

Trusting in democracy

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People still trust the bodies that make up our democratic system, such as the government and Parliament, but they have far less confidence in the institutions and persons who are members of those bodies. The manner in which we in the Netherlands give shape to our democracy therefore has the approval of the great majority of the Dutch population, whereas the way in which parties and politicians actually function is viewed critically. A significant proportion of the population have little confidence in the people who represent them in Parliament and administration. In other words, the people who take decisions on our behalf have only limited support among the people whom they represent. As a result, the decisions that they in fact take are always a matter for discussion. That distrust of politicians and parties has its effect on the legislation that they adopt. This is a dangerous development: the perceived dysfunctionality of parties and politicians can drag down other institutions along with it.

The origin of this crisis of legitimacy can be found in “the gap”, but not in the usual sense of the perceived distance between the citizen and politicians that is said to involve politicians not understanding the concerns of the citizen. No, the Council believes that there is “a different gap”: relationships within society are becoming increasingly horizontal, whereas political administration largely continues to operate as always, i.e. on the basis of vertical, hierarchical relationships of authority. That leads to friction.

The horizontalisation of society has its origin in the process of individualisation, which people experienced primarily as a liberation. But there is also a downside: institutions, leaders, and politicians are consequently without natural authority and must constantly earn that authority over and over again. Ideologies have lost much of their significance and have been replaced by economic values such as effectiveness and efficiency. Economic principles have become decisive for the public sector too, with the assumption being that institutions other than government bodies can ensure greater effectiveness and efficiency. Within the horizontalised public sphere, the media interpret reality as a conflictual relationship between government and politicians on the one hand and citizens on the other. This encourages distrust of government and politics.

Political administration has adapted itself only slightly to this new reality of the horizontalised society. Ideologies have been cast off and business-economics discourse has also become firmly embedded within political circles. Politics has shifted to semi-public implementing organisations, independent administrative authorities and the EU, or has been contracted out to private enterprise. But while citizens have gained influence in many other areas of life, they have hardly been able to strengthen their position within politics, if at all. Proposals for the introduction of referendums or elected mayors have often failed at the last hurdle, while other ideas, for example for a new electoral system, have never even acquired the formal status of a parliamentary bill. Politics has itself therefore become part of the problem rather than the starting point for finding a solution.

Political and societal reality have therefore diverged. The way people see the world – how they experience reality – no longer links up with the way politics functions. Politics and administration operate as if society were still a system of vertical, hierarchical relationships. People, businesses and institutions – but also public administration – are now members of horizontal networks. Within that system, politics and government are no longer the most important player but only one of a number of important players. Political administrators still seem to be insufficiently aware of this. The way politics functions and organises itself no longer fits in with the way society is organised.

This is therefore the actual or “other” gap, the one between – on the one hand – the horizontalised public sphere where people, civil-society organisations and businesses, but also politicians and administrators deal with one another on a basis of equality within networks, and – on the other hand – the vertically organised institutions of politics and administration which, although part of the horizontal system, in fact still assume a vertical fiction in their mode of operation, and have consequently failed to find any effective link to the new reality.

It is a misconception to assume that it is only politicians and administrators who need to search for new links with the horizontal network society. Many other institutions too – for example churches, unions, media, businesses, and civil-society organisations – are also organised vertically and still operate on the basis of a vertical reality. In many cases, however, they do attempt to reposition themselves within that public sphere because they otherwise run the risk of losing contact with their members, customers, shareholders, donors, subscribers, and other stakeholders. Like politicians and administrators, many of these institutions are struggling with the fact that people have become autonomous: they now determine their own rules of life, represent their own interests, do not need to read newspaper editorials to know what to think, and no longer take anything automatically for granted. Although the present advisory report focuses only on how politicians and administrators should deal with this new reality, the issue involved is not solely one for political administration to confront.

The “other gap” leads to only a small proportion of people still connecting with political administration. From the perspective of the democratic principle, that is unacceptable. Moreover, there is also the practical objection that significant potential in the form of knowledge and experience is not utilised if citizens are hardly involved – if at all – in policy and decision-making. This threatens to divorce politics from society entirely.

Vertically organised administration and final decision-making based on a democratic mandate are indispensable and will remain so. It is important for institutions to take decisions, to act decisively, to supervise matters, and to impose sanctions. Nevertheless, they must do so in constant interaction with the public sphere. Failing to do so damages the legitimacy of their decisions.

Those involved in political administration must also realise that they themselves operate within the horizontal relationships in society, and that they are themselves part of the public sphere. In order to continue functioning within that sphere in the best possible manner, a different attitude and new competencies are required. How can government and political administrators operate

authoritatively within the horizontal public sphere? Doing so will require the creation of new links between the vertical administration and the horizontal society. This in turn raises a further question, namely how vertically organised political administration can link up again with the horizontal society.

The Council believes that there are three points where such a link can be created. In the first place, politicians will once more need to operate mainly on the basis of values and principles. They must give direction authoritatively. The vertical structure of the old parties-based democracy works with SMART objectives in election programmes, coalition agreements, and policy plans. That approach is based on the fiction that the future can be predicted and planned. Within the political arena, public values must be considered; they are, after all, the basic principles on which we can choose our leaders. This requires a radically different approach, particularly from political parties. These will need to face up to the relative nature of their highly detailed election manifestoes, calculations of their programme, and the dozens of pages of coalition agreements. Politicians, parties and administrators, but above all citizens benefit far more from a framework that gives them something to hold on to when unexpected events occur than a programme that quickly becomes obsolete in the light of such events.

The Council considers, secondly, that people should be given considerably more influence on policy and decision-making. In a democracy, it is not sufficient for them to merely be able to vote for a political party once every four years. Representative democracy needs to be supplemented by elements of participatory and/or direct democracy, with the primacy of politics no longer being sacred. The Council favours differentiation between the elements of primacy and ultimacy. When people have had a direct influence on the front end of the policy process – drawing up the agenda and preparing policy – and consequently enjoyed primacy, then the ultimacy element – the actual decision-making – can be assigned to politicians. If politicians and civil servants have dealt with the planning in the traditional manner, then the citizens must still play their role. The ultimacy element can then express itself, for example, by means of a referendum. The quality of the democratic process will need to become just as important within political debate as the actual products of decision-making.

Thirdly and finally, the Council believes that citizens must be given greater influence on the choice of their political leaders, starting with the drawing up of lists of candidates and designation of the leading candidates of the political parties. The Council also recommends changing the electoral system so that people's votes have greater weight. Consideration must also be given once more to the possibility of mayors being directly elected.

At this stage, the Council does not express any preference as to the way the various links should be effectuated – there is a broad range of options. Doing nothing, however, is not an option. The methods referred to constitute the necessary lever for creating a new relationship between politicians and society. A number of these measures will need to be implemented in order to join up what are at the moment separate worlds. The need to do so is urgent because if none of the possibilities is utilised, the “other gap” will become too great for that connection to be created.