The State of Multiculturalism in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of immigration and integration policies in the Netherlands. Whereas these were once relatively lenient, recent developments give cause for concern. Changing attitudes are reflected in the popularity of such political figures as Pim Fortuyn who publicly criticized Islam and championed the rejection of multiculturalism. In conclusion, Doomernik asserts that multiculturalism in the Netherlands has now been "relegated to the dunghill of political history."

Much like most other European countries, The Netherlands does not consider itself to be a country of immigration in the sense that it offers opportunities to adventurous people from abroad. The government did, however, acknowledge by 1980 that the presence of immigrants in the country was a reality requiring adequate policy responses. This was after a period in which the country had pursued 'guest worker' policies, whereby it was assumed that these workers were to stay as long as their presence was of economic value and would return home once their services were no longer required. For certain nationalities this was precisely what happened, for others it was not. When the need for unskilled labour drastically went down after the oil crises of the 1970s, especially 'guest workers' from poorly developed states like Turkey and Morocco turned out to have settled. Subsequently, a process of family reunification set in; in this way a moderate stock of several tens of thousands of 'guest workers' turned into ethnic communities of considerable size. The Turkish community now comprises 341,000 persons and the Moroccan community amounts to 295,000 people[1] (CBS 2003).

Another type of immigration took place from the (former) Dutch colonies. When Indonesia gained independence in 1949, this caused an outflow of persons who – often of mixed descent – had been associated with colonial rule. Even though most of these persons were born in Indonesia, they were considered as repatriates who 'returned' to the Netherlands. The Indonesian community gradually increased in size and now numbers just over 400,000 (Ibid.). Colonial immigration of a more recent date stems from Surinam. The country became independent in 1975, forcing the Surinamese population to remain Dutch nationals (implying resettlement in the Netherlands) or becoming Surinamese nationals. Today the Surinamese community numbers 321,000 (Ibid.). Since then, immigration to the Netherlands has greatly diversified. Especially since the end of the 1980s, immigrants – oftentimes refugees and asylum seekers – from many countries near and far have found their way across the Dutch borders. To give a few examples: in 2003 the country was home to 42,000 people from Iraq, 28,000 from Iran, 28,000 from Somalia; all populations virtually unheard of a decade earlier. Between 1995 and 2003 the total population of non-western origin in the Netherlands increased by 44% (to 1.6 million or 10% of the total population), whereas that of western immigrant origin the increase was limited to 7%. Arguably, this diversification in immigration is to be understood as an integral – and hence 'normal'- part of the globalization process (Doomernik et al. 1997, Doomernik & Axtmann 2001). Yet, this was an unforeseen consequence and one which gave policy makers a sense of being 'out of control' and politicians an easy issue for debate. It is in this light that recent developments in Dutch immigration and integration policies should be understood.

Immigration policies past and present

The sense that immigration needs to be strictly controlled is a relatively new phenomenon in the Netherlands. In the 1950s and 60s the country was considered to be one of *emigration* and the government actively promoted the resettlement of Dutch nationals abroad. After 1960 shortages started to make themselves felt on the labour market and these were addressed by importing guest workers. Recruitment took place, but to a large extent vacancies were filled with workers who turned up "spontaneously" (Penninx et al. 1994). In case these immigrants had no residence and/or working permit these could be arranged *post factum.* Few if any policy concerns were caused by this.

After 1974 this period ended. As we know now, this did not mean an end to actual immigration – on the contrary. Yet no serious attempts were made to curb the arrival and settlement of family members of the former 'guest workers'. The main challenge for policymaking that was identified was to integrate these newcomers into Dutch society (see further down).

Since then, the Netherlands has pursued restrictive immigration policies, meaning settlement is only allowed in cases where a) this serves the national interest, b) international obligations leave no alternative, c) there are compelling humanitarian

grounds to allow it. Obviously, these grounds stand open to interpretation. The meaning of "serving the national interest" has never been established by parliament and has been interpreted according to economic urgency and the political influence of the applicant (which always is the employer) (Koopman 2002). Some international obligations are clear-cut in nature (e.g. European Community Law) while others are much less so; e.g. as far as the compelling humanitarian grounds for granting a residence permit are concerned, the government has certain discretionary powers within the framework of the European Convention on Human Rights (article 8).

Until the mid 1980s admission usually took place on the grounds mentioned under c) and, to a smaller extent a), and the interpretation tended to be generous towards the immigrant. After this period, this started to change. More and more immigrants were asylum seekers and refugees hoping to be admitted on grounds following from the Geneva Convention. Traditionally the interpretation of the Geneva Convention was such that an applicant stood a good change of being allowed to stay – if not with full refugee status at least with some other type of residence permit. The emerging sense of losing control following a sharp increase in asylum requests during the early 1990s led to numerous changes in practices and laws all over North Western Europe, including the Netherlands, in hopes of reducing the number of asylum requests. During the entire decade the Netherlands remained one of the European Union countries that received the highest numbers of asylum requests (not just in relative but also in absolute numbers). By the second half of the 1990s, the government had become convinced that further restrictive use of the current Aliens Law no longer held much promise and decided to enact an entirely new law. This came into force in April 2001 and by virtually abolishing the possibility of appeal for rejected asylum seekers indeed managed to reduce the number of successful claims quickly by half or more. This led to a significant reduction in asylum requests.

Furthermore, the present government decided to make admission on grounds mentioned under c) more difficult or even impossible by imposing conditions regarding income (120% of the minimum wage) or age of the person wanting to import spouse or partner from abroad (from 18 to 21 years of age). And so in general it can be concluded that the discomfort caused by the feeling of being out of control when it comes to asylum seekers and refugees had spilled over into other areas of immigration and integration policy.

This trend is further exemplified by the way in which internal controls were developed during the 1990s. It gradually became clear that immigrants, especially those from the guest worker era, had disproportionate need for social security provisions and similar benefits. From there the step was small towards the assumption that *illegal* immigrants might well be large-scale welfare abusers. And in any event, the possibility that a person residing in the country without permission could theoretically claim such benefits politically justified the introduction of an 'exclusion law' or *koppelingswet* in July 1998. This law introduced the requirement for all providers of public goods (with the exception of medical doctors and teachers) to establish a client's residence status, and deny access in relevant cases. Even though the number of aliens affected by this law turned out to be small, their exclusion still created considerable public attention. First of all because they usually turned out to be vulnerable families with children and, secondly, because the municipalities concerned showed themselves to be very reluctant to terminate these people's income (and if applicable, public housing). Today this reluctance is still in evidence but the focus has shifted towards rejected asylum seekers. Apart from humanitarian considerations, municipalities are also concerned about the potential risks to the civil order when vulnerable people are left to fend for themselves on the streets. Politically this stance has resulted in a deadlock between municipal and national authorities; the latter trying to force the former to implement locally their centrally planned policies. The type of resistance varies, but about a third of all municipalities have indicated that they are not prepared to fully implement government policies. The Minister for Aliens Affairs and Integration voices considerable dismay but has few instruments with which to force local authorities to comply.

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Integration à la mode Hollandaise

When it comes to integration policies a similar type of development can be seen to have taken place in the domain of admission policies: a gradual move away from laissez-faire and leniency towards a problem-driven and uncompromising approach to newcomers. Dutch integration policies broadly comprise three domains: the legal, the

socio-economic and the ethnic-cultural domains. The first was partially addressed earlier (restrictionist, i.e. admit as few aliens as possible) but is complemented by the notion that those who *are* admitted should ideally become full citizens as a matter of course. Failing to naturalize, which can take place after five years of legal residence, an alien has legal rights that come very close to that of a national (the most significant discrimination being the right to vote and stand as a candidate for national elections). This principle has stood more or less undisputed since Dutch integration policies were first conceived in the early 1980s. Naturalization made relatively easy, and the presence of many post-colonial immigrants who always had been Dutch nationals, plus a desire to monitor the integration of the children of immigrants, created the need to create a new policy category: the *allochtonous* inhabitants of the country. Anyone born abroad or having one such parent comes under this heading. Further differentiation is made between western and non-western allochtonous people. Only the latter are of concern to Dutch integration policies.

The socio-economic position of non-western allochtonous persons, on average is not at par with that of the native Dutch. Indeed, among members of the first generation the average unemployment levels are high and the net-participation rates low (Doomernik 1998, CBS 2003). For the second generation the picture varies less from mainstream society, but educational attainments lag behind to varying degrees and dropout rates are higher. Labour market performance and participation rates are clearly higher than of their parents but lie behind those of native peers. Not surprisingly, crime rates appear to lie well above those for the rest of the population (though one should keep in mind possible biases in police investigation, prosecution and sentencing).

These problems have been countered with several types of policies, both of a targeted and a general nature. Among those policies were quotas for positive discrimination in the allocation of public jobs, on the local and the national level examples could be found, and additional job schemes aimed a the long-term unemployed (among whom are a disproportionate number of persons of foreign origin) and school-leavers with poor qualifications (ditto) (Choenni 2000, Doomernik 2003). On top of that, mention should be made of two instruments that are rather typical for the Netherlands.

The first came under several names and lasted for a decade (until the end of 2003). It was a legal obligation among the larger employers to register the ethnic identity of their staff members, to report these numbers annually, and to come up with a public statement as to its plans to increase (if applicable) the relative number of allochtonous staff members. The idea behind this measure was that it would raise awareness among employers for their important role in furthering the integration process. Yet, it transpired that many employers did not take this responsibility as seriously as expected. To remedy this, the law was renamed and watered down by dismissing the reporting obligation. It is difficult to assess what these measures have contributed.

Probably more effective is the comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation (in civil and penal law) the Dutch government introduced during the 1990s. Part of this was the establishment of the Equal Treatment Commission. It investigates complaints about discrimination in the fields of work and education, or in the provision of services. Its judgments are not legally binding but have a very high standing and societal impact.

A last important change pertains to the financing of the integration courses. Whereas originally the government funded the municipalities to organize the integration courses, the new system will be such that the migrants themselves must bear the full costs and the courses are to be privatized.

Another set of instruments is meant to equip newcomers with basic skills. Since 1998 all newcomers who seek permanent settlement in the Netherlands and who arrive from outside the European Union are subject to an integration obligation. This follows from the *Wet Inburgering Nieuwkomers* (WIN), or the Law on the Integration of Newcomers. Immigrants are required to follow approximately 600 hours of language training, during which they also learn about Dutch society's institutions, culture, norms and values. Until now, the sanctions in case of non-compliance from the immigrant's side were modest (an administrative fine). The present government aims to link the completion of the course and the passing of a language test to the granting of a permanent residence title. It also wants to extend the scope of the WIN to include immigrants who were in the country already before 1998, and even those who are naturalized Dutch citizens.[2]

Moreover, by introducing an integration requirement for prospective migrants from outside the EU (a minimal knowledge of Dutch to be tested by the Dutch consulate) before a visa is granted, integration policies meet the restrictive admission regime. A last important change pertains to the financing of the integration courses. Whereas originally the government funded the municipalities to organize the integration courses, the new system will be such that the migrants themselves must bear the full costs and the courses are to be privatized. The government explicitly retreats and puts all responsibility on the migrants concerned.

Policies towards the ethnic-cultural part of the integration process are also in flux. Based upon a tradition of denominatial groups being able to live together successfully by leaving each other alone (which was the way Dutch society was organized until the 1960s) a similar attitude prevailed towards newcomers, and the tools by which they could organize themselves along ethnic and, especially, religious lines where available on the basis of equality

(Doomernik 1995). Just as previously Dutch education allowed for Roman Catholic, Protestant and neutral school types, and similar divisions in the media, hospitals, trade unions and employers, and all other societal spheres, it now offered Muslims and Hindus the same opportunities. The Netherlands today has more than thirty of such primary schools. Moreover, there are Islamic and Hindu broadcasting corporations which receive full state funding. The government also maintains consultative bodies for seven ethnic groups that meet with the Minister for Aliens Affairs and Integration on a regular basis. These bodies are made up by a variety of religious, cultural and social organizations and receive government funding. The idea of having this type of consultations goes back to the 1980s but was formalized in the 1997 Law Consultations Minority Policy (*Wet Overleg Minderhedenbeleid*), coinciding with an explicit government choice to label the country "multi-cultural."

During the campaigns for the parliamentary elections of 2002, the populist politician Pim Fortuyn gained much support with – among other issues – his rejection of multiculturalism and sweeping statements about the "backwardness" of Islam and its assumed discriminatory stance towards homosexuals and females. Fortuyn was assassinated shortly before the elections but his party (LPF) gained a landslide victory, especially over the social democrats who had been coalition partners to the last two governments. Fortuyn's party became part of a quarrelsome new government with liberal and Christian democratic coalition partners that soon ended with new elections. This time round other parties made clear that they had "understood Pim's lessons": the LPF lost many of its voters, the social democrats regained their strength, yet a new government was built on the basis of a liberal/Christian democrat coalition.

In so far as the term comes up, multiculturalism is relegated to the dunghill of political history. Apart from the developments outlined earlier, this change in perspective allows the government to question the willingness among immigrants to participate, and to propose a system by which to measure the distance (or nearness) of immigrants vis-à-vis Dutch society. Whereas previously integration was deemed first and foremost related to employment and education, presently it appears generally to be about more than this; e.g. about loyalties and making an unequivocal choice for Dutch society by giving up dual nationality. The discussions were further fuelled by the murder in November 2004 of a filmmaker and notoriously provocative columnist by a psychologically deranged Muslim (of Moroccan extraction but Dutch born) which sent shockwaves that went far beyond the national borders. Those already convinced about the backward character of Islam, found in this murder the ultimate evidence for the claim that they had been right all along.

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Notes

[1] This includes the members of the second generation, defined as having at least one parent born in the country of origin: the allochtonous – see further down.

[2] How this stands up to article 1 of the Dutch constitution, which prescribes equal treatment, at the time of writing is unclear.