46.2% | 2 | 33.3% | 38 | 25.3% |
| Totals | 13 | 100.0% | 5 | 38.5% | 79 | 52.6% |
| B. Composition of Rutte II cabinet at initial 2013 observation, 1 January | | | | | | |
| See previous editions of the <i>Political Data Yearbook</i> for the Netherlands (Otjes & Voerman 2013: 162) or http://politicaldatayearbook.com | | | | | | |
| C. Changes in composition of Rutte II cabinet during 2013 | | | | | | |
| There were no changes in the cabinet during 2013 | | | | | | |
| D. Party and gender composition of Rutte II at final 2013 observation, 31 December | | | | | | |
| The composition was the same as on 1 January | | | | | | |

Note: ^aThe government did not have the support of a majority in the upper house, which in effect meant that it operated as a minority coalition.

Source: Parlement & Politiek (2013).

cabinet composition did not change during the course of 2013. The cabinet lacked a majority in the upper house of parliament so it effectively operated as an unsupported minority coalition cabinet.

On 28 January, Queen Beatrix announced her abdication from the throne. Her son, Willem-Alexander, was inaugurated on 30 April. The event itself had little political effect, as the role of the monarch is limited.

Parliament report

Lower house

The cabinet, which had to rely on support from other parties to pass legislation through the upper house, negotiated with opposition parties in the lower house for support (the exact nature of the discussion is covered below under **Issues in national politics**). Over the course of the year, the cabinet developed an understanding with three opposition parties: the social-liberal D66 (Democrats 66/*Democraten 66*), the Christian-social CU (Christian

Union/*ChristenUnie*) and the conservative Christian SGP (Political Reformed Party/*Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij*) – the so-called ‘constructive opposition’ or ‘C3’. By the end of the year, regular consultations developed that were aimed at political coordination. The cooperation between the social-liberal D66 and both Christian parties was surprising, given their diverging views regarding ethical-medical questions such as euthanasia. They did share similar centrist positions on the financial and economic problems that were at stake, however. The absence of the CDA (Christian-Democratic Appeal/*Christen-Democratisch Appèl*) as a constructive opposition party was also remarkable. With 11 seats in the upper house, the support of the CDA would have been more than enough to secure the majority in the upper house that the cabinet lacked. It also seemed likely that the CDA would play a constructive role, given its longstanding governmental tradition. After its severe electoral defeat in 2012, however, the party was not prepared to support the Liberal-Labour coalition. Instead, it stressed the importance of tax cuts and a smaller government – traditionally the agenda of the conservative liberal VVD.

There were a number of changes in the parliamentary parties in the lower house: on 4 October, Henk Krol, the leader of the pensioners’ party 50+, stepped down as party leader and MP after it emerged that while he was editor-in-chief of the *Gay Krant* (*Gay Newspaper*), the magazine did not pay the pension contributions of its employees. He was succeeded as leader of the PVV by Norbert Klein, the other 50+ MP. On 29 October, Louis Bontes was expelled from the parliamentary group of the PVV (Freedom Party/*Partij voor de Vrijheid*) after publicly criticising the internal functioning of the party. He retained his seat in parliament and continued to vote with the PVV group.

Upper house

During 2013, the upper house came under scrutiny. First, the chair of the upper house had to resign after the coronation of the King. During the coronation, the King is accompanied by a limited number of MPs. They were selected by the president of the upper house, Fred de Graaf, (VVD), who also chaired the inaugural meeting of the two houses of parliament. He had arranged to specifically exclude the long-sitting MP and leader of the right-wing populist PVV, Geert Wilders, from accompanying the King. When this came out, his independence as president of the upper house was questioned and he had to step down. Ankie Broekers-Knol (VVD) succeeded him as president.

Second, there was an ongoing public debate about the role and function of the upper house within the Dutch political system. The reason for this discussion was the fact that the cabinet, while having a majority in the directly elected lower house, did not have a majority in the upper house, which is indirectly elected by the provincial councils (last election in 2011). Rutte II was the second successive cabinet without a majority in the upper house. Generally, the upper house is regarded as a ‘*chambre de réflexion*’: its task is to assess legislation, adopted by the lower house, with respect to its constitutionality and legal quality and not its political value. In April, the chair of the VVD lower house parliamentary party, Halbe Zijlstra, criticised the upper house for undermining the political primacy of the lower house. In September, Prime Minister Rutte promised a study of the position of the upper house and its relation to the lower house.

There were no changes in the party political composition of the upper house.

Table 3. Party and gender composition of the lower chamber (*Tweede Kamer*) of the parliament (*Staten-Generaal der Nederlanden*) in the Netherlands in 2013

| Party | 1 January 2013 | | 31 December 2013 | |
|---|----------------|--------|------------------|--------|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Liberal Party (VVD) | 41 | 27.3% | 41 | 27.3% |
| Labour Party (PvdA) | 38 | 25.3% | 38 | 25.3% |
| Party for Freedom/ <i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i> (PVV) | 15 | 10.0% | 14 | 9.3% |
| Socialist Party/ <i>Socialistische Partij</i> (SP) | 15 | 10.0% | 15 | 10.0% |
| Christian Democratic Appeal/ <i>Christen-Democratisch Appèl</i> (CDA) | 13 | 8.7% | 13 | 8.7% |
| Democrats 66/ <i>Democraten 66</i> (D66) | 12 | 8.0% | 12 | 8.0% |
| ChristianUnion/ <i>ChristenUnie</i> (CU) | 5 | 3.3% | 5 | 3.3% |
| GreenLeft/ <i>GroenLinks</i> (GL) | 4 | 2.7% | 4 | 2.7% |
| Reformed Political Party/ <i>Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij</i> (SGP) | 3 | 2.0% | 3 | 2.0% |
| Party for the Animals/ <i>Partij voor de Dieren</i> (PvdD) | 2 | 1.5% | 2 | 1.5% |
| 50+/50+ | 2 | 1.5% | 2 | 1.5% |
| Group Bontes/ <i>Groep Bontes</i> (Bontes) | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.7% |
| Women | 58 | 38.7% | 58 | 38.7% |
| Totals | 150 | 100.0% | 150 | 100.0% |

Source: Parlement & Politiek (2013).

Issues in national politics

Over the course of 2013, the cabinet negotiated with most of the parliamentary parties to come to ad hoc agreements. Parallel to these talks, it also started negotiations with employers' organisations, trade unions and other interest groups in order to get broad support for reforms of the public sector and the labour market.

Housing market agreement

The first political agreement was reached in February and concerned the housing market. After it had become clear that the cabinet's own proposals would not find a majority in the upper house, CU, SGP and D66 took the initiative of re-negotiating the proposals with the cabinet. They could supply the eight members of the upper house that the cabinet needed for a majority. The agreement included reforms that would affect both those who owned their own home (by changing the conditions for the mortgage interest relief) and those in social housing (by increasing rents for those with a high income who live in social housing). In December, the upper house approved the proposals with a narrow majority of one vote.

No education agreement

Negotiations with D66 and GL (*GreenLeft/GroenLinks*) about grants for parents, student grants and the education budget in June did not lead to an agreement. The cabinet had to

postpone its plans concerning student grants. During the budget talks, the grants for parents were discussed again.

Budget agreement

The second political agreement was reached in October. The cabinet had sent a budget to the lower house without further negotiations. The budget included €6 billion in additional cuts that were required by the European Commission. The Netherlands would not meet the requirements of the Stability and Growth Pact and had a budget deficit of 3.3 per cent. The Commission allowed this as long as the Netherlands kept to the €6 billion in cuts. As the opposition parties presented their alternative budget plans, it became clear that the cabinet's budget would not find a majority in the upper house. The cabinet invited all parliamentary parties to negotiations at the end of September. The PVV and SP refused to take part. Both had supported a vote of no-confidence in the cabinet. In addition to the coalition parties, the SGP, CU, D66, GL, CDA, 50+ and the Party for the Animals (*Partij voor de Dieren*, PvdD) were willing to participate. The PvdD (which had also backed the vote of no-confidence) was the first to leave the negotiations, followed by 50+, CDA and GL (in that order). On 11 October the coalition came to an agreement with the remaining three parties by meeting their wishes to a certain extent. The parties agreed to increase education spending (as D66 wanted), reintroduce a number of environmental taxes (as D66 and CU desired) and reverse proposed cuts on subsidies for families (as CU and SGP proposed). As D66 had urged, a number of reforms of the labour market would be implemented quicker. Additional funding was found in the budget by not adjusting public sector wages, subsidies or tax brackets to inflation levels.

Pension agreement

The third political agreement was realised in December. The cabinet's plan to reform the pension system had reached the upper house a few months before, but was criticised by all opposition parties. The cabinet started talks with the CU, SGP, D66, CDA, GL and the coalition parties. Again, the coalition came to an agreement with the first three parties only. The deal included €3 billion in spending cuts, specifically by limiting the percentage of income someone can save for retirement tax-free.

Agreements with interest groups

The cabinet also came to five agreements with interest groups. A so-called 'social agreement' between cabinet, trade union confederations and employers was reached in April. It concerned a modest reform of the labour market: it shortened unemployment benefit and liberalised contract termination laws. The agreement about the budget in October implied an adaptation of the social agreement, which the most important trade union confederation, FNV, very reluctantly accepted. The cabinet came to two agreements about health care reforms. The first concerned long-term care. The cabinet, employers and trade unions, except for AbvaKabo (the largest public sector trade union), came to an agreement in April. Proposed cuts in the health care budget would be reversed to a certain extent and

compensated by wage moderation for those working in the sector. The second agreement concerned limiting the continuing growth of short-term care costs: in August, employers in the health care sector and the cabinet came to an understanding. An energy agreement was reached in July, signed by the cabinet and about 40 interest groups, including employers, trade union confederations and environmental organisations. It included concrete measures to extend the share of renewable energy. In August the cabinet came to an agreement about education with employers and trade unions. The largest education trade union, Aob, opposed the agreement, which concerned measures to increase the number of qualified teachers.

The combination of political agreements and agreements with interest groups led to a complicated situation: the cabinet is not assured of parliamentary support for its agreements with interest groups, while the FNV, which signed the social agreement, joined protests against the budget agreement.

Institutional changes

Parliament discussed two major institutional changes: a revision of the party finance law and the introduction of a referendum.

Referendum law

In the spring, the lower house accepted two parliamentary initiatives by MPs from PvdA, D66 and GL to introduce a consultative referendum (accepted in February) and a binding referendum (accepted in April). These referendums had to be initiated by citizens and had to concern legislation already approved by parliament. By the end of 2013 the upper house had not yet voted on the two laws. The latter would also require a second reading as the initiative sought to change the constitution; for the consultative referendum, this procedure was not necessary.

Party finance law

On 5 March 2013, the upper house accepted the revised party finance law sponsored by the Minister of Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations held by PvdA. The lower house had adopted the new legislation in 2012. It includes more transparency requirements for donations and, for the first time, sanctions for non-compliant parties. In December, the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations announced a change in the law that would also regulate the finances of the parties at the provincial and local level.

Sources and further information

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