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## **Two-party versus multi-party: The Netherlands and Britain**

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The starting point of this comparison is the evidence in the Netherlands of articulate and widespread criticism of the indigenous party system. The criticism ranges in form and depth from disquiet about the appropriateness of the existing multi-party situation, to radical attacks on the political structure <sup>2</sup>. The evidence is available from a large variety of sources. The output of political studies has become increasingly iconoclastic during the past decade. In an article on "Social Change and the Rise of Political Studies", published in 1970 <sup>3</sup>, P. J. A. Ter Hoeven reviewed this output and in two sentences set the scene for the transformation from acquiescence to challenge:

"Until recently politics in the Netherlands were of exemplary stability..."  
 "Within the space of five years the structure began to crack at its most vital points."

Critiques of a number of aspects of the political and party systems have appeared, since 1965, in the political science periodical *Acta Politica*. Perhaps the most sustained indictment of the traditional system (though it does not seem to have circulated widely among Dutch political leaders) is set out in Arend Lijphart's book, *The Politics of Accommodation*, published in the U.S.A. in 1968. But the criticism is by no means confined to the conjectures of academic analysts. It is expressed in the emergence of new political parties, notably the Farmers Party in 1963, Democrats '66 and Democratic Socialists '70, and it is reflected in the support which each has achieved in the first elections they have contested. It has also penetrated to politicians in the major parties, and the framers of election programmes, in 1971 especially, have become acutely conscious of an insistent questioning of the rationale of party strategy and behaviour.

#### Current Criticisms

The criticism has crystallised into a number of specific contentions, all of which

<sup>1</sup> The approach followed in this article is that of trying to identify how far the party systems of the Netherlands and Britain fulfill some rather simple criteria of performance in relation to current criticisms of the former. It does not consciously adhere to any school of conceptual analysis, though it may not be immune from what Flanigan and Fogelman call "eclectic functionalism". *Contemporary Political Analysis*, ed. J. C. Charlesworth, Cap. 4, 'Functional Analysis', p. 80, New York 1967.

<sup>2</sup> In this article the terms *political structure* and *political system* both refer to the pattern of national institutions comprised by the government, parliament, the political parties and the electorate. The word *structure* specifies the formal arrangement of this pattern; the word *system* indicates the *modus operandi* of the components. The term *party system* is used to describe both the institutional and the operational activities of the political parties.

<sup>3</sup> *Sociologia Neerlandica*. Vol. VI, No. II, 1970, pp. 108-120.

are familiar enough to those versed in Dutch politics. They may be summarised as follows:

*1, The recurrently inconclusive outcome of elections.* — This refers to the fragmentation of electoral support among, in 1971, seven major parties (i.e. those securing more than 5% of the total vote) and more than twenty minor parties. Such a diffusion of support prevents and has traditionally prevented any single party or party grouping from achieving a parliamentary majority. The situation does not arise directly from the electoral arrangements, because there was a multi-party pattern long before the introduction of proportional representation in 1917. Its roots lie in the historical circumstance of diverse and separate social and religious groups within the population. Both the cohesion of these groups and the divergences between them are generally represented as declining, as a consequence of recent social and economic change. The imperative of reconciliation between the groups, which has been one of the dominant themes of political life in the Netherlands since the latter half of the nineteenth century, is therefore weakening. This has opened the way to expectations of a more clear-cut party system with more dynamic objectives.

*2, The unresponsiveness of cabinet formation to electoral fluctuation.* — Here the inherent ambivalence of the multi-party situation is seen in its sharpest focus. The electoral arrangements allow voting support for each party to be translated, directly and arithmetically, into parliamentary representation. At this level the political system is impeccably and unusually sensitive to voter preference <sup>4</sup>. At the level of cabinet formation, however, the sensitivity is blunted by the need to compile a parliamentary majority on which a government can be based. This need may over-ride the evidence of relative success or failure in the elections by individual parties. In 1967 two parties which had lost seats in the elections were admitted to the four party government — the Catholic Peoples Party as a major partner, even though its holding had declined from 50 to 42 seats. In 1971 the five party coalition government which eventually took office included four parties which had lost seats at the elections.

*3, Delays in cabinet formation.* — The formation of a cabinet after the elections of April 1971, occupied 63 days of negotiation, even though the negotiations were carried on by the same parties throughout, under the aegis of a single formateur. This period conforms exactly with the average duration of cabinet

<sup>4</sup> The fraction of the total vote needed to obtain a seat is 1/150 or 0.67% which is only 0.17% above the threshold for the return of deposits. Arend Lijphart observes that this is "the world's most extreme P.R. system". *Political Behaviour in Modern Industrial Society*, ed. R. Rose, 1971.

formation following elections since the war<sup>5</sup>. These delays are scarcely a pathological feature, since the system depends upon the patient reconciliation of the ambitions of a number of minority parties; and they do not connote the kind of governmental instability associated with the French Fourth Republic. It is nevertheless a vulnerable aspect of the party system in relation to the political structure, that of the 25 years since the war, a total of nearly two years have been devoted to the prolonged, esoteric task of cabinet formation.

4, *The unaccountability of party strategy.* — This criticism covers a whole terrain of controversy about the 'accommodation' characteristics of Dutch politics, which Lijphart has comprehensively dissected<sup>6</sup>. One of the sharpest forms of the criticism concerns the reluctance of party leaders to commit themselves before elections to any prescribed formula for post-election strategy. The voter, it is argued, has no certain knowledge where his party will end up in the bargaining process which surrounds the compilation of a governing coalition. Nor does he know how much of his party's programme will be preserved or implemented if the party enters a multi-party government. The programme of the government is compiled only after the election. There is therefore little expectation by the voters that the election programmes of any of the parties will necessarily be translated into policy. The situation is compounded by the extent to which the record of individual parties, in office in multi-party coalitions, is not readily susceptible to intelligent scrutiny by the voters.

An extension of the phenomenon of unaccountability occurs where coalitions are dismantled and new combinations formed without further reference to the electorate, as happened in 1958, 1965 and 1966. Indeed some would put this at top of the list of objections to the operation of the political system as a whole. The sudden withdrawal of the KVP from its brief coalition with the PvdA in 1966, has become a kind of Gethsemane in the litany of the evils of the system. It has had a traumatic effect upon the subsequent outlook and tactics of the PvdA; and it was one of the events which stimulated the founders of D'66 to form their new party.

5, *The invertebrate character of governing coalitions.* — The dominant preoccupations of a multi-party administration, are, it is asserted, to preserve its composition and to ensure its survival for the duration of the parliamentary term. Operationally, this amounts to a concern to neutralise inter-party conflict within the cabinet at the expense of positive government. There is therefore an

<sup>5</sup> Calculated from figures given in *Partij Kiezen*, compiled by drs L. P. J. de Bruyn, 1971, Appendix 6, p. 206.

<sup>6</sup> *The Politics of Accommodation.*

inherent tendency for the style of multi-party government to be reconciliationist, rather than dynamic and incisive<sup>7</sup>.

6, *The confusions of multiple choice and the absence of polarisation.* — A total of 29 parties entered the lists at the general election held in April 1971. The programmes of the seven most successful parties overlapped on a number of points, including many of the major issues. In the Netherlands situation it tends to be electorally unwise for any party with serious ambitions to govern to distinguish itself too radically from its rivals. This creates obvious problems for the discriminating voter, and the idea of a clearer polarisation of choice has become attractive to those who no longer identify with the traditional pattern of electoral fragmentation.

7, *The inertias and anachronisms of the party machines.* — This contention relies upon the demonstration of a cause and effect relationship between the multi-party situation and the actual character of the parties. In its simplest form the argument runs that the cultivation of the traditional pattern of fragmentation protects party machines against renewal, and at the extreme would preserve them against dissolution even if their *raison d'être* had objectively disappeared. Parties and party leaders, it is urged, acquire a vested interest in maintaining established patterns of electoral support and in resisting the mobilisation of the electorate around new issues and contemporary problems.

8, *The anonymity of the list system of voting and the absence of locality representation.* — These are familiar criticisms of proportional representation. As part of the indictment of the current multi-party situation, they refer both to the domination of the selection of candidates by national party HQ's, and to the ease with which small groups can present themselves to the national electorate and secure representation by the aggregation of votes. (It might even be contended that in an extreme form of proportional representation, the aggregation of votes may not be synonymous with the aggregation of interests).

<sup>7</sup> This criticism is given considerable prominence by J. F. Glastra van Loon in an article on 'Democracy in the Netherlands', *Acta Politica III*, 1967-68. His diagnosis of the major defects of the political system since the war concentrates upon three features of invertebrate government:

- a) the formation of middle-of-the-road cabinets.
- b) the fragmentation of long-term issues into short-term technical matters.
- c) the devolution of policy-making upon advisory committees, expert bodies, and interest groups.

His conclusion is that this has resulted in a diffusion of political responsibility and the confusion of the electorate.

This latter feature has been enhanced by the availability of free time on both radio and TV to any group which submits lists of candidates in all 18 electoral districts.

This brief review of the more conceptual criticisms of the Dutch party system is strictly for reference. There are numerous factors which affect and modify the impact of the various contentions, and the list neither identifies the precise sources of each challenge nor explains which concatenations of criticism are associated with particular view-points. Above all it does not enquire how far the system has already begun to respond to certain kinds of pressure from its critics.

#### Theoretical explanations

Dissatisfaction with an established political system does not arise *in vacuo*. It is important therefore to ask why political arrangements in the Netherlands have come under fire after half a century of apparent stability transcending even the lacuna of the German occupation. Some possible theoretical explanations might first be aired:

1, *A deterioration of the 'fluency' of the system.* — This possibility requires some assessment of the purposes the system has developed to serve. The multi-party situation pre-dates the grand package of 1917 which produced universal suffrage and proportional representation on the basis of a single national constituency. It emerged, in the latter half of the 19th century, as intra and extra parliamentary agencies, commonly directed by powerful personalities, sought support for particular constitutional and educational causes which were identified with the aspirations of self-conscious social and religious groups. Having organised these groups politically the parties then sought, by a process of shifting alliances, to participate in the government of a polity whose fragmentation they were re-affirming.

Three separate functions are discernible here. One is the process of mobilising a newly enfranchised electorate and entering it in the national parliamentary contest. The second is the development of a style of coalition formation and operation which reconciled political differences sufficiently for constitutional government to proceed. The third is the task of preserving the separate electoral bases which each major party had cultivated.

This circulation pattern seems to have worked with reasonable success and indeed to have entrenched itself up to and beyond the Second World War, when it was supple enough to absorb the Labour Party into governing coalitions without dislocation. Since the early 1960s however a certain amount of stasis appears to have set in. This is often presented as an aspect of the process of deconfessionalisation. That it is wider in its ramifications is evidenced by the fact that in the late 1960s the party with the lowest proportion of young voters

was not one of the major confessional parties but the Labour Party — a party identified with government since 1945 and regarded by the 1960s as an integral part of the political establishment.

2, *A decline of the performance of government and parliament in the handling of public issues.* — This is extremely hard to objectify and virtually impossible to measure, though impressions of a declining ability to cope with social, economic and environmental problems can be a factor in popular dissatisfaction. Even if deeply felt, this kind of dissatisfaction is not necessarily evidence of the inadequacy of the system. It may express the diminishing capacities of national governments and parliaments to cope with certain generic problems, even though the posture of comprehensive management of public affairs goes on being asserted and re-inforced. The position of the Netherlands within regional and inter-state organisations, like E.E.C. and N.A.T.O. clearly adds a further dimension of difficulty to demonstrations of the potency of the political organs in The Hague.

3, *A rise in the expectations of what a political system should provide.* — A number of general-type factors are discernible under this heading. First, popular scrutiny of political performance may be expected to increase with greater leisure, more sustained exposure to the mass media, increased investment in education etc. Secondly the impact of social and technological change will produce new patterns of frustration which, depending upon the type of system, may be projected upon the political arena. Thirdly the specialised and esoteric nature of an established political system may be challenged by a new generation which has less respect for traditional approaches or even for the concept of the professional politician.

The list of general-type reasons for a critical view of the performance and response of the political system could be extended at length. The problem is to try to determine which factors are tangible and specific in the Dutch situation, including why it seems to be considered that the political system ought to be sensitive to a very wide range of frustrations and impulses for reform within the contemporary population. The second part of this question suggests something about expectations in a multi-party situation, which may become clearer when we turn to the experience of the two-party situation.

The development of an increasingly comprehensive critique of the Dutch political system has led inevitably to a search for remedies. The quest for changes in the system is of course a consequence of economic, social and cultural changes which this article can only refer to peremptorily. The entire proposition that it is valuable to compare an existing multi-party system with an existing two-party system is open to the most obvious charges that crucial cultural

factors are in danger of being ignored and that an artificial conception of the options available to differing political communities is being encouraged.

It must be confessed that anything less than a fully-developed analysis of the political culture and experience of the two communities will have these limitations. Any comparison which is largely confined to institutional analysis must be offered diffidently in the hope that it may clarify some issues and lead to a more profound study of the factors which govern the emergence of different types of party system.

### Recipes for Improvement

The various nostrums which have been canvassed in the Netherlands for an improvement in the system can be assembled under three main headings:

1, *Technical changes in the electoral system.* — These include:

- a) The introduction of a 'cut-off' in the allocation of parliamentary seats, so as to eliminate very small parties and enable the larger parties to increase their parliamentary representation. This aspect of the Federal German system is often commended, and it has been variously proposed that a party ought to gain 3% or even 5% of the total vote before qualifying for representation in parliament.
- b) The establishment, or viewed historically the re-establishment of a district system of constituencies. This would naturally offer the possibility of closer geographical links between parliament and the electorate. But more important for the system would be the increased obstacles to the formation and maintenance of small parties, both electorally and organisationally<sup>8</sup>. That this could also militate against new parties with ambitions greater than the cultivation of small pockets of minority opinion is perhaps overlooked by some of the supporters of a district system.
- c) The addition of either a second ballot in the form of a play-off between the two leading parties or party grouping<sup>9</sup>, or of a second preferential vote.

<sup>8</sup> Contrary opinions on the effects of a district system are expressed in two articles in *Acta Politica III*, 1967-68. In one, 'Implications of P.R. with 18 Districts', R. Verboom argues that "such a reform of the electoral system would not cause the number of parties in parliament to diminish, that the numerical relations between the main parties would hardly change, that cabinet formation would be equally difficult and that the proposed reform would not lead to a two-party system". (English summary, p. 181). In a 'Reaction to the Implications of P.R. with 18 Districts', J. in 't Veld maintains that a district system "would facilitate the formation of two large political groups, which could offer real alternatives to the voters at the polls". He adds "thus there would be no need for a directly elected Prime Minister as proposed by D'66". (English summary, p. 266).

<sup>9</sup> See J. F. Glastra van Loon, *op. cit.* for advocacy of this proposal. From 1849-1917, when the country was divided into constituencies, second ballots were held where no

2, *Strategic changes in the approach of the parties.* — Exhortations under this heading could be caricatured as attempts to make the parties in a multi-party situation behave as though they were in a two-party situation. The view most frequently put forward is that parties should inform the voters in advance of elections what the post election strategy of the party will be. It relies heavily upon the belief that the parties should move towards specific and possibly permanent alliances with groups with whom they are prepared to share power. It assumes that from the adoption of pre-election commitments on a sufficient scale, an essentially polarised situation will evolve in which the voter can choose between clearly articulated alternative policies.

Responses to the pressure of this contention were evident in the 1971 elections, both in the pact between the Labour Party, D'66 and the P.P.R., which produced a shadow cabinet, and in the agreement between the three major confessional parties which led to the publication of a common platform on certain issues. Exactly how far these developments clarified the problems of voter choice is somewhat uncertain, as indeed is the question of how far they pre-figure a viable form of political polarisation.

3, *Constitutional changes which would reform the political structure.* — The crux of the various ideas for a new political structure is the creation of a direct political relationship between government and the electorate. The most specific nostrum is the institution of a quasi-presidential election for the office of Minister-President. Under the simplest conditions this would yield a prime minister identified with the leading political party. The probability that this party would not, under present circumstances, command a parliamentary majority is catered for by the advocacy of a formal separation of cabinet and parliament, on congressional lines.

### Unresolved Problems

The desire for a more polarised situation tends to be expressed without any very clear specification of the basic dichotomy around which a new party system would revolve. The more obvious possibilities are firstly a polarisation between social democracy and liberal individualism, secondly between confessional and secular groupings, and thirdly between traditional political concerns and new conceptions of social needs. There seems little general interest in marxist formulae, nationalist movements or authoritarian solutions. The main complication is that the multi-party situation already includes in a composite form the three most favoured dichotomies and may not easily yield to an insistence that

candidate had achieved an absolute majority. A simple plurality sufficed on the second round.

a single, primary polarity must efface the others<sup>10</sup>.

The problem of ordering a bespoke party structure touches upon virtually every element in the process of identifying what a party system in a contemporary western democracy ought to offer. The ideal model which Dutch critics of the present establishment seem to have in mind is one composed of two major parties or alliances which, on every issue of present and future importance, would be able and willing to compile policies which exactly antithesise each other. This model may or may not include provision for other groups to operate on the sidelines as reservoirs for dissent, agencies of renewal, or even agencies of potential replacement for the major parties.

In the model several concerns are run together. One is for more vertebrate government. Another is for a more direct relationship between Cabinet and voter, instead of the present indirect procedures. A third is for a new style of representation. The last relies upon the view that in a two-party context, clear alternatives are offered to the elector which affords him a better representational service than the multi-party situation where old issues and patterns of support are kept alive artificially by party bosses. A further concern is often interwoven with the other three. It is for a radical democratisation which would offer the citizenry greater opportunity for the expression of opinion and for participation, in various ways, in decision-making.

All these concerns, including the urge for more vertebrate government, are in essence voter and citizen oriented. They reflect a desire, often passionate, for a more perfect articulation of the popular will than the system currently provides. It is particularly interesting that this concern should be so fervent in a system which is already more sensitive to certain aspects of representation than polities where interparty competition is organised in a less multiple way.

### The Two-party Reality

Any party system involves the distortion of the opinions of millions of voters, in order to create units of opinion and belief which can be used to achieve political ends. To consider how far a two-party system might or might not

<sup>10</sup> The existing parties were plotted on a Left-Right continuum, by C. J. Lammers in an article on 'Deconfessionalisation and Radicalisation among Students', *Acta Politica III*, 1967-68. Unfortunately for the seekers after clear polarisation, the three major confessional parties plus D'66 are shown as occupying that part of the spectrum which lies between the Labour Party and the Liberals. If D'66 can be considered to have moved to the Left since 1967-68, this still leaves a confessional centre, which in 1971 collected 36.8% of the total vote. It seems improbable that a Left-Right dichotomy could be achieved so long as the confessional parties command mass support. There is also some question whether the Liberals would be happy to assume the role of right wing in a polarised situation; indeed there is a considerable presumption that they would not.

handle this process more successfully than a multi-party system, we can move a short distance across the North Sea to Britain. The choice of Britain as a comparative reference rests essentially on the fact that it exemplifies an entrenched two-party situation with deeper roots than any other in Western-Europe and possibly than anywhere in the world. But it is also a model which seems to arouse interest in the Netherlands, partly because of assumed affinities between the two countries, and partly because it appears to offer features which certain groups in the Netherlands find increasingly attractive.

A rigorous functional and historical study of the British political system is entirely beyond the scope of a short comparative essay. But there may be value in a concise assessment of how far the British experience suggests remedies for the most advertised defects of the Dutch system. To be useful the exercise must also review such defects in the British system which may not be paralleled in the Netherlands. In examining the extent to which the British two-party system offers, or fails to offer, remedies for the defects in the Dutch situation on which the critics have concentrated, we can follow the same order of specific contentions set out at the beginning of this article.

The first conclusion is that the British system avoids the first five problems set out in the list of defects. Elections in the British two-party situation are invariably conclusive, in so far as one or other of the major parties usually achieves a clear majority of the seats in the lower House of Parliament. Within the two-party ambit there is therefore an automatic response to the election results, which in all normal circumstances will endure for the duration of the parliamentary term. Outside the two-party ambit a rather different situation obtains, but this will be discussed later. Given this conclusiveness, the problems which arise in the Dutch situation surrounding the formation of a Cabinet literally do not exist in Britain. A British party leader, on the outcome of an election, will reckon to form a governmental team within a matter of days entirely from within his own party, and many of the major appointments will already have been presaged by positions in the opposition Shadow Cabinet.

The absence of the need for coalition administrations removes the possibility of uncertain or unaccountable party strategies. The voter for one or other major party will know that if his party is successful at the polls, in the very straightforward terms which constitute success within the British system, then his party will govern exclusively. If the party is unsuccessful then it will automatically assume the role of official opposition, which again it will normally perform without compromising alliances or coalitions. The spectre of invertebrate government is not therefore, in the British context, one which derives from the need to reconcile the interests of a multiplicity of parties within the same administration.

It is when we consider how far a two-party system clarifies the issues before the

voter, that the theoretical advantages of a bipolar situation become divorced from actual experience. The basic reason for this is that a two-party situation does not necessarily yield a comprehensive or in some areas even an intelligible dichotomy of policies. A number of separate factors have to be isolated at this point. The first is that once a two-party system has become entrenched, then it exerts a very effective duopoly over the whole terrain of serious national controversy. Depending upon the degree of entrenchment it can be said to seal off the political arena against the intrusion of any issue which one or other party is not prepared to embrace<sup>11</sup>.

Within the sealed system certain kinds of behaviour are discernible. One of the most important of the factors which condition this behaviour is the absence of a real fear that the duopoly will be threatened by the prospect of any new group successfully mobilising a significant proportion of the electorate outside the system. The absence of external threat leads inevitably to certain patterns of assumption about the discernment of which issues are important and therefore which issues are to be politicised. Essentially, these kinds of judgements are made in relation to the behaviour of the other major party, rather than in relation to inputs which are external to the duopolistic situation.

#### Insulation of Major Parties

Four characteristics reinforce the insulation of the two major parties. The first is the virtual certainty of continuity, and by this is meant not simply the continuity of a two-party system, but the continuity of the major parties themselves. The history of the two-party situation in Britain is one which demonstrates, with an awesome finality, that a cosmic change in political relationships is required to affect the fortunes of a major party. Thus the only profound alteration in the pattern of the parties in Britain, certainly since 1832, has been the displacement of the Liberals as a major party by the Labour Party; and this can be ascribed very directly to the enfranchisement towards the end of the 19th century of an entirely new element in the electorate — the urban working class. This displacement was completed between the wars, effectively, as we can now discern, by 1929. Since 1945 Britain has had an unchallenged Labour — Conservative polarisation and each party has set up its own administration on exactly four occasions.

During the post war period the only party activity of any significance which

<sup>11</sup> See Belloc and Chesterton, *The Party System*, 1911, for some unbuttoned rhetoric on this aspect of the British two-party system in the first decade of the century. Until 1950 it would have seemed inconceivable that the Labour Party could reproduce the Tweedledum/Tweedledee quality of certain stages in the earlier Liberal/Conservative imperium. The record of the 1960s however is less convincing.

has taken place outside the duopolistic pattern has been the Liberal revival of the late 1950's and early 1960's. The high water mark of this revival was a tally of over 3 million votes in 1964, which represented 11.2% of the total poll. This gained for the Liberal Party 9 seats in the House of Commons out of a total of 630. 11.2% of the national vote was thus translated into 1.4% of the number of parliamentary seats; so Liberal representation reflected one eighth of its voting strength, and 59 seats which, under a system of national proportional representation, would have gone to the Liberal Party, were distributed among the two major parties.

The second key characteristic of the two-party situation is that given the certainty of continuity, the effective choice before the voters acquires a very limited quality. For over a quarter of a century only two parties have governed. If it is virtually certain that they will continue to be the only two parties likely to govern, then the maximum amount of political change which can be achieved by a General Election is the restoration to power of the party which previously governed. There is of course an equal possibility that there will be no change of government. In the course of the average lifetime, a voter may expect to see as many governments formed by party "A" as by party "B". In these terms the only effective question which confronts an elector is whether the occasion is one where a government by party "A" would be a better tactical prospect than a government by party "B". That his individual calculation may in no way be related to this logical proposition does not alter the fact that his freedom of manoeuvre is very closely circumscribed.

The third characteristic is that both parties are parties which have governed and expect to govern. Irrespective of party labels, a governmental mentality tends to develop within the parliamentary group at the expense of an oppositional mentality<sup>12</sup>. On the part of the leadership this figures as a very high degree of conformism, not only to the doctrines of the individual party, but to the system as a whole. In the case of back-benchers the restraints which are inherent when the party is in power serve to condition behaviour in opposition also<sup>13</sup>. Politicians of ability in both major parties will tend to regard themselves for the greater part of their career as "papabile", in terms of ministerial office. This has a palpable effect upon the style of opposition, which reinforces the sealing off of the duopoly from external inputs.

The fourth characteristic is an extremely high degree of conservatism in the

<sup>12</sup> Ian Gilmour, *The Body Politic*, London 1969, puts the point pithily: "In a two-party system the leaders are necessarily government-minded", p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> See Sir Ivor Jennings, *Party Politics*, 3 Vols, Cambridge 1961; "The mere fact of loyalty to the party produces an impulse towards conformity in the member himself," Vol. II, p. 330.

selection and definition of political issues<sup>14</sup>. There is no obligation in the two-party situation to move outside the field of recognised issues, unless the other party takes an initiative. Any initiative which widens the area of political controversy has to be very carefully weighed from the standpoint of electoral consequences. Both major parties therefore are subject to extremely powerful inertias and there is mutual reinforcement between the parties of a reluctance to take political initiatives<sup>15</sup>.

This last point has a considerable relevance to anxieties in the Netherlands about the inertias and anachronisms of the party machines. Vested interest in maintaining traditional patterns of electoral support is as evident in the two-party system as it is within the multi-party system. Comparable resistances are equally evident when questions of remobilising the electorate arise; indeed because of absence of movement within the two-party situation such questions arise very much less readily than in the multi-party situation.

The most recent vivid example of this process can be seen in the performance of the major parties in Britain vis-à-vis the issue of Britain's entry into the European Economic Community. Both major parties in Britain endeavoured to avoid any polarisation of public opinion on this issue which might conflict with their traditional patterns of support. Throughout the long process of appraisal, each party was extremely apprehensive about the possibility of division within its ranks. In both cases party unity was accorded the highest priority and until a very late stage in the negotiations both major parties preserved a common front on the desirability of Britain's entry, despite the existence of very considerable opposition to entry within the country, and despite the uncertainties and ambivalence of many leading Labour politicians on the issue.

The eventual decision of the Labour Party Conference in September 1971 to oppose entry on the terms announced, was translated by the leadership of the parliamentary party into a call for a united front in the Commons. The same leadership had called for a united front on a diametrically opposite policy in 1970 when the Labour Party was in power. Thus the two-party system had once

<sup>14</sup> Gilmour, *ibid.*, p. 33, "The two-party system is intensely conservative and the major element of stability in the country".

<sup>15</sup> Jennings, *ibid.*, p. 332, puts the point in an alternative form, in relation to parliamentary activity: "Conflicts of principle are, however, the exception. Much of the Parliamentary programme is not contentious. Much of what is contentious is so only because there is a choice of alternatives, neither perfect, in which the Opposition chooses the one because the Government chooses the other. Other proposals are contentious because the Government has one bias and the Opposition another, so that (for instance) a piece of legislation which either party might have introduced has particular variants to suit the 'ideology' of the party in power. It follows that much of the Parliamentary battle is shadow-boxing."

again triumphed over a cleavage of opinion on an issue essentially unrelated to party allegiance.

### Political cultures

So far, as has been noted, we have been examining structural and operational factors in the political and party systems of the Netherlands and Britain without any direct reference to the political cultures of the two countries. Once again in a brief survey it is impossible to provide a comprehensive account of the two cultures. But it is possible to indicate certain basic features and to point up some of the more obvious contrasts. Perhaps the most interesting part of such an exercise is the opportunity to identify possible disharmonies between the political systems and the cultures to which they relate. This is particularly important where the political systems may function anachronistically and may express assumptions about political needs which are no longer relevant to contemporary experience.

If one were to try to identify the mainsprings of the two political systems, Dutch and British, in response to each culture, the most sensitive area would probably be the relationship between power and representation. In neither country is the existence of political authority problematical. It has a clear location in both the Netherlands and Britain — the national government is omnipotent, as and when it chooses to act.

Britain derives its idea of omnipotent government directly from the experience of centralising monarchy which subsumes almost the whole of its history as a nation state. The power of the central government has been re-articulated in the present century by the demands of total war and the need for policies of comprehensive social intervention, in economic policy, welfare, planning, etc. The concept of omnipotent government in the Netherlands is rather more difficult to explain. Assumptions about the role of the government in Holland tend to be tacit rather than explicit. There are few published diagnoses which offer a British observer a clear explanation why governmental authority is generally regarded as legitimate and inviolable. Indeed almost all the historical-political accounts of the formation of the present Dutch state emphasise pluralism at the expense of central authority, and the accommodation of multiple interests in contrast to strong national allegiances<sup>16</sup>.

Governmental authority appears to rest upon the relatively narrow historical base of some 50 years of a centralising, monarchical regime in the first half of

<sup>16</sup> See both Lijphart, *Op. cit.* and Daalder, *On Building Consociational Nations — the cases of the Netherlands and Switzerland*, Paper presented to UNESCO Meeting of Experts on the problems of State Formation and Nation-Building, Cérisy-la-Salle, France, 1970.

the 19th century. But there are clearly other elements in the Dutch historical culture and social patterning — notably the traditions of the burgher elite and the patriarchal position of the churches, Protestant and Catholic, — which re-inforce the authority system of which the national government forms the summit<sup>17</sup>. Whatever the precise historical explanations, government in the Netherlands does have prescriptive authority and unquestioned legitimacy, even in the teeth of trenchant criticism of the political system. It seems also that this authority can be separated from the competition between the political parties and that the government can be regarded as a super-figure in the system which presides over the preservation and administration of the state.

The multi-party situation makes a profound contribution to the *ex-machina* character of the government's role. Even the largest parties do not individually possess the possibility of attaining exclusive political power. The party which commands the largest fraction of political support — the K.V.P. — is not a party whose members are in a position to constitute a dominant political group. Indeed the Catholic population in the Netherlands was until recently a self-consciously underprivileged minority, and the importance of its position in the political spectrum still hardly squares with the position of the bulk of its supporters in Dutch society. The second largest party — the PvdA — is equally not a contender for control of the political system and does not, in contrast to Britain, embody within its ranks the Trade Union movement. The major Protestant parties have no more significant position in relation to national institutions than either the Catholics or the Labour Party, despite the Calvinist historical tradition; and the Liberal Party, although it mobilises support from employers and the professions, is no closer than the other major groups to being a central element in the political 'establishment', if such exists.

In these circumstances the national government can readily be recognised as the agency which holds the ring whilst the politicians get on with the business of lobbying, arguing and reconciling conflicting interests. The political parties in the multi-party context are not contending for exclusive power, because none can achieve it. Instead they are contending for increments of influence within the system<sup>18</sup>. It is interesting that the contention that a controlling position

<sup>17</sup> In an interview with a former Minister of C.H.U. affiliations, the Calvinist view of government was expressed with clarity and conviction. It was represented as the repository of an authority above the political struggle, a role derived from the position of God within the universe, to be exercised according to the dictates of Scripture and human conscience. If this seems a reactionary view in the 1970s, it may still have some echo in the formula for even greater separation between Executive and Legislature, propounded by more radical thinkers.

<sup>18</sup> The secretary of a major parliamentary party stated in interview that even in opposition his party could achieve many of its aims by inducing governing parties to bid for electoral support in the same areas of policy.

should be fought for by a single party or party grouping is a relatively new idea and one which is considered by certain of its opponents to be "not Dutch" i.e. not part of the conventional assumptions about the nature of political competition.

It becomes, intelligible, in this situation, that questions of representation should loom so large. It is equally understandable that great emphasis should be placed upon parliament as a sounding-board for divergent opinion, both by public-minded citizens and by parliamentarians themselves. Throughout the debate about the political system in the Netherlands there tends to be more stress upon the need for views to be heard than upon the question of who actually takes the decisions<sup>19</sup>.

The Dutch context could be summarised as one in which politics and government can be regarded as separate. Even those who advocate the cultivation of a majority grouping of parties which can take over the government after an election, are concerned not only to preserve the present separation between parliament and the executive, but to divorce the two on a congressional model. Some analogy occurs here between the outlook of the Dutch parliamentarian and the American congressman, though in other respects the two systems differ profoundly.

The situation in Britain is very different. Politics are not about representation. They are about power. And the system has been refined and reduced to a contest between two alternative contenders for total control of the national government. This situation could be regarded as an advanced stage of maturation in the refinement of democratic objectives. Defenders of the two-party system might well view it in such terms<sup>20</sup>. Political debate in the 19th century was undoubtedly characterised by a concern with representation. It is evident in Chartist agitation, the writings of J. S. Mill, the contentions of radicals, suffrage and parliamentary reformers, and the early phases of the labour movement, whose first political incarnation was in the form of a Labour Representation Committee.

The social and economic consequences of industrialisation in Britain were however to provide a highly polarised political cleavage between the interests of the working population and those elements which either embodied or identified

<sup>19</sup> This is borne out by the view of a former leader of a major parliamentary party who in interview revealed that he had never proposed himself for a Cabinet post, because as a parliamentary leader his freedom of manoeuvre was unimpaired by ministerial responsibility or the specific boundaries of a portfolio. He observed that a Cabinet post removed a politician from the political arena, often permanently.

<sup>20</sup> See C. S. Emden, *The People and the Constitution*, preface to Second edition London 1956. "For some time now the two-party system has been once more operative, with consequent improvements in the outlook for our democracy".

with employers, landowners, business and the growing managerial class. The division between white and blue collar interests in Britain, though not translated 100% into electoral behaviour, offered in the first half of the 20th Century a clear basis on which to mobilise political support. It was only partly ideologised since each class needed to dip into the other, sometimes heavily, to increase the prospects of success at the polls. It was uncomplicated by religious differences, outside of Ireland, and local, regional, even ethnic factors (in Scotland and Wales) were almost entirely assimilated and absorbed into the fundamental social-economic stratification.

The translation of this cleavage into the principal dimension of the party and political systems, required of course assistance from the political structure. The gradual transfer of political responsibility from Ministers acting on behalf of the Monarch to Ministers acting on behalf of Parties took place between the mid 18th century, before the onset of industrialisation, and the early part of the second half of the 19th century, by which time Britain was decisively an industrial country<sup>21</sup>. The notion of parliamentary government, celebrated by Bagehot, was little more than an interlude between these two stages. Several decades before the rise of the social democratic movement therefore, political control in Britain was seen to depend upon the Cabinet commanding an obedient majority in the House of Commons. This meant that once the conditions existed for mass parties which could be mobilised around the post-industrial dichotomy between socio-economic interests, the concern for increments of representation became entirely subordinated to a concern for the achievement of a majority role which would confer political power in a direct, unequivocal form.

There are two very obvious differences here between the British and the Dutch experience. One is in the timing and extent of industrialisation, which in Britain obliterated almost all major political foci outside the socio-economic cleavage between the working class and the middle and upper classes. The other is the stage reached in the development of the political structure by the time the results of comprehensive industrialisation were able to make their impact upon the political system.

Industrialisation in the Netherlands is an extremely late phenomenon in comparison with the rest of Western Europe. Its main impact has been in the present century and it has therefore encountered a political structure and system which

<sup>21</sup> The point is made clearly by Alan Beattie, *English Party Politics*, London 1970, who notes that after the franchise reforms of 1867 the notion of party government emerged along with party discipline in parliament and the organisation of national party machines. "The cohesion of party voting made governmental defeat in the Commons after the 1880s seem an abnormal occurrence", p. 137.

had already achieved, by the end of the 19th century, a high degree of responsiveness to the social fragmentation of the pre-industrial period.

These are bland terms in which to depict a highly complex process. But one can offer a simple equation to illustrate the current state of the relationship between the political systems of both countries and the historical-cultural factors which underlie them. Both systems have been formed to cater for the social and economic circumstances of an era prior to the present. In Britain the two-party system reflects a dichotomy established in the 19th century by massive industrialisation. In the Netherlands the multi-party system reflects the social fragmentation which was institutionalised, also in the 19th century, prior to industrialisation.

To this extent both systems are anachronistic, and possibly dysfunctional. The question is, given a possible disharmony between contemporary circumstances and the entrenched political mechanisms, what is the scope within each system for a more accurate expression of current political needs?

One of the more obvious aspects of the question is how far the two systems provide for renewal and adaptation to new phenomena. It is immediately apparent that the Dutch multi-party system is far more sensitive to new constellations of political interest than the British two-party counterpart. In the British situation, new patterns of opinion, fresh public concerns, have to be registered and worked out inside the alimentary systems of the two great parties. Initiatives have to be steered through the maze of established party interests and policies, through the existing party bureaucracies, and past the formidable array of established personalities within each movement. For any national political cause to succeed in Britain it must be espoused by one or other of the major parties. The actual adoption of public policies by governments is of course of a complex process in all states, but where government is dominated by only two parties, there are ultimately only two possible avenues for the implementation of any scheme.

In the Netherlands, the options are very much greater. There are six or seven parties which have some chance of participating in government. In virtually all major parties a considerable amount of rethinking seems to have taken place since 1965-66. The New left upheavals in the Labour Party, provide perhaps the most dramatic evidence of rethinking; but the K.V.P., Anti-Revolutionary Party and the Liberals have also undergone considerable revision and re-examination during this period. Inter-party rivalry for electoral support appears to have sharpened in response to the acceleration of social change and the formation of new parties. The problem of ensuring the survival of parties is much greater in a multi-party situation, and although the traditional major parties in the Netherlands have shown great survival powers, there is always room on such a crowded stage for parties to be eclipsed. The conditions for major party eclipse in a

two-party situation are infinitely more demanding. There is also, and the experience of D'66 bears this out, the feasibility of forming an entirely new political group which can act as its own channel of ideas and initiatives, and, given the porosity of the party and electoral systems, can expect to succeed in bringing them to the forefront of national political debate and into governmental policy, if part of the electorate can be so persuaded.

It would be hard to overstate the near impossibility of forming a new party under present conditions in Britain which could have any sensible expectation of becoming a serious political force. So the problem of renewal in British politics becomes a matter of determining how far each of the two major parties is susceptible to internal re-appraisal and internally responsive to the phenomena of social change.

It would be difficult to give a confident verdict on this issue. There is evidence in many sectors that both the appetite and the stimuli for change in the two major British parties are limited; indeed it could be said that the imperatives for change in a two-party system are less stringent and precise than in a multi-party situation. There is little danger in the two-party context of challenge from new movements. This protects leadership against change as much as it protects policies. Challenges can come only from within, but the party leader in the British situation is a decidedly more powerful figure than his counterpart in a multi-party situation. He is both the leader of the parliamentary party and either the incumbent or presumptive Prime Minister. His powers of patronage in either circumstance are enormous. At any point in time the whole of organised national politics in Britain are governed by only two personalities — the leaders of government and opposition.

One asset possessed by the Dutch political system, in contrast with the British, is that it does offer the opportunity to question the relevance of the individual components of the system to changed circumstances. The belief that the 'politics of accommodation' relate to a disappearing factor in Dutch life is capable of translation into political action, both within existing parties and by the formation of new movements with some expectation of having an impact upon the content and style of national politics.

In Britain, the monumental character of the two-party system militates against even thinking about the appropriateness of the system to present-day conditions, let alone contemplating effective action to challenge the established orthodoxies. One of the ironies is that the Netherlands may, as a result of its more flexible system, be able to retune its multi-party situation in the direction of greater polarisation and this could induce over time the emergence of a two-party situation. Such an emergence could then, because of the nature of the two-party situation, effectively freeze further development.

It would be unwise in such a tentative assessment to concoct an 'iron law' about

directions of change in democracies. But there is much to suggest that whereas a multi-party situation will always contain options to move towards a two-party situation, the reverse is not demonstrably true. It is important that the advocates of polarisation and a two-party system in the Netherlands should realise that such a development could not easily be reversed.

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