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1

The Country and Its Constitution

A 'Small' Country

The Netherlands comprises an area of land with a surface area of some 42,000 square kilometres located on the North Sea around the Rhine-Meuse estuary. By some standards, this area is not particularly large, and the Netherlands is often referred to even by the self-deprecating Dutch as a 'small' country. Granted, the area is about twice the size of Wales or half of Scotland and equal to the size of the states of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. Yet a definition of size that relies only upon landmass is far too limited. Even though just over 4,000 square kilometres of this area is uninhabitable, as it is covered by the water of rivers, canals and lakes, the remaining space is utilized with great efficiency to provide homes for 16.4 million people. With an average of 480 people per square kilometre, it is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. In terms of inhabitants it is 1.5 times the population of Belgium or Portugal, more than twice that of Austria or Switzerland, and more than Norway, Denmark and Finland combined. In the past the Dutch controlled a colonial empire smaller only than that of France and Britain, and today the gross national product of the Netherlands is among the highest in the world. 'Small' is thus quite relative and in some respects it is one of the 'largest' countries of the world.

Whether one chooses to call the country 'large' or 'small', it would have been smaller without the efforts of its population. Virtually no discussion of the Netherlands is complete without reference to the well-known adage, 'God made the world but the Dutch made Holland.' By draining lakes and marshes to create new land, the Dutch may have had more impact on the shape of their country than other peoples, but whoever may be said to have made it, we have the problem of what to call it. The official name is The Kingdom of the Netherlands, but legally this also includes kingdom outside Europe, namely Aruba and the other Dutch Antilles. In colloquial speech it is often called Holland, but this actually is the name of its once most famous province. The French call the country 'Les Pays-Bas', but this translates into 'the Low Countries' in English, and is then usually meant to apply to Belgium as well.

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In this book we will refer to the polity as the Netherlands. Its 12 modern provinces are shown in capital letters on Map 1.1. Thus, although there are many themes that could be used to begin a discussion of the political system of the Netherlands, the interplay of geography and people may serve as well as any other. There is little doubt that in their little corner of the world, the land contributed to shaping the people and the people have helped to shape the land. Understanding this relationship will help the reader to understand the society and politics of the country.

Map 1.1 *The Netherlands: Provinces and Major Cities*

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The Struggle Against the Water

Of course, the land area of the world began to take shape before people could have much influence on it. In many areas of the world this shape has changed little since the prehistoric days that determined its form. In others, the interplay of factors such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and/or water have altered the land even during the period of recorded history. The area of land identified as the Netherlands falls in the latter group.

During the Ice Age, British and Scandinavian glaciers grew together blocking the North Sea. The course of the Rhine and Meuse rivers was altered, although as the ice melted they partially returned to their old courses. The glaciers also brought the sand that began to form what have become the higher, southern provinces of the country. As the climate warmed and the ice melted, peat bogs began to form, first in the western part of the country, later more towards the east. In places, the sea flooded areas that had once been above water (Van Valkenburg, 1943; Van Keuning, 1965).

When the sea broke through the connection between England and France, the force of the water in the channel brought sand from the south and created the walls of sand dunes that are still characteristic of the Dutch coastline. Behind the dunes was a large lagoon that gradually began to fill with the sands and soil that the rivers brought from higher ground. Peat bogs, swamps and lakes characterized the land behind the dunes.

The earliest inhabitants of the low lands were tribes who came to the area to hunt reindeer. Gradually, the hunters and fishermen were joined by farmers and cattle herders. Sometime after 100 BC four waves of immigration took place, three Germanic ones from the north and a Celtic one from the south-east. The Greeks had vague ideas of the existence of the lands of the Celts, but it was Caesar's expeditions that brought the first direct contact between the inhabitants of the great civilizations and those of the lowlands. With the Romans also came the first recorded history of the area in the works of Tacitus and Pliny. It was the former who wrote of the legendary Batavians. Caesar and his successors pushed northward to the banks of the Rhine river, but to the Romans the area had little meaning other than the furthest extension of the Empire to the north.

The Rhine and Meuse rivers provided natural barriers for the Romans and, although the armies of Augustus crossed the rivers and included the Frisians in his Empire, the Romans later pulled back and never really subjected the inhabitants to the north. As Vlekke has written, 'the Romans set little store by the marshlands of the west and the north of the Low Countries which held no allure for them' (Vlekke, 1943).

Assaults by German tribes and by the sea finally drove the Romans from the area. The Franks gradually gained in power and pushed the Frisians back to the north, so that the Frankish kingdom of Charlemagne and his successors included much of the Low Countries. Frankish power brought with it the introduction of Christianity into the region. Frankish domination, however, did not greatly affect the social institutions

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of the people. The marshy areas of the north and west did not support the kind of large land ownership that was necessary to support feudalism so that this social system was never fully established in these areas. No nobility developed in what later became the provinces of Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht; instead, the Low Countries remained a territory of small landowners and free peasants. In remote areas of the north, free peasants were able to continue as democratic peasant republics for centuries. The area was less conducive to the development of a manorial system than to the development of cities, which sprang up at virtually every juncture of waters and at every harbour.

Three times in history the sea broke through the natural protective dunes to alter the landscape. About 300 BC the sea broke through via the estuaries of the Scheldt, Meuse and Rhine to inundate areas in the south-west of the country. The second principal incursion of the sea occurred about AD 270, and was a key factor in driving the Romans from the area. The third period of incursion began in the tenth or eleventh century and resulted in the flooding of large areas, creating, for example, the islands in the current provinces of South Holland and Zeeland. In the north, areas of dunes were washed away; now only small islands formed by the remnants of these dunes indicate where the coast once was. Behind these islands, new seas (or bays) were created, the largest of which was the Zuiderzee, which over a few centuries expanded to cover a substantial area of the north of Holland.

This last incursion led the increased populations of the area to take protective measures which were to alter the landscape. In about the eleventh century the first dikes were built to protect inhabited areas from flooding (Vlekke, 1943; Keuning, 1965). The threat of water came from three sources. In addition to the threat from the sea, there was the threat of periodic flooding from the great rivers. Moreover, the surplus of yearly rainfall had to be disposed of lest large areas revert at least seasonally into swamps. Thus, on the one hand, the systems of dikes were extended to cover increasingly large areas, and methods, including the use of windmills, were devised to drain off surplus water. By combining the use of dikes and drainage systems, areas of land could be reclaimed from the sea and from lakes.

From the very beginning, the battle against water was not something that could be left to an overlord (or a little boy putting his finger in the dike), but required the combined efforts of the population. Since everyone behind the dike profited, maintenance could not justifiably be left only to those whose land bordered the water. Water control boards were organized with the responsibility of maintaining the system. It is often claimed that, dating back at least to the thirteenth century, these were the first democratic organizations in the country and one of the oldest forms of democracy in Northern Europe.

Nature has thus left those who inhabit the area with what may be justly described as the ‘netherlands’ or ‘low lands’. No point is higher than about 30 metres above sea level. In the northern and western area of the country, most of the area varies between 0 and 2.5 metres below sea level. In some larger areas that have been drained the level is even lower; the area in which Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport is located lies 4.2 metres below sea level, and new areas have been created that once lay under as much as 6.9 metres of water of the Zuiderzee (Keuning, 1965).

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Today, although windmills no longer play a role in the system, dikes and drainage systems must nevertheless be maintained. More than half of the country must be artificially protected against water and more than half of the population live in areas that would be under water at least at high tide if protection were not maintained. The threat of inundation comes not only from the sea: in 1994 and 1995, some towns and polders behind river dikes were flooded, and the government hastily started a campaign to reinforce and heighten the dikes. There are dormant plans to drain yet another portion of the former Zuiderzee and proposals have been made to relocate Schiphol airport to an island to be built off the North Sea coast. It is the long history of the struggle against the water through the building of dikes and land reclamation through drainage that gives rise to the saying that ‘the Dutch built Holland’.

Three Boundaries

Both the people and nature have interacted to shape the land. However, the mere shape of the land is not the only factor of importance in understanding the relation between geography, social structure and politics. There are no mountains or natural boundaries separating the Dutch from their neighbours, and even modern satellite photographs will not reveal the important boundaries that separate peoples and have such an important impact upon them. In the area of the Rhine river delta, three boundaries – linguistic, religious and political – divide the peoples of the low lands. The fact that these three boundaries do not coincide influences the politics of both the Netherlands and its southern neighbour Belgium even today.

The Boundaries of Language and Religion

In his discussion of ‘The Borders of the Netherlands’, De Vrankrijker (1946) distinguishes ‘structural borders’, which he defines as natural borders or those resulting from geographical position, and ‘historical borders’, which simply through their long existence gain permanence and acceptance. The Rhine and Meuse rivers provided structural borders for the Romans, and although they never really subjugated the inhabitants to the north, they did leave a lasting imprint by building a highway from Cologne through Aachen and Tongeren to Bavai in northern France and on to the sea coast.

The building of this highway and the Roman colonisation along its track was one of the most important events in the Netherlands history. It determined the furthest extent of Germanic influence in the northwestern corner of the European continent and fixed for thousands of years to come the dividing line between Romanic and Germanic peoples in this area (De Vrankrijker, 1946).

The Roman highway and the structural border of the rivers thus introduced two rough, but discernible, dividing lines between north and south. To the north Germanic influences prevailed; to the south the Romans imposed their authority

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and customs. The highway became the boundary between Germanic and Romanic languages; to the north, Dutch is spoken, to the south, French. The rivers were to become the border between Rome and the Reformation, between Catholicism and Protestantism. As neither the linguistic nor the religious border eventually coincided with the political boundary between two countries, both would later play a role of political significance. As the influence of the language demarcation is felt in the area of the Low Countries now known as Belgium, it will not be discussed further in this book. However, no discussion of Dutch politics is complete without mention of religion.

The Political Boundary

At the end of the Middle Ages, the Low Countries were not excluded from the attempts to carve out larger entities that were to become the nation-states of Europe. The politics of this period is quite complicated, involving war, marriage and intrigue. As one scholar stated, '[I]t is obvious that the federation of the Netherlands provinces was primarily due to accidental circumstances' (Vlekke, 1943, p. 74). The beneficiaries of these accidents were the dukes of Burgundy, who were temporarily able to carve out a buffer state between France and Germany. Yet just as fate had brought Burgundy into existence it also brought its demise when the lands passed into the Hapsburg dynasty through the marriage of Duchess Mary to Maximilian of Austria, son of the Holy Roman Emperor.

Charles V, as a descendant of the Hapsburgs, combined the rule of the Low Countries with the throne of Spain, Naples and America, the princedom of Austria, and election as Holy Roman Emperor. He was the last of the 'natural' princes of the Low Countries, having been born in Ghent, speaking French as his mother tongue, but being well acquainted with Dutch (Vlekke, 1943). Upon his abdication in 1555, he passed the Low Countries and Spain to his son Philip II. In this accidental union, Philip was far more interested in Spain, although this might never have resulted in serious problems had not other events intervened (Schöffer, 1973). Philip never gained the loyalty his father had received, and the local authorities became more inclined to establish their independence. Revolt ensued when this flexing of local political muscle was combined with the forces of the Reformation.

Although the people of the Low Countries were known for their piety and devotion, they were aware of the excesses and faults of the Church, which were exposed and discussed by Erasmus and his followers. Even before the ascension of Philip to the throne, religious reformers, largely inspired by Zwingli, had become popular. In 1552, Charles V crushed an Anabaptist revolt by expanding the powers of the Inquisition, but the suppression of the Anabaptists was only a short-term success. Under these new powers, heretics could be prosecuted without regard for the traditional processes of law. Thus religion and politics became enmeshed as the struggle for religious freedom became intertwined with the fight to protect traditional political freedoms. Remnants of such groups came into contact with John Calvin,

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and Calvinism quickly became the dominant force in the Protestantism of the Low Countries.

With the abdication of Charles V, the stage was set for the conflict between Lowlands Calvinism and Spanish Catholicism. There was considerable discontent at all levels within the Low Countries, but it was the Calvinists who provided the backbone of the revolt against Philip, opposing the new king on political as well as religious grounds. The Calvinists had the organization and the discipline necessary to lead the revolt. In 1566 the churches in western Flanders were stormed; sculptured images were destroyed and all that was sacred to the Catholics was desecrated. The movement quickly spread from the south northwards to Amsterdam, Leeuwarden and Groningen. Just as quickly, however, this first revolt was suppressed, but further from Brussels the influence of Calvinism continued. Despite this initial stabilization of the situation, Philip chose not to attempt further pacification, but instead sent the Duke of Alva to centralize control. Never before had a Spaniard been appointed as governor of the Low Countries, and the zeal with which Alva attempted to carry out his orders made him and the king even more hated. Rather than pacify, Alva, through his ruthless enforcement of centralization and heavier taxation, helped to unite the national opposition.

This opposition was led by William of Orange, a German count of Nassau by birth, who had inherited rich lands in the Low Countries as well as the principality of Orange in southern France. He was educated at the court of Brussels and was a favourite of Charles V. A decent man, rather more intellectual than most of his rank, he sympathized with those who protested against the injustices of Spanish rule. Although he felt the initial Calvinist revolt to be inopportune, he became caught up in the events. After the suppression of the revolt by Alva, only he had the will and resources to continue. His attempt, with the help of French Huguenots and German Protestant princes, to invade the Low Countries in 1568 failed dismally. Although his own resources were eventually depleted, he continued to provide inspirational leadership.

When on 1 April 1572 the ‘Sea Beggars’ captured the town of Brill, the revolution spread rapidly. On 19 July representatives of the towns of Holland met in Dordrecht where William of Orange was proclaimed ‘Stadtholder’ (literally: *locum tenens*, or substitute, of the King; in practice, the governor and commander-in-chief) of Holland and Zeeland. However, without personal resources he was dependent upon the States-General (which is still the official name of the Dutch Parliament). In January 1579 the rebel northern provinces met at Utrecht to form ‘a closer union’ in which they were to retain their sovereignty, but would act as a single body in foreign policy.

Alva regrouped quickly in the south and, when the threat from France failed to materialize, headed north. Yet, even after his replacement the Spanish were never able to crush the revolt, and hostilities dragged on for 80 years. After William was assassinated in 1584, his son Maurice succeeded to the leadership and successfully reorganized the army to reconquer Groningen and the towns in Overijssel and Gelderland. He also moved south and occupied some Flemish towns, thus securing a buffer zone to protect Zeeland.

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With the domination of Spanish forces in the south, the Counter-Reformation was able to re-establish Catholicism, so that when Maurice recaptured parts of the area the inhabitants were firmly Catholic. The peace treaty of Westphalia in 1648 established a political border that was to the south of the religious border. To the south Hapsburg reign continued, with the new independent Republic of Seven United Provinces to the north. This situation was to continue throughout the remainder of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, until Napoleon conquered and eventually annexed the country. This 'French period', as the Napoleonic occupation is commonly referred to in the Netherlands, left an important imprint on the political institutions of the Netherlands, as we will discuss later in this chapter.

Upon the defeat of Napoleon, the Congress of Vienna was convened to redraw the map of Europe. In an effort to create a buffer state between the major powers, the southern provinces were once again united with the north. The Netherlands was raised to the status of a kingdom, with William I as Monarch and Grand Duke of Luxembourg. Perhaps with patience and understanding William could have succeeded in undoing the effects of 250 years of separate development, yet this was not his manner and in his haste to establish a modern, centralized state he quickly alienated many of his new subjects in the south. Catholics feared his Protestantism and his support of state over church schools. They also opposed him in his attempts to centralize authority at the expense of local interests. Liberals, on the other hand, supported him in his centralizing and anticlerical tendencies, but opposed his restrictions on the freedom of the press and his promotion of Dutch interests. The King favoured Dutch over Belgians in his appointments and had decreed that Dutch was to be the official language in the Flemish areas. After 20 years of 'Frenchification' during the Napoleonic occupation, the Flemish elite resented the imposition of Dutch as the official language. Despite their own differences, Catholics and Liberals joined in a 'union of oppositions' to rid the Belgians once again of 'foreign' oppression. On 23 November 1830, the National Congress declared an independent Belgium and excluded the House of Orange from the possibility of ever ascending to the throne.

Thus, after only 15 years of unification, the Netherlands and Belgium were again separated. Hostilities continued for several years, but in 1839 King William accepted terms of separation. Through the 'forces' of history, three boundaries had thus been drawn through the territory at the mouth of the Rhine. Yet none of these three – the political, religious or linguistic – coincided. The political boundary which defined the two nation states left each with a boundary dividing it internally, and producing the basis for an important source of political cleavage. Belgium, to the south, was relatively homogeneous religiously, but divided into French- and Dutch-speaking areas. The Netherlands, to the north, was linguistically homogeneous (with the exception of the northern province of Friesland, where Frisian is also spoken), but divided into predominantly Protestant and predominantly Catholic areas.

Apart from a temporary change of the Dutch–German border after the Second World War, the political boundaries of the Dutch state within Europe have not changed since 1839. Change has taken place, however, in Dutch territories outside

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Europe as a result of decolonization, especially after the Second World War. The Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies reinforced the independence movement there, and immediately after the war this movement declared independence unilaterally and took up arms against the Dutch. The Netherlands was not prepared to give up the colony, and when negotiations failed it waged two large-scale military campaigns (euphemistically called 'police actions') in 1947 and 1948. Militarily, these campaigns were successful in terms of regained control over the islands and the capture of the leaders of the independence movement. Politically, however, they proved disastrous: the Netherlands became one of the first countries to be condemned by the UN Security Council and US pressure on the Dutch government finally forced acceptance of Indonesian independence in 1949. In the early 1960s history repeated itself when Indonesian forces infiltrated Dutch New Guinea (Irian Jaya). The Dutch defended their colony militarily, but the USA forced the Dutch to give up their last colony in Asia. By the 1970s the Dutch had learned their lesson, and they almost forced independence upon their South American colony of Surinam in 1975. Today, only the small Caribbean islands of the Dutch Antilles remain within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Aruba and the other Antilles form two self-governed units whose relationship with the European Netherlands is regulated in 'the Kingdom Charter', a document halfway between a constitution and a treaty. Box 1.1 summarizes important events of Dutch history.

A Nation of Joiners

The geography and history of the Netherlands are relatively easy to define and describe compared with the Dutch national identity (see Box 1.2). An aspect that seems to be overlooked in recent efforts to define what makes a Dutch citizen is the rich civil society of the Netherlands. A study of membership in voluntary associations in the early 1990s listed the Netherlands as one of the 'Nations of Joiners' (Curtis *et al.*, 2001). In fact, this study of levels of voluntary association membership across 33 democratic countries, which included 16 types of voluntary organizations, found that Dutch citizens had the highest average number of memberships. Even when trade unions and religious organizations were excluded, the Dutch still had the highest average number of memberships. When only those organizations in which an individual was actively engaged in unpaid work for the organization were included, the Netherlands still ranked fourth behind Canada, the United States, and the former East Germany (ibid.).

Before approximately 1967, Dutch civil society consisted of three to four highly organized subcultures (see Chapter 2). The role of citizen activity in this period was ambiguous, even contradictory. On the one hand, citizens were mobilized to be active within their subculture's organizations such as churches, trade unions, political parties and so on. On the other hand, the role of the citizen was generally a passive one (Daalder, 1974). The members of the subcultural organizations gave their trust to the leaders who could then negotiate the necessary compromises between the

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BOX 1.1

Important Dates in Dutch History

1st century BC to 4th century AD	Romans occupy the southern portion of the low countries.
7th century	Conversion to Christianity carried out largely in this period.
12th and 13th centuries	Expansion of towns and granting of many city charters.
13th and 14th centuries	Foundation of the higher water control boards (‘*hoogheemraadschappen*’) to coordinate control of water.
1384–1579	Burgundian and Hapsburg rule.
1566	Revolt breaks out against Philip II of Spain.
	William (the Silent) of Orange eventually becomes leader of the revolt.
1579	Union of Utrecht; northern provinces first agree to cooperate.
1623	Amboina Massacre.
1648	Peace of Westphalia ends the Eighty Years War; Spain acknowledges the independence of the Netherlands.
17th century	The ‘Golden Age’.
1795–1813	Period of French Rule, from 1795 until 1806 as the Batavian Republic.
1815	Kingdom of the Netherlands founded at the Congress of Vienna.
1830–39	Belgians revolt, Belgium leaves the Kingdom.
1848	Introduction of ministerial responsibility.
1914–18	The Netherlands remains neutral during the First World War; Kaiser Wilhelm seeks refuge following the war.
1917	Great Pacification’, resulting in universal male suffrage, proportional representation, and state financing of church schools.
1940–45	German forces occupy the Netherlands.
1949	Former Indonesian colonies gain independence.
1952–58	The Netherlands becomes a founding member of the European Economic Community.
2002	Assassination of populist politician Pim Fortuyn; The Netherlands exchanges the guilder for the euro.

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BOX 1.2

What Makes One Dutch?

In September 2007, Princess Maxima made a speech at the presentation of a report entitled *Identification with the Netherlands* that was prepared by the Scientific Council for Government Policy. The princess, who was born in Argentina and married crown prince Willem-Alexander in 2002, described her 7-year journey to become Dutch and her search for the Dutch identity. There is no 'Dutch' identity and no such thing as 'the' Dutchman, or 'the' Argentinian, she stated. 'The Netherlands is just one cookie with your coffee, but it also enormous hospitality. It is large windows and throwing the curtains wide open, but it is also privacy and *gezelligheid*' [a Dutch term that cannot be properly translated, but implies cosiness, warmth, and friendliness].

The report that was presented reached somewhat similar conclusions, that a clear and unequivocal Dutch identity does not exist, but it was the speech by the princess that was the focus of criticism. From the right, Geert Wilders of the Freedom Party, called it 'well-intentioned politically correct silliness'. Rita Verdonk, former Minister of Immigration and Integration, and founder of the new party, Proud of the Netherlands, charged that Maxima did not understand how the Dutch people felt. 'She sees herself first as a citizen of the world, then European and only then as Dutch; most Dutch see it the other way around.' Other parties granted the princess the right to her own personal observations, but were critical of the report. A Christian Democrat spokesperson stated: 'The national identity does exist. The Monarchy is itself a good example. Of course, there is pluriformity, but we have a collective history and national symbols that bind the Dutch people.'

But what exactly is it that binds the Dutch people? Perhaps some limited insight can be provided. In an effort to limit immigration into the Netherlands to people who might be expected to integrate well into Dutch society, the government introduced a 'Civic Integration' examination. As the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs states:

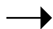
> As of 15 March 2006, certain categories of aliens seeking to settle in the Netherlands who need an authorization for temporary stay to enter the country will have to take an integration test before coming to the Netherlands. This mainly concerns people who want to marry someone in the Netherlands or join family members. Religious leaders (such as imams or other clergy) coming to work in the Netherlands will also have to take the examination.

In addition to knowledge of the Dutch language, the examination tests knowledge of Dutch society. For that purpose, the exam contains 30 questions out of a list of 100 questions that are made public. Presumably, these questions provide some insight into Dutch identity, or at least into what the Dutch government considers essential for potential immigrants to know about Dutch society in order to blend in.

In attempting to define national identity, the report *Identification with the Netherlands* distinguished various dimensions of the concept, at least four of which, a territorial, a cultural, a historical and a political dimension, can be found in the examination questions.

The *territorial* dimension is tested by questions such as:

- Is the Netherlands larger than Turkey and Morocco?
- What does the name "Netherlands" imply?



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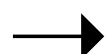

- What is a dike, and what would happen if the dikes were not there?
- Does small imply that only few people live in the Netherlands?

The *cultural* dimension of identity is represented by a variety of questions.

- What is typical of Dutch traffic? (Answer: bicycles).
- Are birthdays celebrated in the Netherlands?
- If someone goes for a visit, do they generally make an appointment or do they just drop in?
- At school, are there separate classes for boys and girls, or are they together in the class?
- When one meets, does one first offer one's hand or immediately sit down?
- May women in the Netherlands themselves choose whom they will marry?
- Who works in the Netherlands, just men or men and women?
- (And then the subtle reminder:) when should you look for work, as soon as possible or later?
- What is the language spoken in the Netherlands?
- Is it important to learn Dutch as soon as possible?
- Why is it good to watch Dutch television with your children?

Judging by the questions, the *historical* dimension is summed up by the Revolution, the Golden Age, the Second World War and the colonial past.

- Who is in this picture? (Answer: William the Silent/William of Orange.)
- How long did the war with Spain last?
- Were the ships of the United East India Company for fishing or trade?
- Who painted this painting? (Answer: Rembrandt)?
- Which country occupied the Netherlands during the Second World War?
- Why is Anne Frank famous?
- Which former colony became independent soon after the Second World War?

Clearly, the monarchy is deemed to be an important part of the national identity:

- Where does the Queen live?
- Who is in this picture? (Answer: Prince Willem-Alexander and Princess Maxima.)
- What country does Princess Maxima come from?

The following questions test the *political* dimension of Dutch national identity:

- What is the most important law in the Netherlands?
- Who is the chair of the Council of Ministers: the Prime Minster or the Queen?
- How often are elections held, every four years or every six years?
- Is there separation of church and state in the Netherlands?
- Does the Netherlands have a state religion or are there many religions?
- Is discrimination tolerated or punishable by law?
- Do women have more rights than men do or the same rights?
- Are newspapers, radio and television free in their opinions?
- Is homosexuality allowed or punishable?
- Is female circumcision allowed or punishable?
- Is it allowed to hit women or is this punishable?

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subcultures. The role of the citizen was basically to provide support for the leadership without making too many demands.

Much has changed since the late 1960s. Subcultural organizations weakened in general, but the impact was most clear on the religious subcultures. From being one of the more religious societies in Europe, the Netherlands has become the society within Europe with the lowest percentage of religious adherents (although not the lowest in church attendance) (SCP, 2000, p. 133). This secularization of society has had far-reaching effects on the politics of the country, as will be seen regularly throughout this book.

At the same time, a ‘silent revolution’ helped change the Netherlands in the direction of a ‘post-materialist’ society (Inglehart, 1977; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). These changes have brought a shift from ‘materialist’ associations to ‘post-materialist’ organizations. Thus, although membership in trade unions has dropped substantially and is below the average for Europe (SCP, 2000, p. 132), the Dutch have become supporters of other organizations. The Dutch have the highest percentage of citizens giving support to Greenpeace in Europe; they are second only to Switzerland in support for World Wildlife Fund and only to Iceland in membership of Amnesty International; and they are among the strongest supporters of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières. They rank second only to Sweden in membership in consumer organizations, and are second only to Denmark in membership in a sports club. Only Denmark and Sweden have lower percentages of persons not belonging to any sort of organization. In many cases, the differences between the top and the bottom countries are quite substantial (SCP, 2000, p. 157).

However, the same organization that published these comparisons with other countries has noted shifts in the organizations to which citizens belong and an overall decline in membership and activities in voluntary associations. Between 1994 and 2003, membership of political parties declined 17 per cent, of churches 9 per cent, and of women’s organizations 33 per cent. A growth was seen in nature and environmental organizations (+34 per cent), consumer organizations (+22 per cent) and organizations focusing on sport and recreation (+10 per cent). Within organizations, there has been a decline in the number of active members in organizations. The report noted that the decline in memberships and activity did not generally indicate a decline in interest in the purposes of these organizations, but that there were now many other ways that citizens could now express their interests and affinities (De Hart, 2005).

In the 2006 Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, respondents were asked to indicate whether they were a member of various types of organizations. Table 1.1 lists the percentages that indicated their membership in the various types.

The categories are not fully equivalent to those of other studies and dealing with only a single year they cannot show trends, but they do support conclusions found elsewhere. For example, membership in more traditional organizations as churches and trade unions is equalled or exceeded by membership in post-materialist organizations such as environmental organizations and organizations related to the Third World, human rights or peace. The largest percentage is that for sports clubs, which are found in the Netherlands for almost any conceivable sport. Even excluding churches and trade

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Table 1.1 *Membership of Organizations, 2006*

Church	32%
Trade union	19%
Professional organization	12%
Employers' organization	3%
Neighbourhood organization	26%
Environmental organization	30%
Third World, human rights or peace organization	19%
Music or cultural organization	16%
Sports club	38%
Other	15%

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 2006.

unions, these data show that two-thirds of Dutch citizens are member of one or more organizations. Indeed, the country still seems to be a country of joiners.

In Chapter 3, membership of political parties is discussed. As has just been stated, this has been one type of organization that has declined in membership. However, Dekker (2000) has argued that focusing only on changes in membership of political parties, religious groups and trade unions is sufficient no longer to understand how Dutch citizens participate in civic life. He has grouped civic activities into five categories to help understand these changes: informal opinion formation, party participation, mobilization, activism, and protest potential. Studying the percentage of citizens making use of these five types of activities between 1972 and 1998, he found that two categories show a decline. 'Party participation', including membership and any activity on behalf of a party during an election, fluctuated between 25 and 30 per cent until 1994, after which time the figure dropped to only 18 per cent. 'Mobilization', which includes contacting a public official about a political or societal problem and/or stimulating an organization to take action concerning such a problem, dropped from 42 per cent in 1972 to a low of 22 per cent in 1986, fluctuating since. One category shows no trend: 'informal opinion formation', a category based on self-reported active participation in discussion of political questions, has been fairly stable, with about half, or just under, of the population reporting participation of this type. Finally, two types of activity have become more popular. 'Activism' includes participation in so-called 'action groups' or taking part in a demonstration. Changes in question wording must be taken into account when comparing the figures for this category, but Dekker concludes that this type of activity rose between 1977 and 1998. 'Protest potential' also seemed to be on the rise. This category comprised the self-reported potential for taking action if an Act of Parliament were felt to be unfair or unjust. Whereas the percentages in the 1970s and 1980s were in the teens, those in the 1990s were close to 25 per cent.

Table 1.2 gives more recent figures for some political activities.

Although these percentages are in general lower than for memberships in organizations, they require a greater level of activity than merely paying membership dues or making a contribution. Of interest is the high percentage that indicated having taken part in a political discussion or action via the internet, email or SMS.

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Table 1.2 *Percentages Reporting having Participated in Various Political Activities, 2006*

Sought assistance via radio, television or newspaper	10%
Sought assistance of political party or organization	5%
Participated in a hearing organized by government	11%
Sought contact with politician or civil servant	11%
Taken part in action group	4%
Taken part in protest	7%
Via internet, email or SMS taken part in a political discussion or action	18%
Other	4%

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 2006.

This indicates that new technological developments are also changing the face of political participation. In general, although this is the only percentage that exceeds 11 per cent, citizens have the choice of various forms of activity. Looking across all activities, approximately one-third of the respondents indicated having taken part in one of these activities. Respondents were also asked how great was the chance that they would take action if they found a bill before Parliament to be unjust. Approximately 20 per cent said the chance was good or very good, and an additional 50 per cent said there was some chance they would take action.

There is little indication in this or previous election studies that voters are less interested in political questions or that they are discussing them less. Although they may not be as active in party affairs, they indicate a willingness to step in if things go wrong. Dekker refers to the concept of the 'monitorial citizen' introduced by Schudson: not a citizen constantly gathering political information or engaged in political debate, but someone who while concentrated on his own affairs keeps a watchful eye on the collective interest and is willing to step in if necessary (Dekker, 2000, p. 89).

Constitutional Development

The international events establishing the borders of the Netherlands also had a profound impact on the Dutch Constitution. Little is left to remind the current observer of the Republic of the Seven United Provinces, but these changes rarely resulted from purely domestic developments. The Republic was a loose confederacy with little in the form of national political institutions. As Schama put it, 'Indeed national unification in the case of the Dutch is a contradiction in terms since they had come into being as a nation expressly to avoid becoming a state' (Schama, 1987, p. 62). Power rested firmly in the hands of the individual provinces. The 'French period' lasted only from 1795 to 1813, but the Napoleonic occupation left the country highly centralized. Local customs and regulations were set aside by national legislation modelled after the French codifications; the judiciary was reformed and centralized; a national tax system was introduced; the once sovereign provinces were relegated to the status of French *départements* and, as we will see in Chapter 8, now form the most impotent of the three layers of government. Today, it is only in other languages that the confederal history of the country is reflected

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in the plural of its name (the Netherlands, Les Pays-Bas). The Dutch themselves refer to it as 'Koninkjrik der Nederlanden', in the singular. It is true that regional elites continued to play a role for some considerable time after the provinces' institutional power was broken, and it is also true that the French found support among parts of the elite who felt that the confederal Republic had outlived its use and radical reform was necessary. Yet, the French influence has been crucial: between 1795 and 1798 the Dutch National Assembly was deadlocked among federalists, unitarists and moderates, despite the French presence and despite the exclusion of the Orangists. After a first draft of the Constitution was voted down in a referendum, a new Assembly was elected, reflecting the same divisions. The French then instigated, or at least supported militarily, a coup d'état by the unitarists and pushed through a draft Constitution made in France.

The French must share responsibility with the British for another radical change, the transition from republic to monarchy (Box 1.3). His role in the struggle against Spain made William of Orange the 'father of the fatherland', and ever since the House of Orange has played a prominent role in Dutch history. As 'Stadtholders', they provided military leadership, but even in this respect they were dependent on provincial governing bodies. Only occasionally did all provinces appoint the Prince of Orange as stadtholder, and there have been times when the provincial elites preferred a 'stadtholder-less period' (as they are known in Dutch history books) to curb the influence of the House of Orange. The French first maintained the Netherlands as a Republic, but before annexing the country outright the emperor created a Kingdom of Holland with his brother Louis on the throne. This monarchical experiment had no lasting effect except for the fact that King William I did later fall back on some of the arrangements of 1806–10. When the Prince of Orange returned to the Netherlands from exile in London after the defeat of Napoleon in 1813, he was met on the beach near The Hague by three patricians who, acting of their own accord and without any legitimate basis, offered him the sovereignty of the country. This was formalized and legitimized on 12 February 1815 when, as already mentioned, the Congress of Vienna created the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Congress acted on a proposal by the British, who may have done so out of a geopolitical desire to have a strong buffer state north of France, or to give the Prince of Orange satisfaction for the fact that the English princess had broken off her engagement to the Dutch prince. Whatever motivated the British proposal, it is clear that not only the unitary state but also 'the Dutch monarchy is no home-grown product' (Cramer, 1980, p. 11). However, except for a half-hearted attempt at a socialist revolution in 1918, a return to republican government has never been seriously considered.

To the list of foreign influences we must add the Belgian contribution. As we already mentioned, the enforced union of the Dutch and the Belgians in 1815 was shortlived, but it did leave its imprint on the Dutch Constitution in the form of a bicameral parliament. We saw how the soil conditions in the once powerful provinces of Holland and Zeeland had not been conducive to the development of a landed gentry, and being a republic for two centuries had not strengthened the role of what little aristocracy there was in the northern Netherlands. Both factors did not apply to the Austrian Netherlands, and the nobility had fared better there.

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BOX 1.3

The Dutch Monarchy

Since the introduction of the monarchy in 1815, the office has been filled by the following individuals:

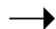
William I	1815–40
William II	1840–49
William III	1849–90
Emma (regent)	1890–8
Wilhelmina	1898–1948
Juliana	1948–80
Beatrix	1980–

Although the Constitution speaks only of a King, in the absence of male heirs in the House of Orange, for over a century, the 'King' has been a Queen. Only in 1983 was the Constitution altered to designate the oldest child of the monarch as heir to the throne, irrespective of the child's sex. The only political involvement in the succession is the constitutional requirement of parliamentary permission for a marriage by a ruling monarch or heir to the throne. Without such permission, the marriage results in exclusion from the line of succession.

Only twice has the government declined to ask parliamentary permission for a royal marriage: in 1968, Irene, sister of then Crown Princess Beatrix, was engaged to marry Don Carlos Hugo, at that time a pretender to the same Spanish throne from which the Dutch had liberated themselves after an 80-years' struggle. The fact that Princess Irene converted from the traditional Protestantism of the House of Orange to Catholicism also played a role in that decision. Religion was no longer a consideration in 2001, when Parliament gave permission for the marriage in 2002 of Crown Prince William-Alexander to a Roman Catholic woman, Maxima Zorreguieta. If that marriage was somewhat controversial, it was because the father of the bride had been a junior minister in the Videla dictatorship in Argentina. In 2003, the government refused a request to seek parliamentary permission for their marriage from the Crown Prince's brother, Prince Friso, and his fiancée Mabel Wisse Smit in a controversy over the latter's previous contacts with a well-known criminal.

Queen Beatrix, Crown Prince Willem-Alexander and his wife, Princess Maxima, receive annual grants from the state totalling just under €6 million in 2007. More than three-quarters of this amount is to pay salaries of staff and to offset costs in relation to their public functions; less than a quarter is received as salary. In addition, according to an appendix to the annual report of the Royal Household, indirect costs including maintenance of palaces, transportation, security, state visit and special events cost approximately 100 million euros. However, there was some controversy in 2008 over whether this was an accurate accounting of all indirect costs. In terms of its private fortune, the Dutch royal family is still one of the world's wealthiest families.

The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy, and the role of the Queen is primarily that of a ceremonial head of state. Each year, on the third Tuesday in September ('Prince's Day'), the Queen ceremonially opens the Parliamentary year by reading the 'Speech from the Throne'. The message itself is, however, prepared by the Cabinet,



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just as the Cabinet is ultimately responsible for everything the Queen and other members of the royal household say and do in public. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the Queen has no political influence. She receives the Prime Minister each Monday to discuss affairs of state, and receives visits by the other ministers several times a year. Although the contents of these meetings are not made public (the 'Secret of the Palace'), ministers have admitted that the Queen's long experience and diligent attention to public issues make her an influential sparring partner.

It is unlikely that the relationship between Queen and Cabinet is without conflicts, but few of these conflicts have become public knowledge. For example, in 1948 Queen Juliana refused to confirm the death sentences of three German war criminals, and these sentences were subsequently changed to life imprisonment. In the Lockheed Affair of 1975–6 the Cabinet dropped all thoughts of criminal proceedings against Prince Bernhard after Queen Juliana, his wife, reportedly threatened to abdicate (see also Chapter 2). In 1972 the Cabinet suddenly withdrew a bill regulating membership of the royal household after it had been amended in Parliament to restrict the number of members falling under ministerial responsibility. It was rumoured that the Queen had threatened to withhold her constitutionally required signature to the amended bill. In 1996, the Minister of Foreign Affairs inadvertently admitted that it was primarily at the Queen's insistence that the government opened an embassy in Jordan. Finally, the government was embarrassed when news broke in 1998 that the Crown Prince would become a member of the International Olympic Committee, which was then riddled by corruption scandals. After difficult negotiations with the Queen and the Crown Prince, the government gave in, but publicly informed the IOC that

> The Prince has agreed to abstain from participation in any IOC decision-making which is clearly of a political nature. It has also been agreed … that on any occasion on which there is doubt about the political significance of the IOC decision, he will consult the Netherlands Minister of Foreign Affairs. (Quoted in Gosman and Secker, 2000, p. A0400-22)

In addition to such incidents, the Queen's influence is most clearly seen in her role in forming new coalition cabinets (see Chapter 5).

Politicians may occasionally complain about royal interference, but any criticism of the monarchy is constrained by its popularity in the general population. It is generally assumed that this popularity received an enormous boost during the Second World War. When the country was invaded by German troops in May 1940, Queen Wilhelmina went into exile in London for the duration of the war. She gained a reputation as 'the only man' in an often indecisive Dutch government-in-exile, and became the symbol of resistance against the Nazi occupation through regular radio speeches. Since then surveys have never found more than 10 per cent of the population in favour of abolishing the monarchy. Of the major political parties only the Labour Party is formally committed to a return to a republican form of government, but, ironically, three times it has been a Labour Prime Minister who has extricated the House of Orange from a potential constitutional crisis: in the 1950s when Queen Juliana came under the influence of a faith-healer; in the 1970s when the prince-consort was accused of having accepted bribes from the Lockheed company; and in 2000–1 over the past of the Crown Prince's prospective father-in-law. What remains to be seen, however, is whether the popularity of the monarchy will be affected when, eventually, the Crown Prince will succeed his mother, and after more than a century the Dutch will have a male monarch again.

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The southern aristocracy was not content with merely being one of the estates represented in the States-General, as was the northern tradition. Thus a First Chamber, or Senate, was created, its members to be appointed for life by the king, in which Belgian aristocrats were joined by Dutch patricians and hastily created new Dutch peers. The First Chamber remained after the Belgians left. The method by which it is composed is the single institutional aspect of the Constitution that has been changed most often, which testifies to its lack of domestic roots (see Chapter 6). Yet proposals to abolish the First Chamber, although regularly made, have never met with success, if only because, according to the Constitution, the First Chamber must assent to its own abolition.

A unitary state, a monarchy, bicameralism: these have been fundamental characteristics of the Dutch political system since 1815. None was endogenous, but none has ever been seriously challenged. Since 1815 the Constitution has been revised 15 times, but only two of these changes altered basic governmental institutions: the introduction of direct elections and a parliamentary system of government in 1848, and of proportional representation and universal male suffrage in 1917 (female enfranchisement followed only 2 years later). These two reforms were not imposed from abroad, but international events played a major role in their introduction. This is especially true with respect to the introduction of ministerial responsibility, the first and crucial step towards a parliamentary system. This reform of 1848 was initiated by the king himself in reaction to the February Revolution in France. After hearing of those events, he quickly set aside his rivalry with the Belgian King and sought support from Prussia. When the revolution spread to Germany in March, King William II, left on his own, decided to steal the revolutionaries' thunder by commissioning a constitutional revision. As the King himself admitted, on 16 March 1848 he changed 'from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal within 24 hours' (Boogman, 1978, p. 51). The reform of 1848, drafted mainly by the liberal leader Thorbecke, brought direct elections and ministerial responsibility to Parliament, although it took years for the implications of that latter change (the necessity for a government to enjoy the confidence of a parliamentary majority) to take hold.

The changes of 1917 were less influenced by foreign powers and circumstances during the First World War. The political parties at the time were bitterly divided, and the war, during which the Netherlands maintained a precarious neutrality, certainly helped to rally the parties around the common interest. The major issues to be resolved were the financial position of religious schools and the suffrage. In 1913 two parliamentary commissions, in which the leaders of all major parties were represented, were charged with the task of finding a solution for the two problems. This proved no easy assignment, and only after years of negotiations was a package deal, known as 'The Great Pacification of 1917', hammered out containing, in addition to state financing of religious schools, the introduction of universal male suffrage and an electoral system of proportional representation (see Chapter 2).

Since 1917 only one opportunity for foreign interference with Dutch political institutions has presented itself: the Second World War. Although the German occupation still has enormous consequences for Dutch culture and for Dutch foreign policy, historians emphasize the constitutional continuity between the pre- and postwar

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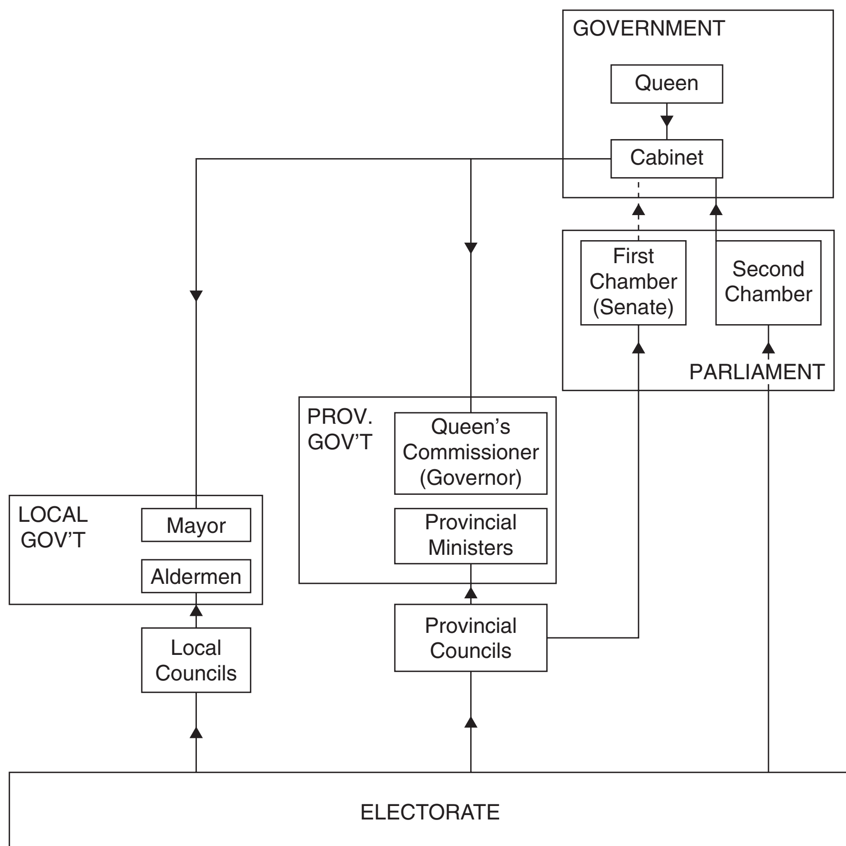
periods. As Blom concludes: 'Dutch political institutions triumphantly withstood the test of the war. Though during the war most of them were temporarily suspended, they reappeared virtually unchanged at the end of the war' (Blom, 1977, p. 247). The German occupation was insufficiently subtle as to rule through institutional engineering and left little to inherit. Perhaps a partial exception should be made for the institutionalisation of corporatist organizations that were to become so characteristic of Dutch socio-economic policy-making (see Chapters 7 and 9). Before the war, corporatist reforms had been proposed, especially by Catholics, but it was the Germans not the Dutch who made a start with the corporatist reorganization of economic life. After the war these corporatist bodies were modified (fewer powers for the chairman, better representation of labour), but not dismantled, and the German legacy became the starting-point for further efforts in this direction by the Dutch government (see Chapter 7).

With the exception of the creation of corporatist bodies and their mention in the Constitution and a few other, minor, amendments, the constitutional framework of today, represented graphically in Figure 1.1, has remained unchanged since 1917.

Figure 1.1 *The Constitutional Framework of Dutch Politics*



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To change the Constitution a special procedure and a qualified majority is needed. Any constitutional amendment first needs an ordinary majority in both Houses of Parliament; Parliament then has to be dissolved (this is usually planned to coincide with scheduled elections), and after elections both Houses must vote on the proposal again. In this second reading a two-thirds majority is needed.

This discussion of the historical and constitutional development of the country has provided an initial introduction to the main institutions and actors in the governance and politics of the Netherlands. The next chapter introduces the developments in the cultural context within which these institutions and actors must function. There we discuss how religious and social minorities led to the development of a social system of 'verzuiling' and a political style of consociationalism or consensus democracy. Having thus set the stage, the subsequent chapters look at the role of individual actors and institutions and their contribution to the governance of the Netherlands: the parties (Chapter 3), elections (Chapter 4), the core executive (Chapter 5), Parliament (Chapter 6), the bureaucracy, organized interests and the judiciary (Chapter 7), and subnational and supranational (that is, European) governments (Chapter 8). To illustrate the outcome of the interplay between these actors and institutions, two chapters analyse two policy domains, socio-economic policy (Chapter 9) and foreign policy (Chapter 10), selected because they have attracted the most attention from foreign observers and because they represent very different styles of policy-making. These chapters also introduce the economic and international environment of Dutch politics. The final chapter seeks to integrate the main findings, and, after an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Dutch system of governance, assesses its prospects.

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Key: **bold** = extended discussion; b = box; f = figure; m = map; n = note; t = table.

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