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Oostindie, G.J.; Veenendaal, W.P.; Hart, P. 't; Lange, S. de; Ham, C. van; Louwerse, T.

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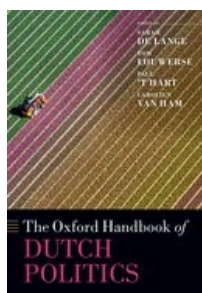
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CHAPTER

14 Political Relations in the Kingdom of the Netherlands

Gert Oostindie, Wouter Veenendaal

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Abstract

The Kingdom of the Netherlands is not exclusively located in Europe. Six small Caribbean islands have been connected to the European Netherlands for almost four centuries, and remain part of the transatlantic Kingdom today. This chapter first discusses the historical origins of these Kingdom relationships, and the ways in which historical legacies of colonialism and slavery continue to influence contemporary Kingdom relations. Then, it pays attention to the peculiar institutional structure of the Kingdom as laid down in the 1954 Kingdom Charter (*Statuut*). Despite the persistent ambiguities and conflicts that the Charter has created, it remarkably still continues to structure Kingdom relations, even though the membership of the Kingdom has changed drastically. Subsequently, the chapter discusses the perspectives and policies regarding Kingdom relations in both the European Netherlands and the Caribbean islands. It shows that while Kingdom relations play a very marginal role in Dutch politics and society, the populations of the Dutch Caribbean islands have deeply ambivalent attitudes towards the Kingdom, resulting in what can be called a head-versus-heart dilemma. The chapter then looks at the international context of Kingdom relations, and provides a comparative perspective by examining the political status of other non-sovereign territories in the Caribbean and beyond. It finishes with a conclusion in which four potential avenues for future research on Kingdom relations are outlined.

Keywords: Kingdom of the Netherlands, postcolonialism, non-sovereignty, Caribbean, small islands

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Introduction

While most readers of this book will be aware that the Netherlands has a long colonial past, they might nonetheless think of the country exclusively as a European state situated along the North Sea. In reality, however, the Kingdom of the Netherlands is a transatlantic entity located both in Europe and in the Caribbean. The European Netherlands is but one of the four constituent countries of the Kingdom, the other countries being three small former colonial islands in the Caribbean: Aruba, Curaçao, and St Maarten. And even the European Netherlands itself became a transatlantic country in 2010, when three other Caribbean islands—Bonaire, St Eustatius, and Saba—were constitutionally integrated into the country as public bodies or ‘special municipalities’ (Veenendaal, 2015). An overview of all Kingdom territories is presented in Table 14.1.

The 1954 Kingdom Charter (*Statuut*), the ‘constitution’ of the transatlantic Kingdom, is of a higher legal order than the constitutions of the four constituent countries. The Charter still governs Kingdom relations, even though membership of the Kingdom has changed significantly since it was established. The Kingdom has a complex and unique political structure, which frequently creates ambiguities and controversies. As we argue in our book *Ongemak* (Discomfort), friction has continued to characterize Kingdom relations, long after the colonial relations were formally ended and in spite of decades of experimenting with new ways of structuring and financing a more equitable postcolonial relationship (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022). There is no obvious way to manage, let alone end, this omnipresent and persistent unease.

This chapter discusses the historical origins of the present Kingdom relations; the legal architecture of the Kingdom as well as the deficits of the 1954 Charter; the significance of Caribbean and transatlantic Kingdom relations in Dutch politics; the appreciation of this postcolonial arrangement in the Dutch Caribbean islands; Kingdom relations in a broader international perspective; and finally provides some comparative reflections.

Table 14.1 Overview of Kingdom territories

	Population	Territory (km ²)	Location
<i>Kingdom countries</i>			
Aruba	107,000	180	South Caribbean
Curaçao	154,000	444	South Caribbean
St Maarten	41,000	34	North Caribbean
The Netherlands	17,749,000	41,543	Transatlantic
<i>Caribbean special municipalities of the European Netherlands</i>			
Bonaire	21,000	288	South Caribbean
St Eustatius	3,000	21	North Caribbean
Saba	2,000	13	North Caribbean
Kingdom of the Netherlands	18,051,000	42,201	Transatlantic

Source: compiled by authors.

Historical Origins

The Dutch state originated in a long war of independence fought against the Spanish Habsburg regime (see De Graaf, *this volume*). As this so-called Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) progressed, the emerging Dutch Republic extended the belligerence to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Economic and geopolitical interests coincided. Infringing on the territories of the Spanish and their close allies the Portuguese not only provided new opportunities for trade but at the same time opened new frontiers to attack the Iberians. By the late sixteenth century, Dutch ships were engaged in incidental explorations and commercial pursuits in Africa, Asia, and the Americas (Israel, 1995; Prak & Van Zanden, 2022). The scale and organization of overseas expansion was greatly enhanced with the establishment of the Dutch East India Company (1602–1799) and the Dutch West India Company (1621–1792) (Emmer & Gommans, 2012). At the time of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, these companies were busily developing an imperial structure, consisting of a long series of trading posts alongside a number of colonies that were mainly administrated by the companies. As time progressed, Great Britain in particular would confiscate a considerable number of these Dutch colonies. At the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), the newly established Kingdom of the Netherlands was allowed to retain the Indonesian archipelago; Suriname, a plantation colony on the northern coast of South America; and the six Caribbean islands that would later become known as the Netherlands Antilles.

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The Dutch state now assumed full imperial powers. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the importance of Indonesia for the Dutch economy increased (Ricklefs, 2008; Van den Doel, 2001; Van Doorn, 2013; Vickers, 2013). The ruthless 'pacification' of the entire archipelago was only completed in the early twentieth century (Hagen, 2018). The Dutch East Indies became of crucial importance to the Netherlands in all dimensions: economic and geopolitical, but also ideological and cultural. An Indonesian anti-colonial movement emerged after the First World War, but this nationalism was repressed and the Dutch demonstrated very little interest in even moderate colonial reforms (Van den Doel, 2001). History took a decisive turn as Japan invaded the colony in 1942, effectively ending Dutch rule. On 17 August 1945, two days after the Japanese capitulation, Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, declared independence. Eager to restore colonial relations, the Dutch authorities both in the Netherlands and in the archipelago totally underestimated the political and military strength of the Indonesian nationalist movement. It would take more than four years of bloody fighting, protracted negotiations, and increased international pressure on The Hague before the Netherlands and Indonesia signed a treaty confirming the transfer of sovereignty, on 27 December 1949 (Oostindie et al., 2022; Van Reybrouck, 2022).

The decolonization of the Dutch Caribbean followed an altogether different trajectory (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003). In contrast to Indonesia, there had been no significant anti-colonial movement prior to the Second World War. This did not change during the war, partly because under strong British and American pressure, the Dutch government in exile had indicated its willingness to engage in colonial reform once the war was over. In 1942 Queen Wilhelmina held a radio speech in which she promised more autonomy and self-rule for all Dutch colonial territories. For the Indonesians, this would be too little, too late. For the newly emerging political elites in the two Caribbean colonies, this was just what they were aspiring to. It would take almost nine years before the negotiations for a new, assumedly postcolonial order were completed. In December 1954, the *Statuut* of the Kingdom of the Netherlands was proclaimed, a Charter defining the Kingdom as a semi-federal state consisting of three autonomous countries, one in Europe, two in the Caribbean (Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles) (Van Helsdingen, 1957).

In the process leading up to the *Statuut*, neither of the negotiators representing the three future countries of the tripartite Kingdom had seriously considered the option of full independence or, conversely, of full integration of the former colonies in the metropolitan Netherlands along the lines of the 1946 French model of *départements d'outre-mer* (Connell & Aldrich, 2020). The principles of the *Statuut* were actually the framework that the Dutch government had started developing during the war in the vain hope of retaining

Indonesia in the Kingdom: allowing for self-governance while at the same time ensuring some sort of overarching governmental structure in which The Hague would retain the final say. By the time it became clear that Indonesia would not partake in this construction, the Dutch had already pledged to offer the same sort of autonomy to the two Caribbean colonies. Skilful Antillean and Surinamese negotiators made sure that these promises were fulfilled (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003, pp. 76–88).

At this point, it should be emphasized that with some hesitation, the United Nations decided in 1955 to accept the new constitutional order of the Kingdom as an acceptable outcome and hence removed the Netherlands from its list of countries obliged to report on the progress of decolonization. This has not changed since. What did change was the enthusiasm about the *Statuut* within the tripartite Kingdom itself. By 1970, a clear majority in the Dutch parliament favoured a complete transfer of sovereignty to the Caribbean countries, and hence the ending of the constitutional order of the *Statuut*. Arguably, the underlying motives were mainly self-serving. There were no significant economic or geopolitical interests, and several conditions inherent in the constitutional order were now defined as liabilities. These were fourfold. First, as we will discuss in more detail the next section, the *Statuut* may force the Kingdom government to interfere by law, but also by military force in Caribbean governance. Doing so would place the Netherlands in an uncomfortable (arguably colonial) position. Next, the constitutional order also obliges the Kingdom government to guarantee the territorial integrity of the Dutch Caribbean countries, by military force if necessary. Thirdly, the *Statuut* assumes that the countries will assist one another economically. In practice, this translated into a moral obligation for the Dutch to finance substantial development assistance. And finally, all citizens of the Kingdom have the same passport and hence the right of abode in the Netherlands.

Taken together, these consequences of the postcolonial arrangement of the *Statuut* were interpreted as unwelcome liabilities by majorities in Dutch parliament throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In Suriname, the Dutch found a nationalist government willing to attain independence, leading to the proclamation of the Republic of Suriname on 25 November 1975. On the Caribbean islands, in contrast, there was no support for a similar move either among politicians or among the electorate (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003, pp. 116–117). In vain did successive Dutch governments do their utmost to convince the Netherlands Antilles to opt for independence as a six-island state. Instead, none of the islands opted for independence, nor for clinging together. Hence, the Kingdom of the Netherlands is still a transatlantic entity today, and the *Statuut* has remarkably survived without major changes in content. Only its membership has changed, first with the independence of Suriname in 1975, then with the secession of Aruba in 1986, not from the Kingdom but from the Netherlands Antilles, and finally with the complete dismantling of the remaining five-island country in 2010. Ever since, the Kingdom of the Netherlands has consisted of four countries: Aruba, Curaçao, St Maarten, and the European Netherlands. The three least-populated islands, Bonaire, St Eustatius, and Saba, were integrated into the European Netherlands as ‘public entities’ or ‘special municipalities’. This means they are governed in a similar way to regular Dutch municipalities, but that there is room for exceptions. As we will explain below, some of these exceptions have created profound contestation.

The Charter for the Kingdom, or *Statuut voor het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, is a higher arrangement than the constitutions of the four individual countries. In its preamble, the *Statuut* stipulates that by joint consent and on a voluntary basis, the constituent countries are 'equivalent' and will 'take care of their own interests autonomously, manage communal affairs on an equal footing, and accord each other assistance' (*Statuut voor het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, 1954). In reality, however, in view of the vast differences in scale, economic development, and demographic numbers, the ideal of 'equivalence' did not materialize, either in the way the *Statuut* formulated the actual institutional architecture of this new arrangement, or in the actual functioning of the new-style Kingdom in the decades after 1954 (Broekhuijse, 2012; Hillebrink, 2008).

The *Statuut* defines a number of issues as pertaining to the authority of the overarching Kingdom government. These include matters of the monarchy, nationality, and passport; foreign affairs and defence; and the guaranteeing of good governance, the rule of law, and fundamental human rights and liberties. The responsibility for these so-called Kingdom affairs lies with the government of the Kingdom. And here the idea of equivalence evaporates. This Kingdom government is nothing but the Dutch cabinet, supplemented by a representative ('minister plenipotentiary') for each of the three Caribbean countries. It is not surprising that since 1954, in all cases where there was a significant conflict of opinion between the Dutch and one or more Dutch Caribbean governments, the former always had the last word (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, p. 49). Moreover, there is a structural 'democratic deficit' underlying this institutional arrangement, as there is no Kingdom parliament. The Kingdom cabinet, alias the Dutch government, is only accountable to the Dutch parliament, for which residents of the Caribbean countries have no voting rights.

Not only is the institutional structure at odds with the idea of full equivalence of the constituent parties of the Kingdom. So is the ideal of mutual assistance, which stands in sharp contrast with the reality of a one-way dependency relation in which the metropolitan Netherlands is the country providing financial support in both gifts and loans. In recent decades the Netherlands has been increasingly requesting control over Caribbean governance in return, thus seriously undermining the principle of Caribbean autonomy (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, pp. 178–196, 235–241).

None of this is particularly surprising, considering the huge differences in size. In 1954, the total population of the European Netherlands numbered some 10.5 million, as against some 240,000 in Suriname and 175,000 in the Netherlands Antilles. Today, the metropolitan population is nearing 18 million, including the 'seventh island'—some 170,000 Antilleans who reside in the European Netherlands. The total population of the six Dutch Caribbean islands is just over 300,000. In sheer numbers, the imbalance is striking, and the same goes for economic strength and potential. In sum, while according to the spirit of the *Statuut* all citizens of the Kingdom of the Netherlands are equal, no matter whether they live in Europe or the Caribbean, there is little reality in the pious claim that the Caribbean countries within the Kingdom are equivalent to the European Netherlands.

Interestingly, the *Statuut* also stipulates that no changes may be made to this arrangement without the support of all of its constituent members. This implies that no member country may unilaterally withdraw from the Kingdom. More importantly, it also means that the Netherlands cannot impose the choice of full independence on its former Caribbean colonies. The fact that all constituent countries need to agree on changes to the *Statuut* explains its rigidity and survival: the Kingdom is a clear case of institutional lock-in (Veenendaal, 2017).

Kingdom Relations as Seen from The Hague

The latter observation is not irrelevant. In the 1970s and 1980s, both left-wing and right-wing Dutch politicians occasionally threatened to simply force the Caribbean countries to accept sovereignty, and in more recent years radical right-wing populists have provocatively suggested selling the islands on eBay (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, pp. 229–235). This stance shows little morality or historical awareness, neglects the constitutional reality of the *Statuut*, and is certainly at odds with the broader international law argument as formulated by the United Nations as early as the 1960s—that former colonies may exercise their right to self-determination not only by choosing full sovereignty, but also by retaining some sort of constitutional relation to their former colonial state (UN General Assembly Resolution 1541, 1960).

At the same time, it is telling that the argument for a unilateral break-up of the Kingdom continues to pop up from time to time. The basic explanation is that over the past half century or so, few Dutch politicians have felt that the Caribbean territories of the Kingdom present a significant positive interest to the Netherlands. Against this background, a broad majority of the Dutch parliament insisted on bidding farewell to both Caribbean countries after 1970, applauded the independence of Suriname in 1975, and continued to urge the transfer of sovereignty to the Netherlands Antilles roughly until 1990. The realization that this policy would be met with a determined refusal on the islands, was at odds with international law and the *Statuut* itself, and might also be seen as unethical led to a somewhat reluctant acceptance, in the early 1990s, that the Kingdom would remain transatlantic. This change in policy was again broadly supported in parliament. The new position entailed a significant re-engagement with the islands and the management of Kingdom relations. But the underlying analysis has not changed significantly. Dutch interests in the Caribbean are defined less in terms of opportunities and gains than as a challenge to minimize the liabilities inherent in this ↪ postcolonial relationship (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003, pp. 118–152, 224–233; Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, pp. 225–244, 269–274).

As discussed above, these liabilities were first defined around 1970: Dutch responsibilities to guarantee territorial integrity and good governance in the autonomous member states, to provide financial support, and to accept an open migration channel between the Dutch Caribbean and the Netherlands. Looking back over the half century that has passed since the independence of Suriname, we may conclude that for most Dutch politicians, these arguments have not ceased to be of relevance. On the contrary, some of these factors have become more salient today than they were before. Issues of territorial integrity—including traditional concerns about Venezuelan claims to the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao, just off the continental coast—have been joined by concerns about refugees and other migrants, the cocaine trade, and international crime. Issues of financial support today need to be discussed in the context of major ecological and at least incidentally health issues (e.g. Covid-19)—challenges threatening these highly vulnerable small island economies, which are overwhelmingly dependent on tourism. Issues of bad and even corrupt governance have haunted several of the islands for decades, in spite of increased metropolitan oversight. And finally, not only has the open migration channel facilitated a significant growth of the Antillean community in the Netherlands and a worrying brain drain from the islands, but the settlement of relatively large numbers of low-skilled migrants has also caused serious integration issues, which in turn have elucidated the deep crisis of education on the islands and particularly in Curaçao (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, pp. 142–143).

What does this mean for Dutch politics? First and foremost, Caribbean affairs, or in The Hague parlance ‘Kingdom relations’, is no priority for metropolitan politicians. No priority not only because politicians have a hard time thinking about the Dutch Caribbean in terms of opportunities rather than liabilities, but ironically also because in the end these issues are of a relatively minor scale. Dutch financial support to the islands is of major importance to them, but insignificant to the overall Dutch budget. Integration issues of Antilleans in the Netherlands are serious (Van Niekerk, 2007), but they do not stand out among a host of

other migration- and integration-related challenges. And the ecological threats facing all of the Caribbean are only recently being discussed, hesitantly, on both sides of the Atlantic (Misiedjan, 2023).

In the end, what really matters is that there is no strong sense in Dutch society that the Dutch Caribbean really forms part of the Kingdom, much less a strong sense of historical affinity, awareness, and responsibility. Almost no opinion research on Kingdom relations is conducted in the European Netherlands, but a 2008 opinion poll suggested that 49% of respondents favoured ending the constitutional bonds with the Dutch Caribbean; by 2015, this proportion had grown to 61% (Nu.nl, 2015; Trouw, 2008). In parliament, this stance is only actively represented by Geert Wilders' radical right-wing Freedom Party, which became the largest party in the 2023 elections. The great majority of political parties, however, simply acknowledge that the Kingdom will remain transatlantic for the foreseeable future (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, pp. 235–244).

p. 232 Looking back on recent decades, we may discern two potentially conflictive tendencies in Dutch politics. On the one hand, there has been a re-engagement with the Dutch Caribbean, a process that took off in the 1990s and accelerated with the dismantling of the Netherlands Antilles in 2010. This re-engagement started with optimistic expectations and has come with more financial support, but also with more direct involvement in Caribbean governance, a process causing Caribbean complaints about heavy-handed 'recolonization' at the expense of the autonomy achieved in 1954. On the other hand, particularly since 2010, there is a growing frustration in Dutch politics about the apparent lack of success of the new policies, both in improving the economic situation of the islands and in enhancing the quality and integrity of Caribbean governance. In this context, it is quite a challenge for Dutch politicians to demonstrate a long-term engagement with the islands, if only because there is so little to win for them, personally: Kingdom relations rank low in the political pecking order (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, p. 230).

The Kingdom Relations as Seen from the Dutch Caribbean

While many European Dutch citizens—and perhaps also politicians—would thus not have a problem with a complete termination of Kingdom relations, the Dutch Caribbean islands have always resisted the idea of becoming independent. Results of both public votes and opinion surveys over recent decades clearly demonstrate that full independence is supported by only a small minority of the island populations, usually less than 10% (Veenendaal & Oostindie, 2018). Independence sometimes features in the rhetoric of Caribbean politicians, but usually only as a future aspiration. The only politician who seriously advocated independence—if only as a long-term perspective—was Curaçao's Helmin Wiels, but his party *Pueblo Soberano* never obtained more than 23% of the votes. After the shocking murder of Wiels in 2013 (only indirectly related to his political views), independence faded from the Curaçaoan political agenda.

Why do the island populations want to retain ties with a distant larger country which, after all, was their colonial ruler and brought their ancestors, enslaved Africans, to the islands? The reasons are primarily pragmatic: the Kingdom provides a series of tangible and intangible benefits. In the first place, since the 1960s the islands have received billions of euros in financial and economic support from the Netherlands, currently amounting to nearly €1 billion per year (Oostindie & Veenendaal 2022, p. 272). In case of emergencies like hurricanes and the Covid-19 pandemic, the small and vulnerable islands are assured of Dutch disaster relief. In addition to such direct benefits, membership of the Kingdom also translates into high-quality infrastructure connections with Europe, and direct access to the EU single market. The Dutch passport also provides important benefits to island populations, among which is the right to move temporarily or permanently to the Netherlands—hence the 'seventh island' of 170,000 people with Dutch Caribbean origins living in the Netherlands, more than the total population of Curaçao. Given the

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scarcity of higher education institutions on the islands, the passport also provides talented Dutch Caribbean students with the opportunity to pursue higher education at a university in the Netherlands.

The Kingdom also provides military safeguards and protection against international crime. The Dutch Caribbean islands are located in a volatile world region, in which the cocaine trade and accompanying crime networks are an increasing problem (Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2020). Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao are located just off the coast of Venezuela, a country which over the last fifteen years has plunged into a deep political and economic crisis, with instability and large migration flows as a result (Jones, 2021). The presence of the Dutch Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, and Royal Military Police on the islands provides crucial protection against these security threats. Finally, the Kingdom plays an important role in guaranteeing democracy and the rule of law on the islands. While most independent Caribbean countries classify as democracies (Freedom House, 2022), many of them have experienced profound political turbulence, crises, or coups. Since 2010, the Kingdom government has twice intervened on Curaçao and St Maarten to guarantee the organization of free and fair elections (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, pp. 128–134).

Opinion survey research indicates that Dutch Caribbean populations very much recognize and cherish the benefits that the Kingdom brings (Oostindie & Verton, 1998; Veenendaal, 2016). At the same time, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the brutal colonial past, the enduring relationship with the Netherlands is also disliked by many Dutch Caribbean citizens. The fact that the colonial period was not concluded with a transition to full independence is often interpreted as evidence of a persisting colonial relationship, which is why accusations of Dutch neocolonialism or recolonization are commonly heard on the islands (Sharpe, 2022). As discussed earlier, since the 1990s Dutch involvement with the islands has increased significantly, and on Bonaire and Curaçao the increasing influx of Dutch tourists, businessmen, and civil servants has created profound social tensions. Survey results reveal that the island populations feel increasingly disrespected by the Dutch government, and such sentiments have increased most strongly on the three small islands that were fully integrated into the Netherlands in 2010 (Veenendaal, 2016).

These perceptions are to some extent also grounded in persisting inequalities. References to the colonial past unmistakably have a racial component, and Dutch Caribbean citizens continue to experience race-based discrimination, both on the islands and in the European Netherlands (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2020). Dutch Caribbean citizens remain much poorer than their Dutch European counterparts, and their political representation in Kingdom institutions continues to be deficient. While Bonaire, St Eustatius, and Saba were fully integrated into the Netherlands in 2010, persistent inequalities in social rights and services remain. Provisions like the minimum wage, child benefits, pregnancy leave, and the rights of prisoners are of lower standards than in the European Netherlands—a type of inequality which according to human rights non-governmental organizations is constitutionally unlawful. Given these enduring inequalities, it is understandable that Dutch Caribbean citizens feel that they have always remained second-class citizens within the Kingdom.

In sum, therefore, Dutch Caribbean citizens feel deeply ambivalent about Kingdom relations. The important benefits that the Kingdom brings are partly offset by profound ideological and emotional frustrations and grievances, resulting in what may be called a head-versus-heart dilemma (Veenendaal & Oostindie, 2018). Ultimately, however, the head clearly trumps the heart, in the sense that political independence remains off the table. Instead, Dutch Caribbean citizens are increasingly demanding equal rights, respect, and social justice *within* the Kingdom. A crucial element of this is the recognition of the historical legacies of slavery and colonialism, which is why the formal apology of the Dutch government for its involvement in slavery stirred strong—but mainly positive—reactions on all six islands (see Lauret & Fatah-Black, *this volume*).

An International Perspective

We have discussed Kingdom relations from the perspectives of both sides of the Atlantic, but of course the Kingdom does not operate in a vacuum: there is also a broader international context to consider. The Kingdom of the Netherlands operates as a single sovereign state in international affairs, which means that it has a uniform foreign and defence policy. Nevertheless, the three Caribbean Kingdom countries do engage in so-called para-diplomacy (Bartmann, 2006): they have relations with some other states in the region, but primarily with regional Caribbean organizations such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), of which all three countries are observant members. Occasionally, the Caribbean countries have clearly dissociated themselves from the formal foreign policy of the Kingdom and steered a different course. The clearest example of this was the Curaçaoan government of Gerrit Schotte (2010–2012), which established close relations with Venezuela's former president Hugo Chávez.

Despite the fact that the Kingdom is a single sovereign state, there is one important internal discrepancy that has become much more salient in recent decades: the European Netherlands is a founding member state of the European Union (EU), while the six Dutch Caribbean islands are not part of the EU. In contrast to French overseas departments like Guadeloupe and French Guiana, which as 'Outermost Regions' are an integral part of the EU, the Dutch Caribbean islands remain part of the group of 'Overseas Countries and Territories' (OCT), which do have a special connection with the EU but are not part of it (Besselink, 2005). Moreover, since 2010 this discrepancy also exists within the European Netherlands, since Bonaire, Saba, and St Eustatius have remained part of the OCT group despite their constitutional integration into the European Netherlands. Given that there is only one Dutch passport, in practice Dutch Caribbean citizens do enjoy other EU-related benefits, such as the free movement of persons and goods across member states.

p. 235 Moreover, the islands have also become ↪ recipients of significant funds and subsidies from the EU in recent decades (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, p. 204).

Since the nineteenth century the United States has regarded the Caribbean as its geopolitical backyard. In the Cold War, this dominance was challenged by Cuba and the Soviet Union. More recently, Venezuela and Nicaragua, but also China and Russia have become important anti-American players in the region. Venezuela is one of the world's largest oil producers, and by means of its Petrocaribe initiative, it has tried to gain the loyalty of small Caribbean island states in return for oil supplies. However, given the exacerbating political and economic crisis in Venezuela, Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao are obviously of geostrategic interest to the United States, which has military Forward Operating Locations on both Aruba and Curaçao. Unsurprisingly, Venezuelan presidents like Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have strongly expressed their opposition to the islands' enduring ties with the European Netherlands and have expressed concerns that they could be used as springboards for a potential American attack. Former president Hugo Chávez asserted that the islands are located within Venezuelan territorial waters but are still administered by a 'Dutch imperial regime' (Trouw, 2009).

Aside from the Venezuelan threat, there are also profound concerns about the increasing function of the islands as transit ports for international cocaine trade and the associated transnational crime networks (Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2020). The islands' non-sovereign status and good access to European markets make them ideal intermediary stations for drugs trafficking. Since 2010, international crime networks have especially tried to gain a foothold in the new Kingdom countries of Curaçao and St Maarten, and have attempted to establish connections with local politicians and political parties (Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2020). Several politicians and civil servants (especially those working for customs) have been accused of corrupt dealings with cocaine smugglers. The islands also regularly experience shootings or murders related to criminal groups (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, pp. 207–208).

Given the smallness and vulnerability of the islands, their geostrategic location, and the increasing problems associated with the cocaine trade, the United States strongly prefers the islands to remain non-sovereign territories within the Kingdom rather than becoming sovereign states. It is no surprise, therefore, that behind the scenes Washington has repeatedly exerted pressure on the Dutch government to retain its ties with the Caribbean islands (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022, p. 239).

A Comparative Perspective

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The six Dutch Caribbean islands are part of a larger group of non-independent territories worldwide that continue to have constitutional links with a larger metropolitan state, usually their former colonial power (Connell & Aldrich, 2020; Ferdinand et al., 2020). Most of these approximately 60 non-sovereign territories are small islands, and the bulk of them are located in the Caribbean, the Pacific, or the Indian Ocean. Some of the territories do not have a permanent population, and a minority does not have a colonial history (such as the British military bases on Cyprus). If we disregard these cases, we end up with a group of 40 non-sovereign territories, all former colonies, which retain ties to a total of seven metropolitan states: Australia, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Ferdinand et al., 2020).

There are strong differences in how citizens and politicians of these seven metropolitan powers view the relations with 'their' overseas territories, ranging from a measure of enthusiasm in France and the United States to lukewarm or even negative attitudes in the other five states (Ferdinand et al., 2020). This is strongly related to the global status and aspirations of the metropolitan state in question: France and the United States regard themselves as world powers and therefore cherish the geopolitical and strategic advantages that their enduring ties with non-sovereign territories bring them. This is much less the case for the other five metropolitan states, for which the financial and practical burden of having to take care of small, distant territories weighs heavier. Some of these metropolitan states (e.g. the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) have actively tried to push the remaining territories to independence in previous decades, but have now more or less accepted that the links with overseas territories are here to stay (Ferdinand et al., 2020). The United Nations now also regards non-sovereignty as an acceptable end result of decolonization, as long as it is supported by the population of the non-sovereign territory in question (Duijf & Soons, 2011).

While all non-sovereign territories have in common that they are not fully independent, there are vast differences in the specific constitutional arrangements that they have with their respective metropolitan powers. At one extreme are the French *départements d'outre-mer*, which are fully integrated into metropolitan France (David & Daniel, 2021). Other French territories are not completely incorporated, but still enjoy very little autonomy from the strongly centralized French state. At the other extreme are the two freely associated states of the Cook Islands and Niue, which enjoy full self-government, only retain relations with New Zealand on a voluntary basis, and even have the right to establish diplomatic relations with other states and international organizations. Other non-sovereign territories fall in between these two extremes, with Australian and British overseas territories following the model of limited autonomy, and Danish and Dutch territories following the model of more autonomy (Ferdinand et al., 2020). The American non-sovereign territories have different statuses and corresponding levels of autonomy (Ferdinand et al., 2020).

There are important differences in how non-sovereignty is assessed by the populations of non-sovereign territories themselves (Ferdinand et al., 2020). In virtually all non-sovereign territories, a head-versus-heart dilemma similar to the one we discussed for the Dutch Caribbean can be observed, but there are differences in the relative weight of both head and heart arguments. Smaller territories with fewer natural resources and 'settler' populations who descend from the metropolitan state usually have a rather

favourable, if not outright enthusiastic attitude towards the non-sovereign relationship. A key example is the Falkland Islands/Malvinas, which fully embrace their enduring ties to the United Kingdom. By contrast, for larger territories with more natural resources and legacies of oppression, racism, and in some cases also slavery, non-sovereignty is much more problematic. Key examples are Greenland (part of the Kingdom of Denmark) and New Caledonia (a French special collectivity). In both of these territories, political independence is considered as a serious alternative: in a 2020 referendum, 47% of New Caledonians supported independence, and plans for an independence referendum in Greenland are currently in the making.

Conclusion

Whether we think of square kilometres, population figures, economic data, or geopolitical clout, by all accounts the centre of gravity of the Kingdom of the Netherlands is located in Europe, not in the Caribbean. It is therefore not surprising that studies on the contemporary Netherlands tend to gloss over the transatlantic dimension of the Kingdom altogether, or only mention it in passing. Perhaps the same may be said of a Handbook on Dutch politics, if not for this chapter. What we have attempted to do is to explain the historical origins of what may seem to be an odd outcome of a long history of colonialism and a much shorter one of decolonization. This at first sight counterintuitive outcome, the permanent integration of the last remnants of colonialism within the Kingdom, becomes more logical once we realize that precisely the smallest former Dutch colonies opted against independence. Justified concerns about their viability as independent states—inevitably: microstates—made them decide to remain associated with their former colonial power. As we discussed, this is a choice made by dozens of similar former colonies across the globe, most of them equally tiny islands with small populations and limited viability as independent states.

We have provided an analysis of the historical background and of the present characteristics, performance, and challenges of Kingdom relations. We suggest that there is little reason to expect major constitutional change in the upcoming decades. The real issue is whether the present governmental framework will be made to work to relieve the serious problems confronting the islands, ranging from ecological and economic ones, to the quality and integrity of governance, to the legacies of slavery and colonialism. We have argued before that this will require not only substantial metropolitan investments and engagement, but equally a willingness on the part of Caribbean politicians to improve the quality, integrity, and accountability of governance on their islands, even if this comes at the expense of the doctrine of ‘autonomy’ as laid down in the 1954 *Statuut* (Oostindie & Veenendaal, 2022). At the same time, we have also emphasized that low levels of mutual trust and respect, as well as low levels of knowledge and engagement among the metropolitan Dutch population, continue to stand in the way of constructive transatlantic relationships.

We are very much aware that from a theoretical or conceptual perspective too, this chapter is rather distinct from all other contributions in the Handbook. Mirroring the marginal role of Kingdom relations in Dutch politics, academic research on the Kingdom also remains limited. Nevertheless, by way of conclusion, we will suggest four directions that we think merit priority in future research. First, we cannot but return to the observation made at the beginning of this chapter. The Kingdom of the Netherlands is a transatlantic state, even if the Dutch Caribbean territories may seem peripheral in Dutch politics. Consequently, no political analysis of the Kingdom of the Netherlands is complete without taking this legacy of empire seriously.

There are all sorts of debates about the legacies of colonialism and particularly slavery in the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory (see Lauret & Fatah-Black, *this volume*). The post-war history of the six Dutch Caribbean islands is but one case of postcolonialism, in which the outcome of decolonization has been a deliberate choice for a non-sovereign ‘postcolonial’ status, which nonetheless rouses much ambivalence. These mixed feelings are particularly strong in former colonies where the

memory and legacies of slavery continue to weigh heavily in the present (Connell & Aldrich, 2020; Ferdinand et al., 2020). Caribbean states are claiming reparations for slavery (Caribbean Community, 2023), and this claim has found support both in the Dutch Caribbean and among Afro-Dutch citizens in the Netherlands. Moreover, the Dutch government has moved from its 2002 expression of ‘regret’ for the state’s slavery past to outright apologies in late 2022. A question for future studies is what consequences the call for reparatory justice might have for transatlantic Kingdom relations.

This question ties in with even broader questions about insular and regional identities. In this context, the colonial past and contemporary postcolonial arrangements for non-sovereignty are not the only issues: the deep impact of the tourism industry and the migrations that come with it have produced new identity debates. In the Dutch Caribbean islands, this is a twofold challenge. Over recent decades, labour migrants from the Caribbean and beyond and their offspring have come to make up one-third to over half of the populations of the six islands. While their contribution to the local economies has been indispensable, their presence has also deeply impacted local social and cultural structures. The long-range consequences of these ongoing migrations for local identities and indeed politics are an issue well worth studying. So is the question of how the ever-growing dependence on mass tourism itself impacts on local cultures.

The decolonization process of the Netherlands Antilles and the fragmentation of this multi-island entity in 2010 has created numerous ambiguities and questions (Duijf & Soons, 2011). The same goes for the institutional structure of the Kingdom itself, which is a quasi-federal structure that is unique in the world, and creates numerous questions about the meaning of autonomy, equivalence, and self-determination (Broekhuijse, 2012; Hillebrink, 2008). This leaves ample room for further research in the field of constitutional law, but from a political science perspective we feel that there are other priorities. While the Kingdom is unique, Kingdom relations can be compared to other types of centre-periphery relations in (semi-) federal states (Watts, 1998). These relations often result in the same type of head-versus-heart dilemmas that we observe in the Dutch Caribbean. Such debates often have a scale component, pitting a more populous centre against a scarcely populated periphery. Notions of scale are also important for political status debates in non-sovereign territories and other peripheral entities, as perceptions about viability strongly affect preferences for a political status. So far, research on small sovereign states, non-sovereign territories, and small subnational administrations has been compartmentalized. We believe that future studies should aim to break through these boundaries and analyse the commonalities and differences between small territories with varying levels of sovereignty.

A final avenue for future research concerns the economic development prospects of small islands, and the political dilemmas associated with this. A large number of academic studies have examined the inherent economic vulnerabilities of so-called small island developing states (Briguglio, 1995). While this literature highlights the creative exploitation of economic niche markets, such as offshore finance and (eco-)tourism, as strategies that may (temporarily) create economic growth, in the long run small island territories will always remain economically vulnerable. Moreover, many of these development strategies produce pollution and environmental destruction, which may turn into acute problems on small island territories that are very exposed to the consequences of climate change. This also creates dilemmas for metropolitan states like the Netherlands: by stimulating economic growth, the dependence of small island territories on the metropolitan state may be reduced, but this may come at the price of environmental destruction. Conversely, if protecting the environment becomes a key priority, the metropolitan state may have to accept a responsibility to provide additional economic and financial support to the small peripheral islands.

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