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Politics, bureaucracy and society in crisis? Trust and the quality of public service delivery: causes and solutions

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Dutch Politics, Bureau- cracy and Society in Crisis

Nature, Causes and Solutions

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Only the closed mind is certain... If I were to tell you, you would not believe me. Fisk Senior: Then don't tell me, I don't believe in enough things already.¹

Introduction

There are times when (part of the) citizenry, politicians and media do get the impression that things are not going well; recently, that has been and is the case in the Netherlands (Bouwen aan vertrouwen 2022; Van der Meer 2021 & 2022). In newspapers, among opinion leaders, on social media and in politics, a common view has developed that public service delivery and connected the level of trust in politics (national government and bureaucracy is in sharp decline. New alarming polling figures are almost gleefully cited in the press and other media. Connected to this impression of a decline in public service standards, the idea is that little is being done to alleviate these threats. Moreover, when something goes wrong, opinions how to solve these issues often are of a diverse nature but criticizing the government of the day. The reaction and approach of politics seems to fall short of expectations and that again can reinforce that feeling of threat. For some, this deficient trustworthiness of government seems to be turning into the idea of an unreliable public administration, a dysfunctional political system and an unreliable bureaucracy. Society appears to be in a state of permanent turmoil and state of unease, grumpiness and even agitation.

But, is a decline in trust in politics and government an accurate reading of reality and if the case is it necessarily a detrimental phenomenon? Regarding the latter, does it affect a proper functioning of government but also society by harming an effective, efficient, and responsive and an impartial public service delivery? That is an assumption in this trust discourse. Does government need the trust of the citizen? Mark the underlining of the. Below, I will maintain that the citizen does not exist and that this has as its consequence that varying levels of trust in government and possibly the acceptance of its policies and decisions do exist. Again, mark the underlining of possibly. The markings are important and will be addressed later.

The preliminary answer to the question does it matter will be yes.² However, this is going a bit too fast. Necessary provisos will be introduced below particular relating to question who is more (dis)trustful of government and what are the roots of this suspicion. The perceived declining levels of trust have a multiple and a variety of backgrounds and causes; we will go

¹ From the movie Dean Spanley (2008) based on the novel by Lord Dunsany (1936), *My Talks with Dean Spanley*, London: Heinemann

² See also <https://www.oecd.org/governance/trust-in-government/> accessed 9/07/2022: 'Trust is the foundation upon which the legitimacy of democratic institutions rest. Trust is crucial for ensuring the success of a wide range of public policies that depend on behavioural responses from the public. For example, public trust leads to greater compliance with public health responses, regulations and the tax system. In the longer term, trust is needed to help governments tackle long-term societal challenges such as climate change, ageing populations, and changing labour markets.'

into these roots and causes in this paper. Differences between citizens have, as said, to be taken into account. Regarding relevant factors explaining these differences, we will focus on for instance political, internal bureaucratic and societal factors and responsibilities. This issue cannot be seen in isolation from a number of policy fiascoes and political-administrative crises (Bekker 2020). And in case it is, how, then, can trust and confidence in governance be restored and what can the public sector do so (Van der Meer 2022; OECD 2022)? Then a wide range of opinions and views surface about what is right or wrong with public service delivery. The question is how that affects confidence in the system of government. Let us go first into the causes and roots of the perceived declining levels of trust in politics in government related to perceived declining standards of public service delivery. At the end of this paper, Later, I will return to the citation at the very beginning of this introduction. For now, I beg your patience.

The core task of public administration is to ensure a good public service to citizens and businesses.

Research tend to shows that good governance contributes to a healthy social and economic development. (Van der Meer 2022; OECD 2020; 2021; 2022, Hammerschmid, G. & N. Thijs, 2018, Van der Meer, Raadschelders & Toonen 2015) Good governance is not only a concern for governments with their politicians and civil servants. This responsibility is shared with citizens and businesses. When government is well organized and performs accordingly, everyone can go on with his or hers affairs and life. (Van der Meer 2021) This public service delivery must be maintained and, where possible, even improved. Challenges and threats are always on the lurk. Despite the wish to avert these challenges, this is an arduous undertaking due to the unpredictability of events and constraints regarding available intervention options. Therefore, all kind of challenges often termed crises need to be addressed. The idea of crisis can relate to a multitude of national and international themes. To name just a few: the Corona crisis, the Ukraine crisis, the Climate crisis, the Energy crisis, the Banking crisis, the Economic and Debt crisis, the Childcare crisis, a general implementation crisis, the Asylum shelter and Status holder crisis (see Ter Apel), the Health care crisis, Youth mental health care crisis, the Housing crisis, the Political Crisis of Confidence and the Bureaucratic Crisis of Confidence, etc

Though many of these crises can be considered acute threats, the actual causes may have remained underground for a long time and can suddenly surface and appear in everyone's sight. This causes uncertainty also for government: this makes the approach difficult and hardly soluble and plannable according to fixed recipes. Due to time pressure and uncertainty, a centralization of the decision-making power will then take place. Dissent and participation must for the moment is to subside and *checks and balances* for the time being limited. In addition to reinforcing (centralized) power, creating a sense of urgency can help to mobilize support for a solution at hand. This applies to political officials, representatives of the people at central and local level, interest groups, media, scientists and of course bureaucrats. Under pressure, everything becomes liquid and as a saying goes: it is an ill wind that blows no body

good.(Kuhlmann et al 2021). I often get an unpleasant feeling about that. Ideas can be put forward and perhaps even pushed through. Resistance and other voices and opinions marginalized. After all, we are in a hurry and speedy action has to be taken.

Of course, a great deal is going fine, especially in the answer to these challenges. For example, companies have survived the corona crisis due to government support. The fight against corona has also gone relatively well with some caveats. Unemployment is low. The quality of Dutch government and public service delivery is internationally seen as being high (EU 2021; 2022). The Dutch public service scores internationally, but the pressure on that quality is also recognized in this research. See, among other things, the leading position of the Netherlands in the recent international comparative International Civil Service Effectiveness Index of the Blavatnik School of Government (2019) in Oxford and the British Institute of Government of the quality of civil services based on the sustainable governance indicators of the Bertelsmann Foundation.³ So, where does that malaise feeling originate from? A part of the population is not doing so well or feels even threatened in its existence. The awareness of vulnerability of existence becomes acute. This is especially true for less self-reliant and as will be explained less bureaucratic competent citizens (Van der Meer 2021, 2022). The search for who and what is responsible for this (the crises) then becomes relevant.

What and who (in that order) bears the brunt of the responsibility for the emergence of these issues? Where and what are the (substantive) causes? External causes of an (inter)national economic, medical, safety and ecological nature are of course significant, as the examples shown earlier have illustrated. External causes and responsible parties are always useful; it avoids the painful search for individual responsibilities. But to what extent are public administration, politics, civil servants and society itself responsible; both as a cause of the crises and responsible in the meaning of failing to find an adequate solution? That now seems to be mainly found in the executive politics and the civil service. I have referred to national examples, but they can also be found at the local level.

But, let us take a step back: despite criticism, there is (*in general*) there seems no doubt among society that the (central and local) government must play a primary role in solving these issues (OECD 2022) . That is the big difference with the 80s when the salvation of business and private sector methods such as the New Public Management was expected (Stellinga 2011). Currently, popular expectations of government intervention are high. Expectations that are sometimes not met, as they are difficult to live up to. This against the background that every day's life has become more vulnerable/precarious or better-formulated citizens may become more aware of the vulnerability of existence (Rakhorst et al 2021). That sense of vulnerability had long disappeared with the containment of life-threatening illnesses such as TB, smallpox and typhoid, the direct threat to personal safety and the guarantee of a reasonable

³ There is a great deal to be said about this research given the nature of the indicators chosen, the quality of the basic material, the comparability between them, the Anglo-Saxon bias and the static character (van der Meer, Dijkstra & Van den Berg 2019), but it indicates that complacency is not appropriate. On the longer run, a deficient political attention of parties to public administration, because of an impending lack of public services, is unwise because of the increasing risk of possible political accidents.

socio-economic existence⁴. At least that was true for most but not all of the Dutch. Perhaps more correctly formulated not in the same degree. Nevertheless, public administration was and is thus becoming increasingly important for (groups of) citizens and the expectations with regard to government action are increasing. Given these expectations, the chance of disappointments increases and the trust question is asked. This stands apart from the possible dysfunctioning of political and bureaucratic officials, on which the debate may now seem to focus.

In its enabling state role, public administration contributes, as said, to a good public service delivery to citizens and businesses (Van der Meer 2012; Page & Wright 2007). This must be done in cooperation and consultation with citizens. A reliable public administration trusted by the citizens is therefore a requirement. A lack of trust has been growing in a section of society and politics and the media in public administration, politicians and civil servants. However though trust levels can change over the course of years there is a certain degree of stability (see below; Miltenburg e.a 2021; Bovens & Wille 2011a)

Table: Satisfaction in public service provision and trust in government

| The Netherlands | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | Source |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------------------------------|
| | Value | Value | Value | Value | Value | Value | |
| Satisfaction provision of public services (0-100)* | 90.0 | 93.1 | 91.0 | 90.0 | 89 | 89.0 | EC, eGovernment Benchmark |
| Tendency to trust national government (%) | 66 | 67 | 63 | 74 | 48 | 45 | EC, Standard Eurobarometer** |
| Tendency to trust regional & local authorities (%) | 65 | 70 | 65 | 70 | 57 | 67 | EC, Standard Eurobarometer** |
| Tendency to trust the public administration (%) | 67 | 67 | 68 | 71 | 58 | 64 | EC, Standard Eurobarometer** |

Trust (2022) in Police (83%, the military (80), the Judiciary (80%) and health care (93%) is much higher. In addition all these trust levels are higher than the EU average with the exception of trust in the national government I 3021 and 2022; that is exactly the same (Standard EU-barometer winter/spring 2021/2022). Research shows that trust in organizations when the service delivered becomes more concrete Goodsell 1994; 1984, Ringeling 1993, Van der Meer, Steen & Wille in Raadschelders et al.)

⁴ See for a vivid 19th century description of the vulnerability of every day big city life Auke van der Woud (2010), een koninkrijk vol sloppen. Achterbuurten en vuil in de 19e eeuw, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Prometheus.

One may wonder whether the image of a widespread distrust in government public administration is accurate and whether that negative opinion is so widely spread. One can also doubt whether it is new, or whether it is something cyclical. After all, administrative scientists such as Van Braam (1957; 1988) & Randeraad (1994) have shown in administrative historical analyses that civil servants and governments could never count on a large degree of popularity. There has always been criticism, especially from groups that are not directly or indirectly involved in politics and governance (via, for example, compartmentalized structures). Low access to traditional media and the absence of social media in the past is an important factor explaining this. Resistance to politics and governance sometimes manifested themselves from time to time through demonstrations and explosively through riots (think of the Jordaan riot before the Second World War). That unrest was then fought with the hard hand of government coming down on the rioters (Kielich, W 1984) Having seen the unrest and disturbances at the time of the Corona crisis was therefore still moderate and tolerated to a certain level compared to that earlier period.

Is there really nothing wrong and can we now go home and disconnect? No. There is (still) a possibly growing and a more and more vocal group that expresses its dissatisfaction through social media and demonstrations or tries to get his / her rights through the court. In addition, it is fundamentally wrong to talk about citizens and look at average views. There are citizens in all shapes and sizes with their own situations and problems and related judgments about how the public administration deals with the public good. We get to the significant part: the degree of trust in the government and civil servants depends on the political affiliation, education, self-reliance and independence of the employment position of citizens see also OECD 2022 Christensen & Laegreid 2005). The latter is important, because the citizen does not exist. Many citizens are supposed to be self-reliant, but others are not. We see this recurring in the implementation crises. The accessibility and understanding of how to get your law and your services from the government: the bureaucratic competency and literacy differ from citizen to citizen. The effort of this group of less self-reliant people to take high bureaucratic thresholds for them in order to end up in a world unknown to them has been known for a long time in the public administration and administrative sociological literature. See also the major consequences of, among other things, the Child Allowances Affair, the harsh approach resulting from the Participation Act on the lives of less bureaucracy-skilled and empowered citizens. Therefore, the average level confidence may remain high, but the critical undercurrent is insufficiently reflected in that average.

That is why my perhaps somewhat cynical question: is that a negative thing? Yes, it is bad. Apart from the personal suffering and also the requirement of a reliable government (Bekke 1990), a reduced trust among these citizens can have more adverse consequences than before. A less self-evident trust and authority of the government, politicians and civil servants legitimacy and authority among groups of citizens makes the work more difficult and, at its core, affects the propagation of the democratic rule of law. A loss of trust can have more adverse consequences for the functioning of the government than in the past. It can cause an erosion of the legitimacy and authority of the official. The latter is needed to ensure the cooperation of citizens. That is the difference with the past, when official authority may not have been liked, hence the ridicule, but was accepted. That is less the case now.

To what extent is bureaucracy accessible, reliable, resilient and robust for these groups of citizens? If there are shortcomings, where and how repair work must (and can) take place. Public administration against the background of the enabling state has the core task of ensuring a good public service to citizens and businesses (Van der Meer 2009). Comparative research shows that good governance contributes to healthy social and economic development (Raadschelders et al. 2015). But to quote Bismarck: 'Mit schlechten Gesetzen und guten Beamten läßt sich immer noch regieren. Bei schlechten Beamten aber helfen uns die besten Gesetze nichts' (Windelband, 1933). Of course, what is meant by Gut und Slecht here also depends on the author. In addition, a lot is expected of the government and civil servants. That has the downside of disappointment. This is particularly the case when daily life comes under pressure. At least it is felt increasingly vulnerable due to negative socio-economic, health, safety and ecological conditions. Hence the differences in opinions towards government and public administration and politics: individuals that are more self-reliant have a more positive view than the vulnerable. Again, the stronger the expectations and the greater the dependency, the greater the chance of disappointment in government action.

Earlier, after continuing in the period from the end of 1970 to the 1980s, political efforts were directed at creating a smaller bureaucracy in terms of size and influence (Van der Meer & Roborgh 1993). This should be realized in order to offer more room to the market in addition to savings. That policy, shared by most political parties, has actually been in place since 1982, at least until Rutte 3. This policy could also be widely approved in the media and only criticism was targeted at a supposedly insufficient staff reduction. (Dijkstra & Van der Meer 2017; Van der Meer 2021) (Top) civil servants have, to put it mildly, weakly opposed this. Top civil servants and civil servants can thus also be blamed for, among other things, a lack of loyal contradiction, an idea fixe about a higher educated a bureaucratic competent average citizen, an excessive and uncritical attitude towards reorganisations and management reforms (Van der Meer 2021; 2022 see for an overview Bekker 2017⁵). In any case, with a few exceptions, the contradiction has not come across loudly. Perhaps these officials are partly responsible for moving too much along and conforming to that policy. In addition, they have a crucial responsibility for initiating all kinds of inadequately, thought-out, and underdeveloped reorganizations and management reforms. These have not only impaired the internal operations of the public administration and have increased the distance from the citizen. Almost everyone has become aware of this policy. It has also partly caused capacity and quality problems. The problem is that the issue of implementation has only recently attracted ample political administrative recognition.⁶ This is partly motivated by the fact that much is still going well because of the use of that civil service and the inventiveness of citizens. Therefore, there is a (per-

⁵). <https://kennisopenbaarbestuur.nl/het-geheugen-van-bzk/50jaarverbeteringrijksdienst>.

⁶ Tijdelijke commissie Uitvoeringsorganisaties (commissie-Bosman, 2021) en de Parlementaire onderzoekingscommissie Kindertoelagen (commissie-Van Dam, 2020).

ceived) problem when it comes to a reliable, trustworthy and robust bureaucracy in the Netherlands. Past performance is no guarantee of future levels of performance. Reliability and a robust character require permanent political, official and social attention.

Although the image of a dysfunctional and generally distrusted government and public administration is not accurate, there is still something going on. Past good performance is no guarantee for the future: overdue maintenance can cause fissures. The signs on the wall have been visible since the early 90s but always ignored. Reliability and a robust character require permanent political, official and social attention. That attention has been rather marginal up to, as said the surfacing of the Child Allowance Affair in 2019. Political opportunism and disinterest in legislative quality issues and the institutional capacity of the civil service organization have also been important explanatory factors.

Top civil servants and other civil servants in managerial positions can also share part of the blame by a lack of (loyal) contradiction to their political masters and colleagues, and a misconception of an average citizen, an excessive enthusiasm for reorganizations and management reforms. Some administrative scientists and public administration experts have gone along with it and have provided the intellectual roots (see also Stellinga 2012). A dominant PA elite has even provided a legitimization: see, among other things, the unfocused propagation of a privatization and privatization drive, an unsubstantiated and rather crude policy and implementation separation, unrefined public management thinking and a less critical attitude towards all kinds of destructive management and reorganization modes. Only quite late, after an emerging political and social discontent, has the tide turned.

Finally, expectations of less self-reliant and less bureaucratic competent citizens who experience a feel degree of vulnerability have not been met. The stronger the level of expectations and the greater the dependency, the greater the chance of disappointment in government action.

But what to do: finding solutions

In response to the question, what can and should be improved in this country, the following solutions can be considered. Increase the attention for (structural) interest of politics in the practicality of policy, the quality of legislation and regulations, the quality of the civil service and public organization; do not consider it solely in terms of austerity possibilities. Sustain that perspective for the longer instead for the short run. For government, recognize that needs, self-reliance, wishes and possibilities can vary from citizen to citizen. Bureaucratic and digital literacy and competency also differs from citizen to citizen. So do not start from the conception of a uniform and idealized profile of a bureaucratically competent and digitally skilled citizen or even customer. A citizen who does speak the language of government. By this way, civilians lose track and can end up between shore and ship. As a civil servant, avoid a technocratic perception of citizens and their problems (Dijkstra & Van der Meer 2022).

To foster the popular acceptance of government authority, it is also about the improved (also literal) visibility and transparency of government thus providing, ample room for citizens,

civil servants and representatives of the people alike to participate (OECD 2022). Perhaps somewhat strongly formulated: the wall from a distance must be broken down. Pay attention to the expectations of citizens and do political administrative expectation management: the more you promise and you cannot deliver, the less trust is generated and the more feelings of unreliability do arise. In short, citizens' expectations about the government's ability to solve (all) problems are very high, but these expectations can lead to disappointment and sometimes distrust among less self-reliant citizens. Incidentally, citizens that are more self-reliant can also be overtly consumer oriented due to the decades-long emphasis on the self-interest of enterprising and calculating citizen (customers). You reap, what you sow. Create an environment and ample space for loyal dissent: with regard to politics, official top and leadership, colleagues but also with regard to the citizen, but there are also loyal contradictions in the opposite direction. Loyal to the public good (Van der Meer & Dijkstra 2021). Not to be forgotten, be careful do not try to please citizens in everything. (Van der Meer 2021b) Sometimes it is also necessary to contradict. Nevertheless, explanation, substantiation and accountability of actions is essential. The starting point remains: where things go wrong and when groups of citizens get into trouble, political officials and civil servants must assist these citizens without falling into political-administrative, internal bureaucratic, media and social trench warfare. That perspective of improvement remains an incessant point of attention and a crucial quality criterion.

Consequences for the field of PA: some prescripts and suggestions

However, what does it imply for public administration and public administration programs and institutes? Realize that for that purpose public administration education and research programs are needed that pay profound attention to the practice, issues and problems regarding bureaucracy, public sector organization, public professionalism, political-administrative quality in order to achieve a high standard public service delivery. Be aware that the focus has to be on the distinct character of public administration in all PA-programs and research themes (Berg, C.F. van den, F.M. van der Meer & G.S.A. Dijkstra, (2012). Realize that for public administration, in addition to knowledge of politics, economics and public O&M, an understanding of constitutional and administrative dimensions of public service decisions and delivery is indispensable. Thus, apprehend that the need for an interaction between theory, practice and application is the core added value of academic public administration that goes beyond law, economics and political science as separate subjects. Realize that public administration cannot be reduced to a quasi-political science, political economy, law or organizational sociology. These disciplines do not need to be copied and are outstanding on their own. Recognize that without knowledge of current administrative issues and bureaucratic practice, students and public administration staffs cannot operate in Dutch bureaucratic practice (and beyond) as academic professionals. Appreciate that scientific public administration and public administration experts must be critical of practice and science and do not go along with seemingly high-scoring bureaucratic, management and scientific fashions. Also, be aware that this is a prerequisite not only in politics, administration but also in academia itself. Thus, be aware that it is ultimately concerning how to serve the public interest and your profession. Understand

that in this whole and the satisfaction of these points the added value and right to exist of public administration can or cannot be found.

By way of conclusion and epilogue

Many citizens are supposed to be self-reliant, but others are not. The latter is important, because the citizen does not exist. The accessibility and understanding of how to get your law and your services from the government: the bureaucratic literacy and bureaucratic competency differ from citizen to citizen. The effort of this group of less self-reliant people to take high bureaucratic thresholds for them in order to end up in a world unknown to them has been known for a long time in the public administration and bureaucratic sociological literature. This has its effects in the levels of trust and differences regarding trust levels within society. Though the average levels of trust remain comparatively high (See the Standard Euro-barometers 2018-2022), but the critical undercurrent among less bureaucratic competent citizens is insufficiently reflected in that average. Given the increasing complexity of regulation and bureaucratic procedures more and more citizens (irrespective of their level of education) may become less bureaucratic competent. The same applies to civil servants themselves as a mounting functional work segmentation can make them only partially expedient in their task area. This constitutes a law of decreasing levels bureaucratic competency.

That is why my perhaps somewhat cynical question in the beginning is decreasing trust a negative thing by yes, it is bad. Apart from the personal suffering of affected citizens and the requirement of a reliable and trustworthy government, a reduced trust among these citizens can have more adverse consequences than before. A less self-evident trust and authority of government, politicians and civil servants legitimacy and authority among groups of citizens makes the work more difficult and, at its core, affects the propagation of the democratic rule of law. A lack of trust can have more negative implications for government than in the past. It brings along an erosion of the legitimacy and authority of public officials in society. That is the difference with the earlier 20th century, when bureaucratic authority may not have been liked but it was more automatically accepted. That has changed since the 1960s (Kerkhoff et al. 2011). The starting point for the solution is to emphasize the need for a reliable government and politics in the context of a transparent democratic constitutional state and a reliable, also self-accountable (differentiated) society.

Trust depends on the perception of the reliability of government and its officials. It thus also depends on belief in the credibility the truthfulness and selflessness of public officials and organizations that appeal to and require cooperation and action of citizens. The key word is reliability. Trust is the cement in a relationship between society and government. That sounds lofty, but it also embodies a dichotomy between us and them or also them and us with the possibility of distrust, unreliability and a disappointment in expectations. Citizens are also jointly responsible in their contribution to serving the public interest. This in turn makes a belief in the trustfulness and reliability of public administration so essential. That is why the rebuilding of that trust of all segments of society is so important (OECD 2022; Van der Meer 2021;

2022)). The opening quote from the film indicates that an open mind and attitude is but an indispensable condition for combatting personal and social cynicism. The other quote then by all means don't tell me, I don't believe in enough things already). Infers an attitude that is killing of renewal.

Finally, as an assignment for public administration experts, other academics, politicians and citizens: not only the result counts: but also the view dixi et salvavi animam meam: I have spoken and thereby saved my soul (conscience).⁷

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⁷ EZECHIËL, 3, 18 vgl., 33, 8 vgl. See also the use by Karl Marx in Critique of the Gotha Program (1875)

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