

Measuring the Stakes: The Dutch Planning Bureaus

Willem Halffman

The Planning Bureaus

The planning bureaus are knowledge institutes that provide the Dutch government with knowledge about the present and future state of the country and how it is affected by the government's policies. The name is somewhat misleading, as *planning* may invoke associations with the faltering centralisation policies of the darker days in really existing socialism. These institutes are not involved in planning the economy or the provision of services through state-controlled resource allocation, but in the provision of policy relevant knowledge. For these reasons, they prefer to use terms like *policy assessment institutes* in their English names, although their Dutch names are anchored in law and have become commonplace in Dutch political parlance – and hence I prefer to use *planning bureau* in English too.

Currently, there are four planning bureaus in the Netherlands: one providing advice for economic policy, one providing advice for environmental and nature conservation policy, one for social policy, and one for urban and regional planning policy.¹ They are government institutes with agency status. Each of the institutes answers to a government minister, who carries their political responsibility and is responsible for their research agenda. The bureaus therefore fall under the authority of the executive, but all of them stress their status as *independent* researchers. It is, in fact, through their skilful performance of independence that they can provide policy makers with knowledge that is considered reliable and neutral to an extraordinary degree. In this chapter, I will show how they manage this remarkable feat.

Together, the planning bureaus spend about 55 million Euros per year on research, resulting in almost three hundred reports per year, as well as numerous occasions of daily advice to policy makers. Reports include policy relevant topics such as: options for public-private cooperation in infrastructure (Lijesen/Shestalova 2007), overall short-term economic prognoses (Centraal Planbureau 2007), a model for the labour participation of women with child-

1 CPB, *Centraal Planbureau*, or Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (www.cpb.nl); MNP, *Milieu- en Natuurplanbureau*, or Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (www.mnp.nl); RPB, *Ruimtelijk Planbureau*, or Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research (www.rpb.nl); SCP, *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*, or Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands (www.scp.nl).

ren (Ooms et al. 2007), or the monitoring of target attainment for environmental policy (Kruitwagen/Koelemeijer 2007). Some of these reports are commissioned by a government department, some are produced at the initiative of the institute (in accordance to its general research programme), and some are part of their statutory tasks (such as regular economic forecasts that are integrated in the budget cycle). Many of the reports present numbers, frequently as the outcome of model calculations, and often the work of the bureaus is presented in the media as calculation (*doorrekenen*). Some of the bureaus also act as national competent authorities to provide data to international organisations such as the International Panel on Climate Change or the European Environment Agency. Apart from reports, the planning bureaus also provide incidental policy advice, which can occur through the participation of planning bureau directors in top executive meetings, through web-based data depositories,² or even through a simple phone call. The institutes may stress their independence, but it is clear that the lines to policy makers are short and policy relevance of advice is prominent in their research programme.

The authority of the planning bureaus is unrivalled in Dutch politics. The planning bureaus provide the economic assessments that form the basis of public finance projections by the Finance Ministry and hence their assessments feed straight into the government's budget, ceremoniously presented to Parliament in September. The annual assessment of expected changes in income distribution form the basis for annual debates in Parliament over social policy and inequality. Key reports of the planning bureaus get prominent media attention and are in most cases presented as unquestioned assessments of the state of affairs. Their economic prognoses are the main input for national socio-economic negotiations between employers, unions, and government, as well as for the complex negotiations between political parties during the formation of Dutch coalition governments (De Vries 2008, forthcoming). In recent years, some opposition parties have submitted their September counter-budget to the planning bureaus to increase the credibility of their alternatives. Most political parties even submit their election manifestoes to the planning bureaus for an assessment of how their programme will perform in economic and environmental terms, results that are presented in the media as school report marks clarifying voters' options (Huitema 2004).

The position of the planning bureaus and the status of their knowledge is not above *all* doubt or criticism. In the past, political parties have objected to the assessment of party programmes, economic assessments have occasionally been questioned by competing economists, and both industry and environ-

2 Such as www.milieuennatuurcompendium.nl for regularly updated environmental statistics and basic explanations of environmental processes, such as greenhouse gasses, manure, or air pollution; usually in the context of current policy goals and goal attainment (produced by the environmental planning bureau (the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency) in cooperation with Statistics Netherlands and Wageningen University).

mental organisations have sometimes questioned assumptions of planning bureau assessments (Van den Berg et al. 1993). However, in spite of such episodes, there are no other knowledge institutes that can compete with the planning bureaus' status, while criticism or public objection remains rare. In fact, objection against unwelcome findings from the planning bureaus is often presented in the media as a sign of weakness: Rather than to accept that a policy plan does not have a positive outcome, the objecting policy maker is seen to escape into technicalities or an attack on the messenger.

These characteristics make the planning bureaus into a remarkable feature of the Dutch political landscape. The overall unquestioned acceptance of their assessments, and especially their assessment of election manifestoes, is met with disbelief in neighbouring countries, where this is seen as an unacceptable form of technocracy (Van den Bogaard 1998). In a time when the intellectual discourse about the role of experts in public policy favours a modest role for experts, an awareness of multiple expert perspectives, of the fallibility of prognoses, or of the negotiated boundary between fact and value (Ezrahi 1980; Cambrosio et al. 1992; Barker/Peters 1993; Woodhouse/Nieusma 1997; Van Zwanenberg/Millstone 2001; Hoppe 2005; Jasanoff 2005; Maasen/Weingart 2005; Hagendijk/Irwin 2006; Levidow 2007; Felt et al. 2007), the continued exclusive position of the planning bureaus is puzzling. Why do these planning bureaus have such a strong position in Dutch politics and policy making? Given that the debate over the role of experts in public policy is as lively in the Netherlands as anywhere else (and sometimes even involves researchers of the planning bureaus), how is their prominent position justified and maintained?

This chapter will attempt to answer these questions, based on the results of extensive research into the role of the planning bureaus by a large group of researchers.³ First, I will go into the history of the planning bureaus and provide a brief overview of their development over time to their current position of importance. Second, I will describe the current role and position of each planning bureau in more detail, especially since there are important differences between each of them, which help to illuminate the processes behind their

3 This includes research under the programme *Rethinking Political Judgment and Science-Based Expertise: Boundary Work at the Science/Politics Nexus of Dutch Knowledge Institutes*, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO grant 410.42.16P), under the passionate direction of Rob Hoppe at the University of Twente, involving Peter Scholten, Ragna Zeiss, Udo Pesch, Dave Huitema, and Stans van Egmond, as well as several affiliated projects and their researchers, including Susan van 't Klooster, Annick de Vries, and Willemijn Tuinstra. I will refer to their published work as much as possible, but I want to give these researchers credit for both digging up the bulk of the empirical material used here and for discussing these issues at length. Additional research was also financed under the NWO programme *Planning Nature and Landscape: Under what Circumstances Does Expertise Impede or Enhance Collective Policy Making?* (grant 014.11.540).

prominence. Third, I will analyse the strength of the planning bureaus and identify crucial processes that have built and maintained this strength. Fourth, I will try to identify key tensions in the operation of the planning bureaus and identify the challenges they face. In the conclusion, I will try to assess the pros and cons of the planning bureau model and try to gauge their future, not entirely unlike they gauge ours on a daily basis.

Origins and Expansion

The Netherlands is not the only country with planning bureaus. Similarly named institutes exist in some former French colonies (e.g. Algeria), Cyprus (www.planning.gov.cy), or Belgium (the Federal Planning Bureau, providing economic policy advice, www.plan.be). Several others, such as the French *Commissariat Général du Plan*, have existed in the past. The roots of such organisations reach back to pre-war modernist notions of economic planning that involved state intervention on the basis of economic science. Most were installed as part of the post-war welfare state institutions and concomitant economic state interventionism. However, from the start, there were important differences in how planning advice for government was to be shaped and where it was to be located (Van den Bogaard 1998). As traditional planning notions lost their currency in the last decades of the previous century, planning bodies looked for new roles, and the Dutch planning bureaus consolidated their own particular niche in the advisory sector. It is this particular trajectory that I will describe in this section.

First, we should trace back the origins of the planning bureaus to the dark 1930s. In several European countries, social democrats advocated some form of state intervention to ward off the devastating effects of capitalism's periodic crises. In 1935, the Dutch social democrats presented their *Plan of Labour* (*Plan van de Arbeid*), advocating Keynesian policies to defeat the crisis and rally the nation. One of its writers was econometric pioneer Jan Tinbergen, who was to become the first director of the planning bureau for economic policy advice after the war. A key ingredient of the plan was economic analysis that should identify optimum measures for state intervention. The earlier Belgian model for the Plan, presented to the Belgian Labour Party at its 1933 Christmas conference, went even further. It included nationalisation of major industries and an economy that was to be managed by boards of technocrats. These proposals reflected the strong belief in technocratic control over an economy that had spun out of hand, leading to crisis and fierce labour conflicts (Van den Bogaard 1998; Deleeck 2003).

In the same time frame, a strong steering role for the state was also advocated for urban planning. Here too, (social) scientific research was to form the

basis for state intervention. The motto *survey before planning* of the Scottish town planner Patrick Geddes inspired an approach followed in Dutch urban plans, such as the *Plan for the Expansion of Amsterdam* of 1934. Not only did the new town planning look to government, but also increasingly to *national* government, as the ambitions of spatial planning expanded from town to region and, hesitatingly, even to a national scale after the 1930s (Van der Cammen/De Klerk 2003: 129–148). Whereas a central steering role for the state was much debated in economic policy, it seemed far less questionable in Dutch land use and reclamation. To prepare this policy, the government intended to install a National Planning Service (*Rijksdienst voor het Plan*) to assess land needs and draw plans, on the eve of the German invasion. The order installing the Service was eventually signed by the *Reichskommissar*, Arthur Seyss Inquart, under occupation in 1940. This created the precursor of the national planning administration that was to have a central role in Dutch *spatial planning* throughout the twentieth century (Vuijsje 2002).⁴

The planning notions of the *interbellum* were crucial to the negotiations between politicians in exile or captivity that formed the basis of post-war reconstruction and the welfare state (e.g. in Belgium, The Netherlands, Norway, and France). Ideas about economic planning and the role of economists in state interventionism developed in diverging directions. In Norway, economic advice for economic policy institutionalised within the administration, whereas in France economists interacted in dialogue with the tripartite consultative planning regime. In The Netherlands, the economic planning advice took a very specific form. Starting already in September 1945, a mere four months after the liberation, the Central Planning Bureau (*Centraal Planbureau*, CPB) was installed to advise government on economic policy, which at that time included the rationing system for basic consumption goods. Whereas the spatial planning service had ended up in the administration, the CPB was set up as an independent body, even though it resorted under the administrative responsibility of the ministry. With this somewhat distanced position, the CPB started to look for a niche in the ideological conflicts of the day (Van den Bogaard 1998).

Although social democracy had become *salonfähig* after the war, economic planning notions were not accepted across the political spectrum and this included contention over the precise role of this planning bureau. By about 1950, the CPB had defined its position in this debate by distancing itself from the idea that economists were to identify the desired state of the economy. One of its core principles remains remarkably similar to this day: Tinbergen established that it was up to politicians to specify the preferred pol-

4 Although not proper English, the term *spatial planning* for regional and urban planning has become common in *Euro English* under influence of stubborn usage by European policy communities, especially through European Commission documents, at the abhorrence of some native speakers.

icy outcomes (the *welfare function*), whereas the econometricists of the CPB were to assess which policy measures would help to achieve these goals. For example, this could involve a set of connected targets for budget deficits, economic growth, or unemployment – as long as these were a *coherent* set of ambitions, as measured by macro-economic analysis. Following Keynesian macroeconomics, high levels of employment were seen as an achievable economic equilibrium, but at a likely cost of budget deficits and high inflation. The CPB therefore presented itself as a source of independent advice by separating normative economic goals from politically neutral instrumental advice to achieve these goals. This boundary between politics and advice was seen as an acceptable alternative to the technocratic planning of Eastern European the state-run economies. In order to provide solid advice, CPB's econometricists started to build macro-economic models and predictive indicators, in close cooperation with the national statistics agency (Passenier 1994; Van den Bogaard 1998).

During the fifties and sixties, the CPB and the Spatial Planning Service gradually became well-established institutes in their policy domain. However, there was no further expansion of the planning bureau model until the early seventies. Once again, this was a period with a strong belief in the possibilities of the state to shape society, ideas that were not even confined to the Left. Even though, at the time, the social democrats were a major political force, the installation of two new Dutch planning agencies occurred under a centre-right government, before the social democrats entered government in May 1973. In March 1973, the economic focus of the CPB was complemented with a social and cultural planning bureau (*Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*, SCP). It had a similar mission to assess the »social and cultural welfare« of the country: It was to predict future developments in order to assess policy options and support policy choice, with equally solid arguments as provided for economic policy (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau 2003).

Another expansion developed in a different direction. In 1972, the Scientific Council for Government Policy was formed (*Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*). The original task envisaged for this Council, was to predict longer-term future developments, over-arching the other planning bureaus and working for the Prime Minister. However, these futurological ambitions were quickly abandoned and the Council developed a profile in providing social science-based information for policy and, during the eighties, strategic policy explorations. A main reason for the repositioning was the perceived infringement on political prerogatives and a disturbance of the power balances in government. Thus the original expectations for the Council to predict the future of society and coordinate other planning bureaus, gave way to a more reflexive form of policy advice, relying more heavily on problem analysis and interpretation, across policy sectors and disciplines. For these purposes, the Council consists of university professors appointed for periods

of five years, supported by a research staff. In the selection of council members, there is some consideration to balance membership between various political parties. Even though the original intentions can still be found in its organisational structure, the Council now resembles a think tank more than a planning bureau, relying on interpretation more than calculation in the presentation of its expertise (Hirsch Ballin 1979; Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid 2001; Scholten 2007, forthcoming).

Apart from a brief consideration of a planning bureau for health policy during the eighties, the third wave of planning bureaus came about only recently. Rather than adding new organisations for scientific policy advice, the third wave consisted of a repositioning of existing organisations to follow the planning bureau model. In 1996, the National Institute of Public Health and the Environment (*Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu*) acquired the legal function of planning bureau, after having aspired for a status similar to the CPB for several years. After 1988, the Department of the Environment and the Institute had followed a strategy of relying heavily on »hard« scientific evidence in an attempt to break into the dominance of economic policy criteria (Hoppe/Peterse 1993). Just as with the establishment of the SCP, the creation of a planning bureau for the environment as a countervailing power to the CPB fit that strategy. Originally, the new planning bureau was set up as an unofficial policy interface of the huge research facility of the Institute which comprised thousands of employees and about thirty research laboratories. By 2005, this division had gradually grown more independent of the research facility to form a full-fledged environmental planning bureau (*Milieu- en Natuurplanbureau*, MNP) (Van Tatenhove 1993; Kwa et al. 1994; Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu 2003; De Vries 2008, forthcoming).

The last change in the planning bureaus shook up the world of spatial planning and lifted the planning bureau function out of the Ministry. In January 2002, the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research was created as an independent centre of expertise, split from the office of spatial planning in the department of spatial planning. The greater distance to policy was seen as the crucial ingredient to construct a foothold in the flux of politics, similar to the CPB. As the mission statement suggests, the institute aims to »uphold a position of authority on the strength of its professional independence« (Ruimtelijk Planbureau 2003). Contrary to the other planning bureaus, the spatial planning bureau has conceived of its role rather differently, stressing design and creativity more than the prediction and certification practices that are so central to the other planning bureaus (Halffman 2007, forthcoming-a).

By 2002, the planning bureau model had proliferated to four influential institutions in financial and economic policy, environmental policy, social policy, and spatial policy. Two processes appear to be important drivers of this proliferation. The first is a logic of countering the powerful discourse of

calculation and numbers. Both for social policy and environmental policy, actors in the executive have sought to install a centre of calculation to provide data to counter the force of economic numbers and modelling. The second is the gradual naturalisation of the planning bureau concept: The influential position of previously established planning bureaus has led to the use of the planning bureau function as an almost self-evident requirement of policy making. The question of how the planning bureau function will be met has come to prevail over the question of whether this is a hard-wired functional requirement at all. However, to understand the forces behind this proliferation in more detail, we need to have a closer look at the variation between the planning bureaus.

Variation and the Force of the Planning Bureaus

There are significant differences between the planning bureaus in terms of organisation, types of expert activity, and positioning in the policy process. The size of the planning bureaus is already an indication of different investment levels (Table 1): The economic and environmental bureaus are much larger and the CPB in particular is the most productive in issuing reports. This partly reflects the prominence of policy fields, but also the size of the institutes' remit. For example, the CPB has statutory tasks in the national budget cycle that require the annual production of at least three economic and budgetary assessments. The MNP also services policy with several statutory reports, in particular with respect to the progress of environmental policy and policy goal attainment, including the preparation of reporting towards international environmental commitments. In contrast, the statutory reports of the spatial planning bureau are very limited, involving monitoring land needs and spatial policy.

The planning bureau function has also been interpreted differently between the four bureaus, based on different assessments of requirements in the policy field they service and on the fact that some have had much more time to find a specific niche. Key differences involve how these institutes shape their independence and appropriate distance to policy/politics, and the kind of expertise they provide to policy makers.

The CPB, being the oldest and best established of the planning bureaus in economic and financial policy, has become the paradigmatic one. It has a close relation to policy makers, in particular the civil servants at the departments of Finance and Economic Affairs, often with shared training in economics, econometrics, or accountancy, and career patterns that switch between the department and the planning bureau. Personal linkages and a shared education are complemented with regular contacts during the production of

reports, to discuss the main questions to be addressed in a report, exchange of data, or the time and format for the presentation of results. In the production of assessments for political parties also, the CPB economists base their assessment on clarifications of proposals, typically with parties' financial specialists, to make sure proposals form suitable inputs for the computer models or are otherwise clear enough to be assessed (Huitema 2004; De Vries 2008, forthcoming).

Table 1: Size of planning bureaus in 2006⁵

	Staff	Full-time equivalent	Budget (million €)	Publications in 2006
Central Planning Bureau (CPB)	170	N/A	11.0	135
Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP)	90	76	8.5	50
Environment and Nature Planning Bureau (MNP)	250	205	28.6	80
Spatial Planning Bureau (RPB)	60	N/A	6.5	25
Total	570	N/A	54.6	290

In spite of its closeness to policy, the CPB has three key principles to construct a position of independence. First, CPB economists are willing to negotiate which unexpected eventualities should be taken into account (e.g. an unpredictable change in oil prices), which policy options should be assessed, and even to a modest degree how these policy options could be shaped. However, they are not willing to negotiate outcomes of assessments, even though they will answer questions for clarification from their clients. Second, the CPB does not question intended policy: if the department indicates that policies will be implemented or that future targets will be met, then this is not questioned by the CPB. In this sense, the economists are loyal to policy and do not question the honesty or even political achievability of intended policy (partly because this could lead to parliamentary challenges to ministers). Third, and especially relevant for its dealings with political parties, the CPB tries to be fair, giving competing actors the same chances to discuss or modify proposals prior to assessment (De Vries 2008, forthcoming).

The kind of knowledge that the CPB provides to policy is therefore first and foremost of an instrumental⁶ nature: it provides an answer to questions

⁵ (www.cpb.nl, www.rpb.nl, Milieu- en Natuurplanbureau 2007; Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau 2007; Visitatiecommissie Ruimtelijke Planbureau 2007: 17).

that are predominantly formulated by policy makers and this answer is mostly presented as the outcome of measurement or calculation. This includes an element of policy evaluation, for example in measuring the target achievement of past policies. Together with the assessment of budgetary realism of future policies, this forms an element of a professional pride and mission of the CPB economists that involves disciplining politics in terms of budgetary realism and soundness of economic policies.

The environmental planning bureau bears the closest resemblance to its economic counterpart. Here too, there is an undertone of a disciplinary mission, although this mission mostly involves reminding government to its commitments in environmental policy. Constant monitoring of target achievement, for example in emission reduction, is one of the main objectives for the statutory reports the MNP produces periodically. (This difference in focus of the statutory report reflects differences between economic/financial and environmental/conservation policy, where the Dutch government has relied on precise policy objectives to a much larger extent.) Consequently, the MNP is much less inclined to accept intended policy as if its continuation were certain: Policy intentions are treated with circumspection, as an easy way to polish up future policy target achievement. Another key contrast with the CPB is that the MNP has a much more interdisciplinary composition, with a more diffracted set of models, principles, and calculative practices. This has led the MNP to reflect on cognitive assumptions, the role of uncertainty, or the plurality of knowledge practices, more than the CPB (e.g. Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu/Milieu- en NatuurPlanbureau 2003). The diversity of knowledge extends to the department, lacking the shared community of practice and episteme of the financial/economic policy world. In sum, the MNP similarly provides instrumental knowledge to policy/politics, but with more of a stress on evaluation and less close interaction with policy makers, putting it in a somewhat more distant – and on occasion conflicting – position towards government departments (De Vries 2008, forthcoming).

The Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP) also has a strong profile in instrumental forms of expertise, although it tends to stress assessment of current conditions in society over projections. Similar to the CPB, it tends to assume the assumptions of current policy and provide relevant information for its approach. For example, activities in immigrant integration policy has tended to follow the dominant policy frame, whereas the more reflective Scientific Council for Government Policy has tended to challenge policy assumptions and frames, seen by some as a continued defence of the older multicultural policy frame (Scholten 2007, forthcoming). Also in line with the planning bureau model, the SCP stresses calculation and numbers, although it does regularly present these in the context of interpretations of what is going

6 I am referring here to a typology of expert activities consisting of review, instrumental, mediation, advocacy, and reflective activities (Halffman/Bal, forthcoming).

on in Dutch society, i.e. interpretative expertise that complements instrumental expertise.

Interpretative expertise is dominant in the Spatial Planning Bureau (RPB), making it the outlier of the set of four planning bureaus. Since its formation in 2002, the director of the institute has frequently and publicly presented his view of spatial policy as a decentralised and interactive policy domain, in which the national government no longer has a detailed, directive role to play. Consequently, he has identified the key niche for the RPB in the presentation of novel concepts and visions of spatial planning, presenting new and challenging ideas to policy makers. The mission is therefore more to present a challenge to policy makers, identify what they could want as policy frames and targets, rather than to discipline policy makers into budgetary constraints or previously agreed targets. Although the RPB wants to think along with policy makers, these choices have actually put it at a greater distance of everyday policy making, at least in the perception of civil servants (Halfman 2007, forthcoming-a).

In spite of this variation, based on assessed policy needs, there are also pressures to conform to the dominant planning bureau model. The model is not specified in great detail, yet there seems to be a large degree of policy consensus over what the planning bureau function is and over what it should provide to policy. One instance where this dominant model becomes more concrete is the planning bureau protocol, a set of rules and principles that was formulated originally in 1996, as the planning bureau model spread to environmental and nature conservation policy. In this document, the directors of the planning bureaus⁷ formulated their position as independent of day-to-day policy concerns, based on scientific standards, but also their relevance for strategic policy. In addition, the protocol specified that planning bureau reports are public in principle; it specified principles for a politically neutral position of employees towards the media; or for the restriction of third-party requests for planning bureau advice, giving departments key control over their research capacity. The protocol thus tries to define the planning bureau function, form a united front between the planning bureaus, and construct and maintain a particular type of boundary between experts and policy makers. This boundary stresses instrumental policy use, covered by scientific certification (for example, through periodic assessments by academic peers) and a principle of neutrality and independence. This closing of the ranks helps the planning bureaus maintain their particular balancing position in between considerable political interests.

A second instance where the planning bureau function is articulated and maintained, is the periodic evaluation of the planning bureaus – and most pronouncedly in the recent evaluation of the spatial planning Bureau. Al-

7 Spatial planning was at that time still represented by the departmental Planning Service.

though the academic value of the reports written by the RPB was seen as very high, their immediate policy use was considered much more problematic. One of the politicians who had helped to bring about the institute as a planning bureau even complained that the RPB increasingly saw itself as a research institute rather than a planning bureau, a function assigned by law and that therefore should not be shrugged (Overdijk 2007; Visitatiecommissie Ruimtelijke Planbureau 2007). The straggler was put under considerable pressure to return to the flock and the dominant planning bureau model, pressure that was underlined by the suggestion of top civil servants that perhaps it was time to reduce the number of planning bureaus to three (Secretarissen Generaal Overleg 2007). The RPB is currently changing its profile to cooperate more closely with civil servants and to provide more instrumental expertise.

The logic of performance assessment has therefore been mobilised as an instrument to discipline these advisory institutes. It has become common practice, partly formalised in administrative legislation, that Dutch advisory bodies should be reviewed every five years. For the planning bureaus, these reviews tend to oscillate between reviews by academic peers, to assess scientific quality, and administrative reviews, to guarantee policy relevance and conformity to the planning bureau model.

At the heart the conformation to the planning bureau function lies a specific conception of policy making and the role of expertise within that conception of policy making. Policy is seen as the identification of instruments and targets, to be negotiated and decided in the political arena, but based on: highly black-boxed assessments by the experts of the present state of affairs in economy and society; the future state of affairs based on extrapolation of the present (with or without intended policies); and the expected future outcome of these policies on the state affairs (including prediction of goal achievement). Planning bureaus are therefore presented as powerful institutes that discipline policy makers into rational policy making, defined through realistic assessments of future policy outcomes, of budgetary consistency, and of a frank confrontation with the results of past policies.

The Curious Strength of Planning Bureaus

Why would policy makers let themselves be disciplined by these experts? At first, this state of affairs may seem counter-intuitive, as both the executive and politicians seem to relinquish power and manoeuvring space to a particular set of experts. There are several crucial processes that are at work in the creation of the relative strength of the planning bureaus.

First, the planning bureaus have a privileged position in terms of data access and accumulated calculative resources. The CPB has negotiated how

statistics should be registered with the Dutch statistics agency almost since its inception. Many economic statistics are now gathered with an eye on economic applications that form the core business of the economic planning bureau (Van den Bogaard 1998). Similarly preferred access to data exists for all planning bureaus in the case of data managed by the administration, as well as knowledge of intended policies, before these intentions become public. As a result, it is very difficult (though not always entirely impossible) for other research organisations to compete with the planning bureaus on the same level, especially concerning access to information that is covered by administrative confidentiality during early policy formation or before policy outcomes are reported to Parliament. Planning bureaus tend to make data available through their websites for public scrutiny and counter-expertise, but they thereby also confirm their role as data clearinghouse.

In addition to data privileges, the planning bureaus also have accumulated considerable calculative resources, which are very hard to rival. Computer models form an important backbone of economic, environmental, and (to a certain extent) the socio-cultural planning bureau. Even the spatial planning bureau makes use of models, for example to predict future industrial land requirements. Some of these models are shared with research partners, in academia or consultancy companies, and their architecture is often publicly available. (In recent years, it has become common to present the structure of these models in specialised reports.) Nevertheless, the operation, maintenance, and constant refinement that surrounds these models makes it hard for even informed outsiders to fully participate on an equal level, especially for the most complex models that have been developed over several decades.

In spite of laudable efforts to make data and calculative practices more accessible, the planning bureaus have accumulated calculative resources that are unrivalled in their respective fields of expertise. At the same time, these centres of calculation (Latour 1987) can boast some good results, for example with economic projections that are claimed to be more accurate than those of the OECD or the Dutch national bank (Kranendonk/Verbruggen 2003). Occasionally, reports of the planning bureaus are questioned, by experts or politicians, because of competing data, theories, assumptions, or differing rationales; but at the end of the day, their position remains exceptional.

Second, planning bureaus (although some more than others) successfully make use of the rhetoric power of numbers, of being scientific, objective, and neutral. The power of numbers is not just a matter of material access to the centre of calculation, but apparently also a cultural bias. This becomes particularly clear in over-stretched precision, when raw projection numbers from the planning bureaus are treated as if they were completely precise to the *n*th digit, in spite of considerable uncertainties. To prevent such misuse of data, planning bureaus report uncertainty intervals or only rounded figures. However, numbers get stripped of all circumspection or conditionality in the me-

dia or political debate, especially the numbers that have the quality label of the planning bureaus. This quality label is carefully maintained by avoiding the suggestion of political bias as much as possible and by a careful maintenance of scientific quality, for example through academic publishing, combined appointments at universities, or the periodic appraisal by academic peers. It is precisely because this scientific reputation is so important, that the planning bureaus carefully manage the boundary with policy and politics, refining their specific boundary configuration that combines instrumentality to policy makers with neutrality (Gieryn 1999; Halffman 2003).

Third, the power of (quantitative) assessments that are seen as superior and scientific is mobilised not just by the planning bureaus to discipline policy makers, but first and foremost by policy makers themselves to attempt to discipline others. For example, the department of Finance relies on economic assessments of the CPB to force other departments into budgetary discipline, in the interdepartmental tug-of-war that characterises Dutch policy making. For these purposes, the most established planning bureaus have regular meetings with civil servants during the production of reports, to assure that reports address topics relevant to policy making. Similarly, political parties challenge their competitors to come up with alternative plans or budgets that are assessed equally favourable by the planning bureaus and journalists make comparable challenges. In turn, some planning bureaus will occasionally anticipate these manoeuvres by making data available, thereby raising issues for debate, but political actors discipline each other with planning bureau assessments as least as much as the bureaus themselves do.

Fourth, there is a strong overall defence of the role of the planning bureaus in the construction of a shared rationality. Although the planning bureau function has become naturalised, their functioning occasionally does get thematised and questioned. Civil servants who cooperate with the planning bureaus, but also senior politicians, or the more subtle journalists, are all eminently aware that the knowledge of the planning bureaus is not as absolute as the media headlines sometimes suggest, that they may contain paradigm biases, or be based on questionable assumptions, such as concerning future policy. Beyond these problems, there is the defence that planning bureaus contain political debate within a reasonable set of best guess assessments. It may be possible to question these best guesses, but this is claimed to undermine a shared definition of reality, which would make political bargaining or budgetary trade-offs much more slippery and uncertain. Just like contracts reduce the uncertainty of market exchanges, a shared assessment of next year's state of economic growth reduces the uncertainties in wage negotiations.

This last argument for the planning bureaus rests on an assessment from the perspective of an elder states(wo)man: an interpretation of the overall interest of the political system. The late professor Herman Deleeck, former Belgian parliamentarian and authority on the welfare state, formulated this

defence of the planning bureau function for Belgium (admittedly in a somewhat different political configuration) in these terms:

»The possibilities within which [welfare state] negotiations take place, are foremost of a macro-economic nature. [...]. Statistic data and projections [...] form the informational basis of these negotiations. This information is provided by, among others, the Planning Bureau [...]. The consensus must consist of the agreement that the negotiations will not go beyond this given frame.« (Deleeck 2003: 227)

It is remarkable to see that, when questioned in detail, some experienced members of the policy elite will show awareness of the considerable uncertainties in planning bureau projections or even in the assessments of current affairs. This does not boil down to outright epistemological relativism, but rather points to an awareness of the partially conventional nature of this configuration. Senior policy makers often choose to accept planning bureau knowledge as best guess assessments, because questioning these would only lead to a swamp of policy unpredictability (De Vries 2008, forthcoming). This reading finds some support in the self-understanding of the CPB:

»The unbiased judgements of CPB discourage (politically-motivated) wishful thinking about the economy, and confront decision-makers with the trade-offs they should face. CPB analyses also greatly limit the time that negotiating parties spend on discussions about ›the right numbers‹. Disagreement on that score could easily harm mutual trust within a typical Dutch coalition Cabinet. Moreover, CPB's independent position allows it to serve as a countervailing power wherever the government is confronted with one-sided economic analysis of pressure groups.« (Centraal Planbureau 2003b: 8)

On the one hand, the argument made here is a functionalist one: The Dutch political configuration benefits from a shared definition of the bargaining stakes. It is because a particular type of politics, namely bargaining negotiations between socio-economic partners and increasingly also in coalitions, works better on the basis of an agreement over the factual state of affairs, that the planning bureaus have maintained and expanded their position. However, this process is more than a blind mechanism working behind the scenes, as key actors will defend this role of the planning bureaus at crucial times, such as at the occasion of their evaluation.

Whether by assessment of policy elites; The naturalisation of the planning bureau function as a rarely questioned shared belief; the accumulated calculative powers of models; the rhetorical power of numbers; the tendency of actors to discipline each other into the same logic; or a functional process of mutual adjustment, the planning bureaus do seem to have an elective affinity for a particular style of politics. This concerns a configuration in which a limited number of institutional actors (political parties, socio-economic representatives, government departments) negotiate and bargain, over alternative budget allocations or policy measures. This suggests that the planning bureau model could be particularly successful in the context of coalition governments in proportional representation, corporatism (socio-economic or environmen-

tal), and strong departmental competition (Halffman/Hoppe 2005). In this negotiation process, the planning bureaus define the stakes over which these actors are bargaining. Thus they help stabilise (some critics claim »unduly restrict«) a political process through cognitive means, creating a particular shared rationality that stresses budgetary restraint, verification of agreements through monitoring of policy targets, and the predictability of policy outcomes.

Tensions and Challenges

The position of strength of planning bureaus and their mobilisation for a particular type of political deliberation is by no means unquestioned. The system does raise criticism and also has to face some of the more general problems faced by expertise for public policy.

First, the affinity between planning bureaus and a particular style of political deliberation implies that changes in policy style or variation in styles between sectors (Halffman 2005) have consequences for the position of the planning bureaus. The spatial planning bureau is a case in point, where the assessment of spatial planning as a deliberative, open, interactive policy field led to a different task definition and positioning by its management. In this light, the variation in style of operation between the different planning bureaus seems entirely warranted, as this variation can be tailored towards specific expert niches in differing policy sectors.

Second, certain shifts in policy style identify new audiences and clients for the planning bureaus. Formally, the planning bureaus work for the executive and fall under the political responsibility of a government minister. However, planning bureaus can be allowed to work for other clients also. Parliament has become an increasingly important audience. The spatial planning bureau sees Parliament as a place of political deliberation, along with wider public debate, where it can contribute to political judgement with novel concepts or strategic visions of land use. The nature and environment planning bureau targets some of its periodic reports to Parliament, especially as it aims to provide MPs with information on policy target achievement, thus supporting the controlling role of the Dutch Parliament.

Also, planning bureaus have tried to find a way to accommodate contract research, for example by making their knowledge available to local government or even market parties. Each of the planning bureaus has devised somewhat different rules and practices for how this can be combined with an explicit remit in the national executive. Although client diversion has clear opportunities for increased resources for these institutes, as well as potentially wider political support, government departments tend to be sceptical of too much

diversion, as this diverts expert capacity away from their control. Civil servants tend to see the planning bureaus as *their* expert resource, that should be available to their policy processes, rather than to provide political counterparts with ammunition.

Third, in light of the decreased popularity of the corporatist model of decision making and the alleged unresponsiveness of *the Hague* towards the citizenry, planning bureaus are faced with the problem of how to relate to civil society and stakeholders. Especially the demands that dissenting worldviews should be represented in the knowledge of planning bureaus leads to modifications in assessment practices.

Important areas where differing worldviews are now included, are longer-term foresight exercises. Over the last years, the planning bureaus have cooperated in the production of encompassing scenarios that involve radically different expectations of the development of Europe as a political entity or the further shaping of globalisation (Van 't Klooster 2007). Such efforts are based on assumptions about different worldviews, as constructed by researchers involved, rather than direct representation of stakeholders in the framing of research projects. Direct consultation of stakeholders so far occurs when planning bureaus look for specific data, but there are now some signs that consultation with stakeholders is considered desirable in some cases, for example if the framing of uncertainty in environmental assessments (Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu/Milieu- en NatuurPlanbureau 2003).

However, stakeholder representation over framing of reports or research is a particularly sticky problem for planning bureaus. With such involvement, representation is extended from the political arena to the epistemological arena, normally so carefully separated in the planning bureau model. Some fear that stakeholder involvement could undermine the position of planning bureaus as an objective (or at least neutral) arbiter. The political and epistemological constitution of planning bureaus revolves around the separation of representation of facts and of values in two different logics, the former scientific and the latter political. It is from the maintenance of this separation, however contorted and artificial (as in the dealings with policy intentions), that they derive their main political use. In this context, stakeholder involvement is most certainly not impossible, but may require additional guarantees to maintain neutrality and avoid capture.

A fourth tension that has played up in planning bureaus is the issues of knowledge pluralism. Especially the economic planning bureau is sometimes accused of relying on particular schools of thought in economics, even if these are the ones currently dominant in academic economics. This selectivity is not just a matter of the knowledge base of the research staff, but it is also invested in the design of the computer models that form such an important instrument for some of the bureaus. The issue of knowledge pluralism is a wider one, returning time and time again in expertise for public policy

(Woodhouse/Nieusma 2001). It is occasionally used to argue against planning bureau findings. Although these arguments have so far been rather marginal, experience with expert issues elsewhere do suggest that they will be raised again.

Fifth, planning bureaus have to face some tensions between the front and back office operation. In their public presentation, they position themselves as independent, science-based institutes of calculation, outside of the world of politics. However, productive development of expertise for policy processes requires close interaction between policy makers and experts in the back office. Hence planning bureaus do not just calculate expected policy outputs based in an input of intended policy: This is not a one-directional process, but a process that originates in dialogue, where civil servants and researchers formulate questions, topics, policy options or potentially relevant uncertainties together. Even though there are complaints that some planning bureaus are not sufficiently attuned to policy needs due to lack of interaction with policy makers, many researchers at the planning bureaus are in regular contact with the civil servants who commission their reports. Planning bureaus have become increasingly transparent, willing to share details of computer model architecture or assumptions at the basis of assessments. The tension between a public image of outsiders to politics, but close interaction with policy makers has received some answers (e.g. civil servants can influence the topics in a report, but not the results of calculation), but will require further attention in the future.

Last, planning bureaus will have to look for ways to relate to competitors in the increasingly diverse world of knowledge and expertise. These challenges force the planning bureaus to rethink their specific added value in the complex ecology of Dutch expert advisory institutions (Halffman/Hoppe 2005). The economic planning bureau has in the past overcome competition of both commercial and academic modellers. More recently, it has gained terrain again on commercial consultants, after questions were raised about the quality of their work in the assessment of public infrastructure cost and benefits. Its answer has been to look for a role in guaranteeing the quality of cost/benefit analysis by developing standards and protocols for consultants and public institutes alike (Jong/Geerlings 2003). The spatial planning bureau now faces competition in its efforts to interpret the developments in planning and identifying strategic future options, including from consultants, real estate development corporations, and heterogeneous networks of public-private-expert cooperation. Also, there are now increasingly important international players in the world of expertise for policy, such as the European Environment Agency, the International Council for Exploration of the Sea (Halffman 2007, forthcoming-b), or Eurostat.

Conclusion: The Future of Planning Bureaus

Planning bureaus form a particular feature of the Dutch advisory landscape. Although they originate in a 1930s planning tradition that is shared with other countries, the planning bureaus have developed into a particular way to organise expert assessment of and for public policy. Represented in public debate as a practice of neutral calculation, assessing policy outcomes in a neutral and unpartisan way, they create facts and rationales that frame and discipline political deliberation.

Although there are deviations from this dominant planning bureau model, especially in the current spatial planning bureau, this approach has spread from its roots in spatial and economic planning to include environmental and socio-cultural expertise. An important process behind the proliferation of this model were the efforts to break into the dominance of macro-economic calculation by countering it with hard numbers, both in socio/cultural policy in the 1970s and in environmental policy in the 1990s. Through preferential access to data and accumulation of calculative resources, the planning bureaus do have a considerable advantage over other sources of expertise. In addition, policy actors hold each other to the cognitive consensus planning bureaus create, either because questioning planning bureau numbers and their scientific quality label is presented as a rhetorical weakness, or even because of the pragmatic position that it is better to accept this consensus than to risk negotiation unpredictability. Meanwhile, talk of the planning bureau function increasingly suggests a naturalisation of the model, as if it is a self-evident requirement of policy making. Formalisation and juridification further embed the model and exert pressure on deviations from it, such as through the protocol for planning bureaus, administrative evaluation, or legally specified remits of advisory institutes.

The exceptional position of planning bureaus in Dutch policy boils down to the accumulation of three key types of resources. First, there are cognitive resources, stored in models, data, researchers, networks in academia as well as government, leading to unique expertise, unique possibilities to integrate policy-relevant knowledge, and at the end of the day also unique predictive capacities. Second, there is the accumulation of authority, based on their long tradition, their ability to present their knowledge as independent and scientific, and through the naturalisation of the planning bureau function. Third, the planning bureaus have accumulated political resources, through their powerful alliance with prominent sections of government (key departments in particular) and their acceptance as a cognitive stabilisation of political negotiations, be it mutually enforced or voluntarily accepted. As I have shown, this accumulation of resources has not proceeded in identical ways for all four of the planning bureaus and can be identified most clearly for the CPB.

With this configuration, planning bureaus operate especially well in policy situations where a limited number of institutional actors negotiate, such as during the formation of coalitions, budget negotiations between departments, or negotiations with socio-economic partners. Although this pattern can be clearly identified in the Netherlands, comparison with other countries that share some aspects of the planning bureau model could further clarify this relation. Observations from Belgium certainly suggest that similar processes are at work there too, even if its Planning Bureau is of much smaller political importance.

The Dutch planning bureaus may have an exceptional aura of neutrality and function as a cognitive arbiter in matters of political deliberation, they do favour certain actors in this deliberation. First and foremost, they cooperate with the key government departments that oversee their operation and research capacity and negotiate the framing of many of their reports – even if some of their work involves the evaluation these departments’ policies. For example, politicians leaned heavily on CPB calculations to force social partners into wage restrictions in the early 1980s (Hemerijck 1994), the department of the environment relied on the precursor of the environmental planning bureau to reinvigorate environmental policy in the 1990s, and the department of Finance now relies on economic projections to enforce budget restrictions in its negotiations with other departments. Planning bureaus are therefore not just stabilisers, they are stabilisers in the hands of departments. Planning bureaus *calculate* policy outcomes of election manifestoes with explicit permission from their government departments, helping to structure the political debate over public spending or the environment within the limits of what is considered rational and realistic. It is not always easy to identify who is in charge in this alliance and who disciplines who, the planning bureau or the department, leading to typifications of planning bureaus as technocratic (experts in charge), bureaucratic (civil servants in charge), or discourse alliances (with the shared frame in charge) (Hoppe 2005). Nevertheless, there is a clear executive advantage in this configuration.

The downside to a strong alliance with the executive is its continued insistence on knowledge that is of immediate relevance for its policies, restricting the space of planning bureaus to be too innovative, too academic, too critical of policy frames, or too activist about new causes. In other words, the dominant planning bureau model favours instrumental expertise over reflection, mediation, advocacy, or review expertise (Halffman/Bal, forthcoming). This is sometimes difficult for the motivation of professionals who work at these bureaus. For example, researchers at the environmental planning bureau are often motivated by environmental concerns, which sometimes invites attempts to advocate environmental causes, possibly by making under-achievement of policy visible. This has led to tensions with the department of the environment and is connected to attempts by the MNP to identify Parliament

as a secondary client. Researchers at the social and spatial planning bureaus (SCP and RPB) value the possibility for creative reflection on the developments in their policy field with close academic connections. Especially in the case of the spatial planning bureau, this has led to objections about lack of policy relevance from the ministry. Remarkably, the sense of mission at the CPB often coincides with that of departments, for example with respect to maintaining budgetary discipline.

The future of the planning bureaus depends on how they will deal with some of the key tensions identified in this chapter, as well as their changing political environment. First, their position depends on a particular style of policy making. Although some aspects of this style are deeply embedded in Dutch political institutions (such as multi-party coalition governments), corporatist institutions have lost most of their credit. Too close an alliance with the executive, facing a more distributed civil society, forces the experts to balance between a position as an extension of the bureaucracy or to find some way to relate to a diffuse group of stakeholders, increasingly demanding a cognitive as well as political voice. Planning bureaus need to remain aware of their strategic position towards key clients, involving departments and Parliament, but in the future also increasingly civil society stakeholders and even supra-national, or regional levels of government. Successful strategic manoeuvring in this complex field may depend on their ability to define the planning bureau flexibly, which is likely to generate executive resistance.

Second, planning bureaus need to face the complex problems of expertise in public policy, such as knowledge pluralism, the uncertainties of projections, the limitations of modelling, or the value assumptions hiding at the bottom of all cognitive endeavours. So far, there has been a reluctance to address such issues face-on from sections of the planning bureaus world. This kind of reflection on the cognitive core of planning bureaus' activities is too easily seen as undermining of their position as relatively unproblematic cognitive arbiters. However, past crises with public expertise, such as the BSE crisis, but also the radical questioning of the MNP models' empirical basis at the end of the nineties, shows that such issues will appear sooner or later. In addition, some of these fundamental cognitive problems have grave consequences for the ability of experts to adequately assess risks and opportunities, and may well unduly exclude innovative policy suggestions at an early stage.

Third, planning bureaus will have to deal with growing competition from other knowledge providers, commercial, academic, and (semi-)public, national as well as international, and in some cases even regional (as with spatial planning). Planning bureaus can try to stare down this competition by mobilising their extensive cognitive resources, can try to form alliances or supply chains, or can try to find specific niches, such as in quality assurance of knowledge produced elsewhere. However, here too, their future depends on the development of a viable answer to this challenge.

On balance, the planning bureau model has some significant advantages that are on occasion envied in neighbouring countries. They are influential in rationalizing public debate, enforcing budgetary restraint, and the construction of a particular kind of accountability for policy performance. By doing this, they also structure political negotiations by measuring the stakes. As such, they seem to be particularly functional to a bargaining style of political deliberation. However, observers in neighbouring countries are also shocked by the technocratic tendencies in this system and its limited acknowledgement of the problematic nature of expertise. These objections are to be taken seriously. Even though there have been occasions in Dutch public debate where they have been raised, they will continue to challenge the planning bureaus in the future. Whether these challenges can be met within the basic planning bureau format, will remain to be seen.

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