

CHAPTER 5

BRIDGE-BUILDERS OR BRIDGEHEADS IN BRUSSELS?

THE WORLD OF SECONDED NATIONAL EXPERTS

By Semin Suvarierol and Caspar van den Berg¹

5.1 Living and breathing the Brussels bureaucracy

The foregoing chapters of this book have demonstrated the extent to which national civil servants are involved in EU-related activities, and the dynamics of national administrative activities in the context of the EU. This chapter shifts the focus from national civil servants working *on* the European Union to national civil servants working *for* the European Union. This is a class of national civil servants for whom finding a balance between national and European interests in their work is a permanent, although sometimes implicit feature of their daily professional activities. The duality of national and European roles is perhaps the most exacerbated for the seconded national experts (SNEs), i.e. national civil servants who are temporarily working for EU institutions, in particular those seconded to the European Commission.² On the one hand, Commission SNEs have to be loyal to the Commission and represent European interests in this supranational organ of the EU. On the other hand, their employer is still the member-state government, and they are expected to return to their home organization after their secondment term ends. The SNEs are thus practically torn between two employers: their daily employer under whose supervision they work (the Commission) and the national employer who sent them on the secondment and continues to pay their salaries (the member-state).

Besides these atypical terms of employment, SNEs also form a particular group of European civil servants in terms of their position at a crossing point of European and national governance at the micro-level. This key position stems mainly from their presence in the beginning phase of the EU legislative process by working for the Commission. As it has been argued in Chapter 3, SNEs are potentially key strategic weapons for the member-states in maneuvering policy proposals. Conversely, SNEs are key resources for the Commission to sound out the acceptability of a particular proposal for a given member-state. This reciprocal gain,

however, can only work if there is an ongoing flow of information between the Commission and the member-state through the SNE. By virtue of the flow of information, SNEs can play a major role in linking the European and the national level through their *networks* or “*know-who*” at both levels. To the extent that these networks are maintained, both the Commission and the member-state can benefit optimally from the “*know-how*” of SNEs. Furthermore, since networks are attached to persons, they can remain in tact when the secondment ends, which can make the benefits of the secondment period long-lasting. The lasting benefits can only be reaped, however, if SNEs return to their home organization and keep on working *on* Europe in positions where they can make use of their networks.

Based on this premise, this chapter asks how the work of SNEs can be characterized as connectors between the national and European administration: Do they utilize their networks, rather as *bridge-builders* between the Commission and the member-state, or do they primarily act as national *bridgeheads* in the supranational Commission arena? Answers to a number of sub-questions are necessary to arrive at this insight:

- To what extent do the SNEs rely on their national networks during their secondment?
- For which purposes do they use their networks?
- Do these networks endure? In other words, to what extent do the SNEs rely on their European network upon their return?
- To what extent does the Dutch government exert substantive influence through its SNEs (by means of signaling and frontloading)?
- To what extent is a period of secondment with the European Commission a route for career advancement for Dutch civil servants?

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows: First, the methodology and empirical data are presented. A short discussion of the secondment system will be followed by some remarks concerning the particularities of The Netherlands as a supplier of SNEs. We then answer our questions and conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for the effective use of SNEs as a strategic tool (as implied in chapter 3).

5.2 Getting inside the insiders: methodology and data

Empirical research focusing on seconded national experts is rare. The growing significance of SNEs within the Commission has only recently received attention in the literature, namely through the work of Jarle Trondal (2004, 2006a, 2006b). Trondal has been the first scholar to collect data on the SNEs. The sample of respondents he uses in his work includes mainly Swedish and Norwegian SNEs, and his work analyzes the identities and allegiances of these officials. We chose to concentrate on national experts from one member-state and arrive at valid results for this specific group. This also allowed us to explore to what extent SNEs fulfill their dual role of carrying expertise from the member-state to the Commission and from the Commission back to the member-state.

The Netherlands presents an interesting case in this regard. Not only did it long enjoy a reputation as an enthusiastic subscriber to the ideal of an integrated Europe, as one of the founding members of the European Union it is a longstanding player in the secondment system. Secondly, its modest size makes it possible for researchers to identify and reach the whole population of current SNEs and a considerable share of the population of former SNEs for the period between 2001 and 2005 (56%) with relative ease. Our dataset is composed of 90 Dutch national experts divided into two groups: one group of officials who are currently working as SNEs at the European Commission and one group of former SNEs who were seconded between 2001 and 2005.³ For both groups of respondents, we collected survey and interview data. The survey and interview questions have been adapted from Trondal's SNE studies to Dutch SNEs. The aim of the survey has been to obtain an overview on the networks, positions, and careers of a large group of SNEs so as to follow up with in-depth interviews with a smaller group of SNEs on the major aspects that came to the fore through the surveys.

The whole population of the current 62 Dutch SNEs has been contacted to participate in the survey⁴, out of which 46 have responded to our request, resulting in a 74% response rate. Hence we can be confident that our data for the current Dutch SNEs are representative (Babbie 1992, 267). In-depth interviews were conducted with eight of these officials, selected on the basis of the range of responses they gave, with the aim covering the broadest range with a small number of respondents.

The former SNEs were reached using the snowballing method due to the absence of complete records. Out of the population of 91 former SNEs, we were able to contact 51⁵, and 44 of the contacted former SNEs filled in the questionnaire (a response rate of 86%). The use of snowball rather than random sampling does not pose great problems for interpreting the results, since we only report frequencies, means, and medians in our analysis. In addition 20 in-depth interviews have been conducted with this group of respondents. The item non-response rate was low for the surveys, the poorest item-score equaling 78 respondents. The survey questions have been streamlined to enable comparison between the two groups of SNEs. The former SNEs have been asked questions regarding their secondment period and their current functions to enable cross-time comparisons.⁶

5.3 Demand and supply: The Dutch and the expert secondment system

The growing number of tasks accorded to the European level of governance over the years has brought up the need for more staff, which has led the European Commission to increasingly resort to external assistance through temporary employment arrangements, partly due to budgetary stringency and partly to changing agendas that require extra expertise. There are 22 543 officials working for the Commission, 6868 of which are external or temporary staff.⁷ Seconded national experts number 1077 officials, but their relative weight is better understood when one takes into consideration that their number equals 9.7% of the total number of 11 052 policy officials (Administrator/A-level officials), i.e. the highest level of Commission officials.

The primary aim of the secondment system is to bring in the high level of professional knowledge in a specific area of expertise and work experience in the member-state the national experts possess, especially in areas where such expertise is lacking inside the Commission rank and file. The potential benefit for the national administrations in return is that SNEs build up on their expertise at the European/international level while gaining insider knowledge on the institutional set-up and functioning of the EU which they are presumed to take back to their administrations.

SNEs are typically seconded from the administrations (national, regional, or local) of EU member-states, though the Commission also recruits experts from the private and voluntary sectors or international organizations where their expertise is needed. SNE vacancies are usually made public by informing the Permanent Representations of member-states in Brussels, which subsequently contact the respective national authorities. The recruiting Commission unit receives the applications of SNE candidates from the member-states, makes a shortlist and selects an SNE, usually as a result of an interview. The secondment lasts between six months and four years during which the SNE is remunerated by their home employer and receives compensation from the Commission for the extra costs incurred by living and working abroad.⁸ Whereas it is a relatively cheap manner to hire experts for the Commission, the Dutch government organizations, for instance, invests an estimated total of 3 million euros annually through continued salaries on seconded officials.⁹

From the outset, SNEs have a double allegiance: they are employees of their home organization (financially and officially), but they work under the instructions of the European Commission. SNEs are obliged to behave solely in the interests of the Commission and not to accept any instructions or duties from their home government or organization. But they do not have the authority to represent the Commission or to enter into any commitments on behalf of the Commission.¹⁰ This double role is further exacerbated by the fact that the whole secondment system is based on the assumption that SNEs return to their home organization after the termination of their secondment. SNEs cannot escape the permanent balancing act this arrangement entails. As one interviewee stated: “The Commission is my boss, but I will go back, so I still take Dutch interests into consideration. For instance, I am careful with criticisms with regard to the Netherlands. On the other hand, the more you sound as a representative of the Netherlands, the less your authority in the Commission. So you have to be objective.”¹¹

The Commission is organized primarily according to sector and function, which makes it structurally comparable to a national administration. What differentiates the Commission is its multinational staff. In order to prevent any particular nationalities from dominating the ranks of the Commission, the organization has from the beginning respected a “geographical balance” rule whereby the number of staff employed by the Commission reflects approximately the population size to ensure a legitimate composition. Dutch officials currently make up

3.3% of the total and 4% of A-level officials of the Commission. The Netherlands has 3.6% of the EU population and 4% of the weighted Council votes. Thus, the Dutch share of Commission officials is largely in proportion to its geographical entitlement. Until recently though, the Netherlands was under-represented within the Commission bureaucracy. This under-representation partially stemmed from the fact that the entrance exam for permanent officials, the *concours*, was difficult to pass for Dutch candidates, competitive examinations being unknown in the Dutch educational system. This led the Dutch government to take active measures aimed at increasing the number of Dutch officials, e.g. by introducing training courses for the *concours* and appointing an official to the Dutch EU Permanent Representation responsible for coordinating Dutch appointments to EU institutions.¹²

Secondments meanwhile have been a safe way to secure Dutch posts. Furthermore, the secondment system allows the country to send the “right persons” to Brussels and to create a good image so that the Commission actually asks for Dutch SNEs.¹³ The Dutch SNE policy seems to have reached this target since the Netherlands is currently the home country of 62 SNEs to the European Commission, which makes up for the 5.8% of the SNE population. This, however, is not exclusively due to government strategy. There are two other factors that help to explain the relative overrepresentation of Dutch officials among SNEs: One is the proximity of the Netherlands to Belgium which makes it possible to keep one foot in the home country during the secondment. The personal lives of potential SNEs have to suffer less than those of their colleagues from further afield.¹⁴ Secondly and perhaps more important is the fact that the Netherlands has a high level of expertise in the fields sought for by the Commission, such as transport, research, environment, agriculture, phytosanitary issues, and financial markets.¹⁵ Table 5.1 indicates the distribution of respondent SNEs across policy areas and Commission DGs.

POLICY AREA¹⁶	DIRECTORATE-GENERAL	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
	DG Competition	9	
	DG Internal Market and Services	7	
Market-oriented	DG Economic and Financial Affairs	4	
		24	26.7%
	DG Enterprise		
	Total		
Social	DG Environment	7	

Regulation	DG Health and Consumer Protection	5	
	DG Employment	4	
	DG Justice	1	
	DG Education and Culture	21	23.3%
	Total		
Supply side	DG Transport and Energy	7	
	DG Research	5	
	DG Taxation and Customs Union	3	
	DG Information Society and Media	19	21.1%
	Total		
Administration	Eurostat	4	
	DG Budget	2	
	Secretariat-General	2	
	Legal Service	2	
	OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office)	11	12.2%
External affairs	Total		
	DG External Relations	3	
	DG Trade	3	
	DG Enlargement	2	
Provision	Total	8	8.9%
	DG Agriculture	5	
	DG Development	2	
	Total	7	7.8%
		N= 90	100%

TABLE 5.1 Commission Directorate-Generals as SNE Receivers

It shows that half of the respondents were deployed within either the market-oriented or the social regulation DGs, and that the top 4 receiving DGs were DG Competition, DG Internal Market and Service, DG Environment and DG Transport and Energy.

Looking at the ministries and agencies that provide SNEs, the percentages by policy area are somewhat different than the percentages per policy area for the receiving DGs. These differences are accounted for by the differences in organizational arrangements between the EU and Dutch central administration level.

POLICY AREA	MINISTRY	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Market-oriented	FIN	13	
	EZ	9	
	NMA	3	
	DNB	2	
	Autoriteit Financiële Markten	1	
	DNB	1	
	EPTA	1	

	Total	29	32.6%
Provision	LNV	14	
	Productschap Akkerbouw	2	
	Total	16	18.0%
Social Regulation	SoZaWe	5	
	MinJus	4	
	VROM	3	
	VVS	1	
	BNE Raad	1	
	OCW	1	
	EEA	1	
	Total	16	18.0%
Supply side	V&W	9	
	Senter	1	
	Sytens	1	
	Agentschap Douane	1	
	TNO	1	
	Stichting FOM	1	
	EurSciFoun	1	
	Total	15	16.9%
External affairs	BuZa	9	10.1%
Administration	CBS	3	
	CPB	1	
	Total	4	4.5%
		N= 89	100%

TABLE 5.2 Dutch Ministries and Agencies as SNE Providers

Not surprisingly, the top five suppliers of SNEs are the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Safety, the Ministry of Finance (including the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration), the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

There is a clear parallel between the organizations that are key providers of SNEs and the organizations with the highest density of Europeanized civil servants (Chapter 2). Four out of the top five suppliers of SNEs feature in the cluster of “Eurocratic bulwarks”, the Ministry of Finance and the Tax Administration being the only exceptions as Eurocratic runners-up. This can be seen to strengthen the validity of the “league table of EU-ness” of Dutch public organizations presented in Chapter 2.

5.4 Profiling the Dutch expert contingent

Who are the Dutch SNEs? Based on our survey and interview data, we construct a profile of Dutch SNEs, with respect to their education level, age and rank prior to secondment, and type of home organization.

Based on the nature of the activities of SNE positions and on the interview responses, we infer that all SNEs are highly educated (HBO-level and up) and that the overwhelming majority holds a university degree (Bachelor/Master/PhD). Of the total group of respondents, 38% started their secondment at the age between 25 and 34, 33% at the age between 35 and 44, 21% between 45 and 54, and 8% at an age of over 55. The average age at the start of secondment was 40. This indicates that the Dutch government seconds predominantly young to middle-age officials who are presumably at the beginning or middle of their career. With respect to the rank of an SNE upon secondment, some interesting patterns can be observed, as shown in table 5.3.

	FORMER SNEs	CURRENT SNEs	TOTAL
Higher civil servants (Ranks: 10-12)	28 (66.7 %)	24 (58.5%)	52 (62.7%)
Senior civil servants (Ranks: 13-14)	14 (33.3%)	12 (29.3%)	26 (31.3%)
Top civil servants (Ranks: 15-16)	0 (0%)	5 (12.2%)	5 (6.0%)
TOTAL	42 (100%)	41 (100%)	N= 83 (100%)

TABLE 5.3 Ranks of Dutch SNEs at the time of secondment ¹⁷

63% of the SNEs were in ranks 10 to 12 just before the start of their secondment, 31% were in rank 13 or 14, and 6% were in ranks 15 and 16. The average prior rank among the total group of SNEs was 12.47. These figures seem to underline the assertion that EU-level activity among national civil servants is more the domain of middle-level civil servants than of top-ranking civil servants, (Noordegraaf, 2000; 't Hart et al. 2002). The trend that the frequency of SNEs decrease as rank increases is largely explained by the fact that SNE positions are mostly policy-making posts, and policy preparation becomes increasingly less common as a main activity for civil servants in ranks 14 and beyond.¹⁸ In section 5.6 we return to the issue of rank, within the framework of the discussion on career development through the secondment system.

In the previous section, we already indicated the distribution of SNEs in terms of their home organizations (Table 5.1). Introducing the dichotomy of executive

agency vs. policy department (see also Chapter 2), we observe that 76% of all respondents were originating from policy departments, and 24% from executive agencies. Apart from the fact that part of this difference is explained by the fact that most SNE positions are policy positions and much fewer are executive positions, assuming that the share of SNEs delivered by each type of organization is a valid indicator of EU-involvement, our findings are analogous with the conclusion in 3.3.2, namely that policy departments are more involved in EU-affairs than executive agencies.

With respect to the duration of the secondment, we observe that 17% of the SNEs were seconded for less than a year, 34% for a period between 1 and 2 years, 30% between 2 and 3 years, and 19% between 3 and 4 years.¹⁹ So, the large majority of SNEs stays at the Commission for about two years. A two-year stay is bound to provide enough time to provide substantive contribution to work in the Commission and to constitute a substantial improvement for the individual SNE in terms of skills and knowledge on the EU. If we consider the fact that 49% of the Dutch SNEs stay between 2 to 4 years in the Commission, this period of time is presumably also enough to build a network at the EU if not at the transnational level. Does the secondment period translate into returns for the SNEs and the Dutch government in terms of networks and knowledge and can the Dutch SNEs exchange their value-added for better career opportunities which involve them using this EU know-who and know-how?

5.5 Knowing how and knowing who: networking

We borrow our definitions of transnational policy networks from the multi-level governance literature where the role of informal bargaining between a very wide variety of actors (individuals and institutions, public and private, local, regional, national, European, international) is suggested to be at least as decisive as formal power relations (Scharpf 1994, Hooghe 1996, Marks et al. 1996, Goetz and Hix 2001, Jordan 2001, Peters and Pierre 2001). *Policy networks* are defined here as “more or less stable sets of public and private organizational actors, linked to each other by communication and by the exchange of resources, such as information and expertise” (Jönsson *et al.* 1998, 326). They consist of the contacts, ties and connections between

actors that develop as a complement to formal institutional relations. The emergence of these networks is conditional upon the development of personal relations between relevant actors, which in turn depends on their frequency of interaction. As such, policy networks bring together individuals originating from different fields of knowledge and social environments.

The significance of policy networks within the EU governance is twofold: '*know-how*' and '*know-who*', i.e. an actor needs to have thorough substantive knowledge, as well as knowledge of the organizations, procedures, and individuals who shape the policy environment (Jönsson and Strömvik 2005, 18). Furthermore, these networks are *transnational* and involving both governmental and non-governmental policy actors. Experts may be linked with one another by means of vertical (i.e. across levels of governance), horizontal (i.e. across policy sectors and/or across government, corporate and research organizations) and potentially also diagonal (i.e. cutting through both vertical and horizontal orderings) relations (Slaughter 2004, see also Chapter 1). These poly-lateral network links allow bureaucrats at various levels of governance to prepare and implement policies assisted by organized interests supplying technically relevant expertise. This is the essence of network governance (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999).

To investigate to what extent SNEs form a bridge between their own member-state and the European Commission, we asked both groups of SNEs questions involving the frequency of their reliance on their network in the Netherlands and the Commission. A majority of current Dutch SNEs (53.3%) reported drawing on the network they built in the Netherlands before their secondment once a week. 47.7% said they were approached monthly by their former colleagues at the Dutch organization they worked for. Only 18.2% of the former SNEs were approached weekly and 34.1% monthly by their former colleagues during their secondment period. Clearly, the current Dutch SNEs have more frequent contacts with their network in the Netherlands. Their contacts also involve sending written information to their home organization – 53.3% have such contacts monthly.

What does this network entail though? To what extent do SNEs build up and are part of transnational networks extending to different administrative levels in different member-states, to non-state players, and other EU and international organizations? Or are they just individual bridges between the Commission and the member-state they come from? And, since policy networks are assumed to be

relatively stable and persistent: What happens to these networks after the secondment period? To what extent do the bridges remain intact?

Who's in the loop?

We first look at the frequency of SNE contacts across different levels and actors. Since the scale employed does not have equal intervals, we use the median to compare the results.

Survey Questions:

- **Current SNEs:** How frequently do you have work-related contacts and/or meetings with the following during your secondment?
- **Former SNEs:** How frequently did you have work-related contacts and/or meetings with the following during your secondment? / How frequently do you have work-related contacts and/or meetings with the following in your current function?

Answer categories: Once per day=5, Once per week=4, Once per month=3, Once per year=2, Never=1

	Median: Current SNEs	Median: Former SNEs during secondment	Median: Former SNEs in current function
Colleagues within other DGs ²⁰	4	4	
SNE's from:			3 ²¹
- The Netherlands	3	3	
- Other member-states	4	4	
Other EU institutions	3	3	2
Other international organizations	3	3	2
The Dutch EU Permanent Representation	3	3	1
EU Permanent Representations of other member-states	2	2	1
Dutch national administration:			
- Own policy sector	4	3	4
- Other policy sectors	2	2	3
National administrations of other member-states:			
- Own policy sector	3	3	2
- Other policy sectors	1	1	1
Representatives of regional governments from:			
- The Netherlands	1	1	1

- Other member-states	1	1	1
Representatives of local governments from:			
- The Netherlands	1	1	1
- Other member-states	1	1	1
Representatives of the private sector from:			
- The Netherlands	3	3	3
- Other member-states	2.5	2	1
Representatives of NGOs from:			
- The Netherlands	1	2	1
- Other member-states	1	2	1
Universities or research institutes from:			
- The Netherlands	2	2	2
- Other member-states	2	2	1

TABLE 5.4 Frequency of Dutch SNE contacts

If we concentrate on the medians higher than 2, since this gives the most regular contacts, we see that there are actually only a few actors which fall into this category. The most frequent contacts are within the Commission and with the Dutch national administration within officials' own policy sector. Other EU institutions, international organizations, the Dutch EU Permanent Representation, and sectoral contacts with other member-states are the most forthcoming contact points in the supranational and national arena. The non-governmental aspect in the SNE networks is occupied by Dutch and to a lesser extent by European business.

The figures for contacts of past SNEs during their secondment follow the same pattern with a few exceptions.²² When we turn to the network patterns of former SNEs in their current function, however, we see that these cluster predominantly within the Dutch national administration. The Commission and Dutch business figure as the other most forthcoming network partners. The results clearly show that the only lasting supranational networks of SNEs are within the Commission.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from these observations. The SNE secondment system does stimulate the formation of transnational networks, but applying these data to the three types of network relations set out in this article, we see that the network connections fall largely under the vertical dimension of network relations, to a lesser degree under the horizontal dimension, and only to a very limited extent under the diagonal dimension of network relations. Therefore, the SNEs do

indeed form bridges between the Commission and the member-state and provide a channel of flow of information, ideas, and contacts.

Networking as strategic behavior

How do the SNEs fulfill this bridging function in practice though? Of the three avenues for strategic behavior available to member states governments, signaling, frontloading and coalition-building introduced in Chapter 3, SNEs play a significant role in the former two. Especially in the pre-proposal stage, SNEs can use their position within the Commission and the wider networks to influence the content of proposals-to-be.²³ As one SNE emphasized, “Apart from the SNEs, The Hague has no access whatsoever to what happens in the beginnings stage of the legislation process in the Commission.”²⁴

SNEs facilitate signaling in the sense that they offer easy access points for national civil servants and officials at the Permanent Representation to make certain national interests or concerns known within the Commission apparatus and vice versa. When Dutch government officials are looking for an access point within the Commission, they first search for a fellow-national to talk to.²⁵ This means that SNEs fulfill a role of switchboard within the Commission. Roughly the half of the former SNEs and the majority of the current SNEs (63% of the interview respondents) indicate that they were relatively frequently used as an “EU helpdesk” for the members of their home organizations. They describe their role as “feeler”, “resonance box”, “ambassador” “antenna”, “brainstorming partner” but also as “missionary” and “infiltrator” for their home organization.

The practice of signaling rests on trust-based reciprocity, and the necessary level of trust can be stemming from a common nationality or previous trust-generating interactions. In this sense, the networks of SNEs make the flow of information between the Commission and the member-state possible:

I have personal contacts with my former colleagues. My Ministry will first speak with me. I think through issues with colleagues who call me. The other way around, when there is a new strategy I will first sound out ideas with colleagues in the Netherlands in order to use existent knowledge in the Netherlands within the Ministries.²⁶

Signaling can thus work in two directions:

Your SNE position makes it possible to notify colleagues at home, so that they can anticipate on the course of action of the Commission. For instance, they can prematurely prepare sabotage strategies, prepare proposals for amendment or forge alliances. In some cases the timing of a member-state entering the policy game, is decided by the SNE.²⁷

In terms of the Commission, both the network and the experience of the SNE at the national level are valuable for the Commission since:

The permanent officials do not need to have any experience or network at the national administration. This is the value-added of an SNE. The Commission at the end of the day aims at the member-states, so it is important to have a network within the member-states. Furthermore, the officials do not know about practice. As an SNE, you know a lot about what happens on the ground in practice. That is a big asset. You just know how it works and how it is implemented.²⁸

It is in the Commission's interest to know what is at stake in the member-state.²⁹ In turn, if the information channeled into the Commission which is relevant and interesting to the Commission may thus be used as input to a proposal.

With respect to frontloading, the importance of SNEs is even more crucial, given that the appointment of SNEs within a specific DG is the central instrument for this type of strategic behavior. That the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, among others, sends its officials to strategic positions in the Commission, as argued in Chapter 3, finds support in the account of an SNE seconded by this ministry:

Your influence depends on your position. I work in the field of phytosanitary and veterinary trade barriers. Of course, the Netherlands has a strategic interest there. It is interesting to see how the Commission deals with this issue. As an exporting country, it is very important to have someone at such a strategic position within the Commission, both for the Netherlands and for my own Ministry.³⁰

In short: strategic appointments in view of certain important dossiers are a pivotal method of frontloading.

The other two mechanisms through which frontloading is secured as a strategic route are (a) through instructions by superiors and (b) as a result of the natural national-cultural perspective taken by the SNE in question on the policy-issue. Dutch SNEs claim that they do not receive any instructions from the Dutch government in contrast to SNEs of other member-states:

There are countries with an SNE policy. The UK sends instructions and influences opinion-building with position papers. The French SNEs are also followed up. The Netherlands does less. You can sometimes see the national position per chance in a newsletter.³¹

Whereas some SNEs think they should exert national influence, some think that the influence should be exercised by the Dutch Permanent Representation instead.³² In that sense, some SNEs seem to totally endorse their Commission identity: “Expertise is the most important. We are not the member-state representatives here. They are in the Council.”³³

Still, secondment system gives the member-state the opportunity to support EU-files with its own people.³⁴ This happens through the direct involvement of SNEs in the Commission. Through working in their field of responsibility and their file with their “Dutch profile”, they can “make the Dutch voice heard in Brussels.”³⁵ This is actually what our Dutch SNE respondents view as the frontloading method which is much more common and much more appropriate in terms of exercising influence. The Ministry does not need to dictate SNEs since they already have an indirect influence by means of “thinking as a Dutchman”.³⁶ This is also a transparent way since the proposal drafted by a Dutch SNE still needs to go through all the official EU procedures. Thus, this viewpoint gets locked into the proposal and might be altered at points, but the general spirit rarely changes substantially. In other words, the first blow is half the battle, and SNEs play a pivotal role in enabling member states to strike that first blow.

With respect to the contribution to the policy process, the nationality of an SNE matters in the way of thinking³⁷: “Even though you do not get a substantive mandate, what you bring to the table in the policy making process is a Dutch point of view on the policy issue in question.”³⁸ As another SNE phrased it:

The SNE brings in his own experience, way of thinking, and problem solving strategy to the Commission, all of which have been developed a specific framework, the situation in the home country. Once you are faced with real

policy issues at the Commission, the first reflex is fall back on the old routines. As time goes by he may place matters in a wider, more European framework, but still the SNE's prior experience (or even the tradition he comes from) remains to play a large role.³⁹

Furthermore, many SNEs reported that while they were seconded, they continued following the Dutch media (newspapers, television etc.) and that for a considerable part, their social life remained centered in the Netherlands and not so much in Brussels. As a result of the stronger links SNEs have to their home country compared to permanent Commission officials, SNEs are also better able to reflect the stakes of a member-state and to anticipate national policy positions.⁴⁰ An interesting distinction made by both current and the former SNEs is between the Dutch permanent Commission officials and SNEs. Permanent Dutch officials have reportedly far less direct contact with officials at the national administration level than SNEs. At the same time, SNEs perceive permanent officials as being more independent in terms of their member-state. This seems to indicate that the width and depth of an official's network in the member-state does not depend so much on the official's nationality, but more on whether the official is pre-socialized in a national context and whether the official is legally bound to the national administration.

One SNE responded that the national perspective taken by the SNE serves the benefit of the Commission, too:

It is very common to bring the problems or position from your member state of origin to the fore. I was also regularly approached by other Commission civil servants, when they wanted to put out their feelers in the early stage about whether or not a specific proposal would be greeted with enthusiasm by The Netherlands. So, the presence of SNEs makes the policy process smoother and quicker because SNEs are normally well aware of national positions.⁴¹

However, it should be noted that the mere presence of SNEs within the various DGs does not automatically lead to a successful outcome and that the degree of success is contingent on the degree of coordination of SNE activity from the national department and the effectiveness of the SNE in mobilizing his or her network to influence the authors of a policy proposal. From this follows that member-states have the opportunity to impact the policy-making process if they can second their civil servants

purposefully and strategically. The Dutch government does seem to have adopted such a strategic approach with the aim of becoming more present in the EU through building and sharing experience through the secondment system.⁴²

Yet, roughly half of the former SNEs reported that there was not enough interest on the part of their seconding organization for the potential gains the secondment could have for these organizations. “Out of sight, out of mind”, was a very frequent description of the perceived attitude of the sending organization towards the SNE during the secondment. Many expressed that they had to take the initiative of contacting their home ministry, and that the Ministry did not make enough use of their presence in the Commission. The situation might be changing though: Our data signals a difference between the current and the former SNEs in terms of the degree of contact between the home organization and the SNE during secondment (see Table 4). It seems that the contacts between an SNE and the home organization have indeed increased over the past years. A second conceivable explanation for this variation is the potential propensity by officials to think more positively about ‘the relationship with their home organization during their secondment’ *while* they are seconded than *after* their return, given that many respondents were disappointed by the treatment they received from their home organizations after return, which often seems to be the case as the following sections suggest.

Do SNE networks persist?

The empirical evidence above demonstrates the bridging function of seconded officials *during* their secondment. However, the lasting effects of the secondment system can only be assessed by addressing the question whether the bridge remains intact after the secondment. Using the knowledge acquired and the network built during the secondment is the most crucial pay off of the secondment system for the member-state government: “When you know the internal procedures of the EU, you can anticipate instead of react. Through your network in the Commission, you can keep on anticipating. This is perhaps more important. The Ministries get more of an understanding of what can be done and what not.”⁴³

Several respondents observed that building up and maintaining a network with people at the Commission level is easier than maintaining a network with officials at the national level. The organizational culture at the Commission level is apparently

more open to establishing longer term professional and social contacts than the organizational culture in their Dutch home organizations.⁴⁴ Since not all SNEs are originating from the Dutch central government, but also from agencies and semi-governmental institutions, the secondment system can also help to create networks between the SNE and governmental actors at the national level, which may become opportune once the secondment has ended.

What appears predominantly from our findings, however, is that although the expertise from the Dutch ministries/authorities flows largely to the Commission, the Dutch administration does not always get the EU expertise back. The bridge is often one-way: only 27 of 43 (62.8%) of former SNEs in our sample work for the organization they used to work for before their secondment.⁴⁵

Consequently, the network ties also seem to get weaker once an SNE returns – 27.5% of the former SNEs state that they use the network they built during their secondment in their current function once per month while another 25% use it only once per year, and 17.5% do not use their Commission network at all.

It is also striking that current SNEs expressed relatively high hopes with regard to the degree to which they will be able to professionally utilize their networks, while the majority of former SNEs demonstrated their disappointment with respect to the extent they actually use their acquired networks in their jobs after their secondment. Given that many former SNEs also reported that they had considerable expectations in this respect before and during their secondment, we interpret this difference as an indication of overly optimistic prospects on the part of current SNEs rather than an indication of the increase in opportunities to use acquired networks upon return to the home administration.

During the interviews with former SNEs, many respondents indicated that their networks within and if applicable outside of the Commission had become outdated and were therefore of little or no use anymore. This is remarkable, since the secondments of the respondents had ended an average of only two years ago. In most cases the reason for their network being outdated was the fact that their first job after the secondment did not require the use of their network. A considerable part of these respondents mentioned that while professionally they made little to no use of their established networks, they did perpetuate contacts with the individuals they used to work with during their secondment, but rather on a personal or social level.

Some of these respondents, whose current job did not enable them to make formal professional use of their networks, did indicate that the personal contacts they still have with their network yields them information that may not be directly relevant to the job they are fulfilling, but which nonetheless is interesting for their organization. They are convinced that their colleagues for whose jobs this information would be directly relevant do not get the same information as timely: “Through my network at the Commission I get information about issues that no one else within my organization has access to.”⁴⁶ and “It is always nice to have more or earlier information on an issue than for instance your boss has. Because I know a number of people at the Commission, I get this informational advantage vis-à-vis my boss.”⁴⁷ These respondents reported that the added value in terms of networks falls to them personally and only in an indirect – and therefore sub-optimal – way to their organization.

Others who felt their network had to some extent diluted, indicated that a large part of their network had by now left Brussels as well, and that they did not have new contact information of these people. Nevertheless, respondents who indicated that their network had become outdated did acknowledge that due to their secondment and their familiarity with the structures of the Commission, they would now have an advantage in building up a new network if their job would require it.

On the contrary, former SNEs whose present job did connect well with their professional duties at the Commission reported that the benefits of their acquired network were substantial. This points to a positive relation between on the one hand the degree of compatibility between the job SNEs fulfilled during secondment and the job they perform after return, and on the other hand the degree to which officials have been able to maintain their networks and utilize it professionally.

5.6 Life after secondment: SNE’s and their careers

If the Dutch government wants to obtain benefits for the investment made on the SNEs not only during but *after* their secondment, one would expect it to engage in proactive career planning for the SNEs’ return. The reality is murky. To start with, since only 62.8% actually return, it is clear that the current “return guarantee” is not sufficient to assure that this actually happens.

SNE interviewees point to a gap between the expectations built up in Brussels and the reality faced upon return in The Hague. The high expectations stem from the fact that the SNEs feel that they grow enormously during the secondment. They expect to be rewarded for this when they return. The reality is often different, so much so that current SNEs tend to be concerned about their future based on their knowledge of their predecessors' fates after return:

Return policy is an important issue. SNEs gain substantive and practical knowledge within the EU institutions here. Currently there is no management as to what happens after. Secondment is not a promotion. Until now, SNEs have not been rewarded upon return. They have been promoted away. Now that the number of SNEs is doubled, it is time to consolidate the return policy. It has to be good for your career.⁴⁸

Yet in terms of their national careers, secondment entails stagnation, since SNEs remain in the same rank during the whole period regardless of their personal growth. Returning home to the same job and rank thus constitutes a relative opportunity loss for many who would otherwise have had a chance to rise through the ranks.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, the peer colleagues at the Ministry in The Hague continue to grow in terms of career and rank, and they are still visible for the Ministry whereas the SNE in Brussels becomes also “out of sight and out of mind” in terms of the career planning. In the words of an SNE: “In the Netherlands, they are not sitting and waiting for you. They say: ‘Are you still alive? We have to find something for you.’ So it is not good for your career in the Netherlands.”⁵⁰

The fears of the current SNEs find life in the experience of former SNEs. One observation seems to represent the sentiments of a large number of former SNEs:

Beforehand I expected that the secondment would offer me additional career opportunities, but as it turned out, this was by no means the case. For those who managed to get a permanent position with the Commission afterwards, it has obviously paid off. But all the people I know that have been seconded, are disappointed in terms of the supposed advantage that they were to get out of their secondment. No wonder that most of them leave within a year after they have returned to work elsewhere where their Brussels experience did get valued.⁵¹

Asked whether former SNEs believed that being seconded had offered them any additional career advancement, 51% answered negatively and 49% answered positively.⁵²

Comparing the present rank of former SNEs with the rank they possessed just before being seconded, it turns out that among those who were seconded within the period 2000-2005, 57% was still in the same rank, 29% had moved up one rank, and 11% had moved up two ranks (the remaining 3% represents one person who had moved down one rank). In other words, of the former SNEs included in our study, 60% had not made a significant promotion, either during or just after completion of the secondment. The average upward mobility among this group during an average period of 3.75 years was 0.49 rank. Although we have not been able to compare this figure with national civil servants of the same age, educational level, and organization in the same period, this rate of upward mobility is by no means spectacular.

As long as this image is sustained and there is no concrete career planning, the SNEs take the next steps in their career, and the chance that they go back becomes small. Returning back to their old position does not offer enough challenges which automatically stimulates the search for other alternatives, be it in Brussels or in the private sector in the Netherlands.

CURRENT SECTOR	RETURN to PREVIOUS ORGANIZATION		Frequency (Percent)
	Yes	No	
Public	25	4	29 (67.4%)
Semi-public	2	3	5 (11.6%)
Private	0	4	4 (9.3%)
Public international (Commission, IO)	0	3	3 (7.0%)
None (Retired)	0	2	2 (4.7%)
TOTAL	27 (62.8%)	16 (27.2%)	N= 43

TABLE 5.5 SNEs' return rate after secondment

As the figures for the former SNEs show, SNEs who do not return to their home organization make a career move in various directions, in the public and private sector.

One remarkable exception here is the exception of the Ministry of Agriculture SNEs. Namely, this “Eurocratic bulwark” Ministry scores very well in terms of recruiting its SNEs back: out of the 8 Agriculture SNEs, 7 of them are still working for their ministry. Interviewees pointed out that the Ministry of Agriculture does have a more consistent policy regarding their SNEs. Whereas some of them did end up in the same position, some of the SNEs have indeed obtained a promotion at a position that matched their profile.⁵³ The ministry’s reputation as a true “Eurocratic bulwark” (see Chapter 2) therefore also applies to its management of the careers of its SNEs.

On the whole, however, a secondment with the Commission can hardly be seen as a route for career advancement for the officials involved. Being seconded actually had a negative career effect, at least for those SNEs who were seconded in the early 2000s. This is not a typical Dutch phenomenon: A survey among former SNEs of all various member-states conducted in 2002 show that problems with regard to career development are a general phenomenon associated with the secondment system.⁵⁴

5.7 An underutilized asset: Conclusions

Our empirical data on the Dutch former and current SNEs show that SNEs do form bridges between the EU and the member-state through their role in forming and sometimes in maintaining policy networks in EU governance. These contacts between the Commission and national ministries allow the member-state to signal and frontload its positions and viewpoints into the policy proposals of the Commission through its SNEs. This, however, should not be interpreted as a direct national influence. Firstly, the Commission welcomes the experience, networks, and input of the SNEs since the success of policy proposals depend after all on the member-states. SNEs also stress that they remain loyal to the Commission during their secondment. Secondly, the influence is rather exercised indirectly through the thought processes of the SNEs which they characterize as having been shaped by their national background and upbringing. Thirdly, there is a whole chain of command before the draft proposal of the SNE reaches the top of the Commission where parts of the proposal might be modified. Finally, besides the distinction between national or EU interests, the role of expertise itself may be a third variable of significance. Transnational networks of

experts, in which SNEs participate, can imply distinct normative policy preferences. Although this study does not take this factor into account, future contributions in this field could benefit from the inclusion of the role of expertise as a source of substantive preferences. On the whole, though, secondment seems to remain a legitimate and valued system of exchange of officials both for the Commission and the member-states.

Our study has also demonstrated, however, that not all hopes placed in the secondment system are fulfilled: the long-term benefit of these networks is often rather limited, which can be seen as an opportunity loss for the seconding member-states. Many former SNEs do get jobs that require them to draw on their Commission networks; many of them do not return to their original home organization.

Since networks are bound to individuals rather than to positions within an organization, the enhanced trust and frank exchange may persist after a change of position. The conditions under which this persistence is more or less likely to occur remains uncultivated research territory. By constantly and increasingly sending out national experts to the supranational level and subsequently reabsorbing these experts back into the national administration, these networks can facilitate decision-making (see Beyers and Kerremans 2004).

In this chapter we have identified a number of mechanisms through which the SNE can potentially play a linking role between the Commission and the member-state. The secondment system does indeed facilitate information flows and in specific cases influence, in an intricate web of relations across the formal institutional structures of the EU and its member-states. The results of the Dutch case show, however, that the SNEs are not optimally utilized. Even though the recent efforts of the Dutch government have led to increased levels of contact between the SNEs and their 'home base', there is still room for improvement. As for the extent to which the benefits of the secondment system last after the secondment period, the career paths of the officials following their secondment are a crucial factor. At present, expertise and networks fade quickly as experts, quite literally, 'move on.' Better career planning for the SNEs would prevent this from happening and maximize the benefits for the member-state.

NOTES:

¹ Utrecht University and Leiden University, respectively. The authors would like to thank Jarle Trondal for sharing his work and his questionnaires with us.

² CLENAD UK Section (2002) *An Unofficial Guide for UK National Experts*, Third Edition, p. 44-45.

³ One of the respondents had been seconded before this period but was included in the dataset to maximize the number of observations.

⁴ The survey was sent by e-mail, but the respondents were given a choice of returning the completed document electronically or by post.

⁵ It became only clear when data was gathered that two of the respondents had been detached before 2000. They have been also included in the analyses given the value of empirical data.

⁶ The cross-time comparisons should also be read with caution, however, since the responses to survey questions with regard to the secondment period of former SNEs rely on their memory. An inevitable problem connected to research that relies on respondents' memories is the potential deficiency on the part of the accuracy of the respondents' input.

⁷ The statistical figures on the Commission staff in this article are based on the European Commission *Statistical Bulletin of Commission Staff 04/2006* which corresponds to the data collection period.

⁸ *Commission Decision C(2004) 577 of 27 February 2004 laying down rules on the secondment of National Experts to the Commission*, Article 2.

⁹ CLENAD Nederlandse Sectie (2003), *Op naar een win³ situatie: Een overzicht voor de versterking van de banden tussen gedetacheerde medewerkers bij de Europese instelling en de overheid in Den Haag*, Brussel, p.3.

¹⁰ *Commission Decision C(2004) 577 of 27 February 2004 laying down rules on the secondment of National Experts to the Commission*, p.2.

¹¹ Interview with SNE31, Brussels, February 2006.

¹² Caroline de Gruyter, 17-18 January 2004, *NRC Handelsblad*, "Banenjagen voor het Vaderland", p. 39.

¹³ Interview with SNE23, Brussels, February 2006.

¹⁴ Interview with SNE84, The Hague, March 2006

¹⁵ Interview with SNE25, Brussels, January 2006.

¹⁶ We adopt the division used by Liesbet Hooghe 2001 in *The European Commission and the integration of Europe* to classify Commission Directorate-Generals according to policy areas.

¹⁷ We borrow the classification of Van der Meer and Raadschelders (1999, 205-228), "The Senior Civil Service in the Netherlands: A Quest for Unity", in Page and Wright 1999, *Bureaucratic Elites in Western European States*.

¹⁸ Interestingly, this observation is in contrast to the finding in Chapter 2, where it is stated that "higher ranks ... seem to be associated with higher levels of EU-involvement". One potential explanation for the divergent observation in the POMO-survey is the clustering of all income levels above 5000 euro gross monthly into a single category, disabling the registration of variation between the 7 different ranks that may fall into this one category.

¹⁹ Including one former SNE who had been seconded for five years.

²⁰ We omitted the category "Colleagues within your DG" for the basic reason that this category would be superfluous since all Commission officials have daily contacts with their colleagues.

²¹ The subcategories for Commission officials were omitted for the current contacts of former SNEs to enable a general overview of contacts with the Commission.

²² It is difficult, however, to conclude whether these exceptions are due to a real change in contact intensity or whether this divergence is merely a result of lower accuracy in the responses for which officials' reliance on their memories.

²³ *Programma Andere Overheid, Rijksbrede takenanalyse, 2005, Gemengde Commissie 'Sturing EU-aangelegenheden' Eindrapport, Den Haag*, p. 12-13.

²⁴ Gerben Everts quoted in "Den Haag kijkt teveel naar Den Haag", *PM 19/1, 2005*, p. 27.

²⁵ Interview with SNE79, The Hague, March 2006.

²⁶ Interview with SNE20, Brussels, February 2006.

²⁷ Interview with SNE70, The Hague, March 2006.

²⁸ Interview with SNE3, Brussels, February 2006.

-
- ²⁹ Interview with SNE18, Brussels, March 2006.
- ³⁰ Interview with SNE23, Brussels, February 2006.
- ³¹ Interview with SNE20, Brussels, February 2006.
- ³² Interview with SNE31, Brussels, February 2006.
- ³³ Interview with SNE25, Brussels, January 2006.
- ³⁴ Interview with SNE61, Brussels, March 2006.
- ³⁵ Interview with SNE20, Brussels, February 2006.
- ³⁶ Interview with SNE23, Brussels, February 2006.
- ³⁷ Interview with SNE84, The Hague, March 2006.
- ³⁸ Interview with SNE63, The Hague, March 2006.
- ³⁹ Interview with SNE145, The Hague, March 2006.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with SNE79, The Hague, March 2006.
- ⁴¹ Interview with SNE70, The Hague, March 2006.
- ⁴² Interview with SNE25, Brussels, January 2006.
- ⁴³ Interview with SNE19, Brussels, March 2006.
- ⁴⁴ Interview SNE63, The Hague, March 2006
- ⁴⁵ This is not to say that the returned SNEs as individuals do not benefit from their experiences and networks, but the crucial point here is that the gains for the seconding organization are limited if the SNEs leave the organization after their return from the Commission.
- ⁴⁶ Interview SNE66, The Hague, March 2006.
- ⁴⁷ Interview SNE84, Rotterdam, March 2006.
- ⁴⁸ Interview with SNE25, Brussels, January 2006.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with SNE20, Brussels, February 2006.
- ⁵⁰ Interview with SNE35, Brussels, February 2006.
- ⁵¹ Interview SNE79, The Hague, March 2006.
- ⁵² The categories for answering this question were “to a large degree”, “to a reasonable degree”, “to a limited degree”, “no”, and “rather the opposite”, which were dichotomized into “Yes” (the former 3 categories) and “No” (the latter 2 categories).
- ⁵³ Interview with SNE23, Brussels, February 2006.
- ⁵⁴ CLENAD (2003), Report of the Working Group ‘Life after SNE?’