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Representative Bureaucracy and Diversity Management in the Netherlands

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Even before the discussions on diversity and the wider inclusion of women, ethnic minorities and age groups, the composition of the public sector workforce was an important topic in the Dutch political and societal debate. Reasons for this are situated in the many, often closely interconnected societal cleavages in the Netherlands in terms of religion, political positions, and regional and cultural differences. Although some Dutch observers might loath the idea, from this point of view the Netherlands have always been in essence a multicultural society. The fragmented nature of Dutch society has been elaborated in the dominant system of pillarization that existed at least to the last quarter of the 20th century. Until fairly recently the pillarized version of the decentralized unitary state was considered highly important as a constitutional meeting ground and an exchange house for these different societal groups. The Dutch tradition of representative bureaucracy and diversity is thus quite substantial.

On the other hand, representativeness and diversity have always been controversial. This has not been so much the case with respect to the equal opportunity manifestation of representativeness, but much more with the "mirror image" conceptualization. The notion of equal opportunities is widely accepted where it pertains to creating appropriate conditions for entering the public service. The mirror image conceptualization is far more disputed, specifically with respect to instruments such as positive discrimination and quota measures (though the latter have been replaced to a large extent by target figures). Recent nominations to top positions in the central government civil service and the police force by the then Labor Minister of the Interior have stirred controversy, because she appointed, seemingly at her own pleasure, female and non-Western candidates. Likewise, suggestions that only members of target groups should be able to apply for some top positions have been criticized and are reputed to have led to an exodus of white male candidates.

Different phases in the debate on representative bureaucracy are to be distinguished. Even a shift in terminology has taken place as currently the term diversity has gained in popularity. The human

resource management perspective has come to prevail, with its emphasis on organizational performance and the organization's labor market position. Before formal policy plans and programs, ample attention was already paid to widening the perspective of the agency members by creating a more representative staff composition, especially in implementation agencies and with respect to street-level bureaucrats. For instance, within the police force representativeness and diversity schemes were introduced at a relatively early stage. One could speak of passive opinion and interest representation, widening the antenna of the agency in order to become more effective in executing the primary tasks. Diversity management is thus seen as a means to improve the performance of the organization. However, there is no substantial, hard evidence that these aims have already been achieved. The same applies to the proof of the existence and the effects of active opinion or interest representation within public service decision making and service delivery. We must emphasize that active interest representation would not be regarded acceptable in wider political and societal quarters, because of particular constitutional principles. The neutrality and impartiality of government bureaucracy action are still valued highly.

As said, policies based on representative bureaucracy and diversity management concepts are still controversial where it concerns affirmative action plans and quotas. In particular right-wing and center parties are highly critical. Proponents are to be found in mainly left-wing parties as the Labour Party (PvdA), the Socialist party (SP) and the Greens (GroenLinks).

The use of positive discrimination and quota (in the form of target figures) is perceived to have become stronger in recent years. Basic to the controversy is the definition and appreciation of merit criteria. These are seen as a fundamental expression of the constitutional rule of equality as expressed in articles 1 and 3 of the Constitution. Particularly relevant is article 3 proclaiming the equal access to public positions. Thus merit was and still is considered a vital principal on both a constitutional symbolic and practical level. Nevertheless, the

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ambition to attract and, equally important, to retain more recruits from more different segments in society has become a necessity, given the aging of the civil service and the growing labor market shortages in the near future.

With respect to available empirical material, attention has often been focused on the representativeness of the civil service staff in terms of religious background, gender, ethnicity and age. The composition of the civil service is still not a mirror image of society in these terms, but the representation of target groups such as women and ethnic minorities is increasing. With respect to new entries, there is a time differential effect given the recruitment, and, in case of the ethnic minorities, also an educational backlog.

It is quite interesting to see that civil service staff is slowly being feminized. This has already happened in the judiciary and in primary education. Looking at other professional sectors, and in particular to the new entry figures, we might expect a shift to overrepresentation of women in the near future. Two different explanations can be given for this development. In higher education more women succeed than men, leading to more qualified candidates for the civil service among women. The effect of equal opportunity is then more female new entries. The second explanation is somewhat more negative. It is sometimes argued that the status of public sector work has depreciated given salaries and public perception, which would drive away potential male candidates. At the same time public sector jobs offer relatively extensive possibilities for part time labor, which attracts more women. From a representative bureaucracy or a diversity management perspective, then, it might be wise to start policy targeted at the inclusion of men, as has happened recently in primary education.

This being said, however, we should also note that, despite an increasing amount of women in the civil service, success in bridging the gap on the hierarchical ladder between men and women is still (far) away. A possible explanation for the persisting overrepresentation of men at the top of the civil service is that when female civil servants step out of the labor process for the duration of the pregnancy and the child infancy, they miss a crucial step in the career development, as early on in the organizational life of a civil servant it is decided whether the person is a high potential or not. In addition, part time employment, as mentioned above preferred by many women, is not encouraged in top positions.

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The percentage of civil servants with a non-Western background is slowly increasing as well. Here one of the main problems still is a deficiency in the average educational level of ethnic minorities compared to what is required for a civil service position, particularly at a higher rank. Nevertheless, in recent years particularly the numbers of female students with a non-Western background at the institutions of the higher profession education have increased substantially. Another issue is the so-called cultural dimension with respect to retaining civil servants with a non-Western background. Within this complex of cultural factors external and internal dimensions can be distinguished. In the diversity management literature the dominant (autochthon) organizational culture is often blamed for difficulties in retaining members of ethnic minorities. Among some cultural groups it is still customary for women to leave their job after marriage. Secondly, sometimes group pressure makes it difficult for some civil servants with a non-Western background to stay. The retaining aspect demands some effort as it is considered crucial in diversity management programs. ■