

Development of Dutch Social Pacts between 1997-2005: the case of early retirement

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Introduction

Throughout the 1990s, most European states experienced increasing pressures on their welfare states (cf. Ebbinghaus and Hassel, 2000; Visser and Hemerijck, 1997; Rhodes, 2001). International developments such as globalization and the introduction of the EMU have constrained the range of available tools for the central governments to maintain competitiveness in the international economy. In addition, demands on the existing welfare states have altered by national developments such as high unemployment and socio-demographic changes and changing household structures.

These countries perceived the necessity to adjust their welfare states to these developments. Consequently, countries have responded differently to these welfare state pressures, though one common tendency draws attention. Member states apparently tried to solve these problems by seeking for a coordinated response of governments and social partners, being employers' and trade confederations. These processes often resulted in social pacts. The pacts examine the problems. Social pacts can be defined as new forms of competitive macro-concertation in which governments and the social partners meet regularly in an attempt to coordinate policy across formally interdependent and institutionally segmented but de facto interdependent policy areas such as fiscal, wage, labour market, and social policy (cf. Fajertag and Pochet, 2000; Hassel, 2000). By these pacts, actors concluded an agreement that states how they respond to the problems. This new response to welfare state pressures is labelled 'competitive corporatism' (Rhodes, 2001) and 'lean' or 'supply-side corporatism' (Traxler, 2001; Visser and Hemerijck, 1997).

In the Netherlands the labour market changed by these developments. The labour market is in need of reform. Many people are about to leave the labour market as a consequence of ageing: this cohort concerns the baby boom generation. This generation is the largest cohort of the Dutch labour force. When a large number of people leave this labour

force, this becomes a threat to labour participation and to competitiveness. In view of that the government is an opponent of early retirement. The government is in favour of abolishment of early retirement (VUT – Vervroegde UitTreding), which is no longer supported by taxes and by the reduction of social security. This reduction focuses for example on the revision of the unemployment insurance act (WW- WerkloosheidWet), the disability insurance act (WAO – Wet op de ArbeidsOngeschiktheid) and the Sickness Benefits Act (ZW – Ziektewet). Contrary, the insiders of the labour market want to maintain and protect early retirement. The trade unions try to protect foremost their baby boom members.

The contemporary discussion in the Netherlands is focused on this exit of the labour market. The discussion had come to a head in 2004 when the Fall Agreement of 2004 was negotiated. The main point of conflict in the Fall Agreement 2004 was the conflict over early retirement and pension reform. After a long struggle it was agreed that the pensionable age remains 65 years, though in practice employees can retire at the age of 63 when they have 40 years of work experience. Or one can use the life course savings, and retire at 60 years. Though, it becomes more difficult to use early retirement. The agreement includes a formal commitment to life-course savings. This is an individual right (individual saving) contrary to early retirement that is based on solidarity. Young employees pay premiums for the retirement of the baby boom generation, although young employees probably never take advantage of this luxury themselves.

The features of “new” social pacts of 2000s differ from these old social pacts (Avdagic et al, 2005) because of international and national developments. The features differ in terms of the context in which they happen. The context relates to the EMU, which changed the international competitiveness. Another difference relates to the content of the pacts, which concerns political exchange. The social agenda has broadened. Consequently, the involved actors have to consider more social-economic aspects in the policy decision-making process.

A third difference is the changed aims of the actors involved in the pacts. When the agenda enlarges, actors face the difficult task to consider more -often-conflicting- interests for each policy outcome has varying consequences for varying sectors. Negotiators do not only have to negotiate with the other representatives of the other actors (inter-organisational), they also have to take the different interest within their organisation into account (intra-organisational, e.g. confederation exists of different unions that have different interests). A final difference relates to the role of the government within the social pacts. The state has gained a more prominent role in the new social pacts than in the old. This results in an increasing emphasis on tripartite (government and social partners) rather than bipartite (social partners) bargains.

The question is how reforms take place. Does the government put through the reforms (unilateral imposition by changing law and regulation) or does the government involve other people, e.g. social partners (consensus seeking). In the Dutch case it seems that hard reforms are pushed through by the state. It appears the role of the state has changed; the state has been brought 'back in'. The government prefers active involvement. This results in the question:

How does the Dutch government change the regulation regarding early retirement between 1997 and 2005?

My research studies how these changes in the development of social pacts can be explained. I already studied the Dutch cases and interviewed more than 20 key persons on the change in pension system and early retirement. Interesting is that contrary to expectation it seems interview data show that government strive for "hard" agreements (active involvement of the government/adaptive governance) instead of "soft" agreements (reflexive governance) on the exit side. This is conflicting with the trend of the last 10-20 years. The main question is whether this is a result of learning. Bower defines learning as "the revision of cognitions

[feasibility] and beliefs [desirability] as a result of the transforming or recording of information based on the observations and interpretation of experience.” (1975) This results in the following hypothesis:

Cognitive change within the government originates in the kind of problem, being the realization of a change in the pension system, and prepares employee, businesses and citizens for a longer life as an employee.

My focus will mainly be on the changing role of the state. Following up on Hemerijck and Vail (2004) it is crucial to understand the role of the state how corporatist polities respond to shifting social and economic challenges. The Netherlands serves as my test case.

In section 2 some theories¹ will be shortly outlined. Section 3 describes the Dutch case. This section will be followed by some conclusions. The last section will present my ideas for further research.

Changing pacts

In general the government makes public policy. However, in many countries public policy is the outcome of agreements between government, employer confederations and trade union confederations (e.g. Compston and Berger, 2002). This paper will mainly focus on the role of the state, for it is crucial to understand the role of the state when responding to shifting social and economic challenges. “In all corporatist systems, adjustment invariably entails significant and continued involvement by the state, whose purview for autonomous action is critical to promoting needed reforms and institutional change.” (Hemerijck and Vail, 2004:2).

¹ The theoretical framework needs to be further developed.

Already in the late 1970s and 1980s the high and rising level of unemployment in Europe and a severe recession alarmed policy-makers and politicians that the welfare state's sustainability in its present form was anything but guaranteed. In addition, continental Western European governments reformed their labour markets and welfare states.

Wijnbergen concludes, "...that the success of implementing reforms [in this period] has been explained by the credible threatening or signalling of a unilateral imposition." (2002:13) Particularly regarding social pacts, the argument is that these pacts have been concluded under a 'shadow of hierarchy' in the negotiation (Scharpf 1997) "... that is to say with a government threat/ promise hovering over the negotiations to facilitate cooperation." (e.g. Visser and Hemerijck, 1997; Hemerijck and Vail, 2004).

Later in the 1990s, as states tried to reshape their national social and economic policies to reconcile the demands of international developments, government noticed that seeking for a coordinated response with the social partners offered advantages (e.g. Culpepper, 2002; Wijnbergen, 2002). These partners are frequently involved in governance, not only they are familiar with the subject; they can also explain reforms to their members (Ebbinghaus and Hassel, 2000). Culpepper (2002:774) notes that some scholars point to the re-emergence of neo-corporatism as the most efficient way to respond to these international developments. Tripartite² exchanges are seen as the most effective way to meet these developments.

However, as Culpepper (2002:775) states, "[t]here is a problem with using old paradigms to understand new phenomena, because their apparent similarity often makes substantially different causal logics." In this article Culpepper agrees with Rhodes that neo-corporatist incomes policies indeed operate principally on the basis of the logic of exchange, but Culpepper argues that the negotiated reforms of the 1990s are "better characterized by the logic of information" (ibid). Regini (1997, 2000) makes a similar distinction.

² Tripartite refers to government and social partners (being employers' and trade confederations). Bipartite refers to only the social partners.

Culpepper divides between two logics. The logic of exchange refers to the form of political exchange in which certain goods are bargained. The logic of information, or 'pacting', is characterized by the fact that "private associations deliver information and problem-solving strategies that enable the crafting of the policy reform itself" (ibid:775).

A result of the developments, government needs more information, since "[p]olitics finds its sources not only in power, but also in uncertainty - men collectively wondering what to do..." (Hecllo, 1974:305) Therefore governments not only 'power', they also 'puzzle'. However, not only the government 'puzzles'. Visser and Hemerijck (1997) have shown that in corporatist systems part of the puzzling that takes place does also amongst social partners. Actors learned there was need for reform. Consequently, "[the logic of information] ... combines elements of powering and puzzling in a context in which states do not have access to the information they need to enable their reforms to succeed." (Culpepper, 2002:776)

The logic of information can be distinguished from the logic of exchange by the nature of organizational membership and the nature of organizational capacity. Confederations of employers and employees are not merely actors involved in a trade; these actors are also centers of discussion among their members. Information is shared and discussed with the members in order to make certain what the general preferences and practices are within their group. However, this will not result in complete information. "The crucial value of organizations, faced with an increasingly complex set of policy-making options, is to be able to use this information to develop solutions that are simultaneously technically workable and politically feasible." (ibid:777). These organizations use dialogue, a discussion to brainstorm with e.g. constituency. It allows these actors not only to bargain among themselves, but also to develop new strategies balancing the conflicting interest of their members. It also gives the decisions certain legitimacy. In the Netherlands for instance, trade confederations use referenda and organize meetings with their members all over the country to gain this

information. Most contemporary scholars point that this capacity is of interest to policy-makers for it contributes to consensus. Culpepper emphasize that this capacity foremost results in more information about solving problems. This is “the product of [this] period ... it is not born of a bloodless, technocratic new mode of consensual governance” (ibid:778).

The distinction of Culpepper explain the differences the new and the old social. In conclusion, the pacts of the 1990s are better characterized by the logic of information, whereas the pacts of the 1980s are characterized by the logic of exchange.

The shifts in logic relate to the role of the government. As being responsible for public policy, one can ask what role the state can play when responding to the problems that arose from the developments. Based on the split between internationalisation and the diversity in the labour market, the government lost instruments. From this perspective Van der Meer, Visser and Wilthagen (2005) developed a conceptual framework for steering and governance, in particular for the state and public policy. Steering focuses on the state as an actor and concentrates on the capacity and need of state intervention. Governance refers to the institutions of private-public coordination (ibid).

The framework represents a two-by-two table (figure 1). The first dimension refers to the understanding of the nature of the issue by the policy-makers. If the issue is well understood and can be described more or less the government can have various roles. The government may invite relevant parties for seeking a solution together. Another role may be that the government formulates targets and goals. Under these circumstances learning is about means rather than ends: the role of the government is adaptive. Contrary, when the issue is not clear, government and other actors have difficulties in finding a solution. Learning involves both means and ends. Learning should be reflexive. The role of the government is to serve

and to help finding a solution, for example by defining tasks and defining and guard procedures.

The second dimension for the role of the state and policy coordination concerns the effect for outsiders. Van der Meer et al. (2005) explain that there is a much stronger reason for state intervention when the interest of people who cannot represent or defend themselves is affected in a major way. When the issues are relatively well understood, but the risk to outsiders is major, the emphasis should be on “steering by objectives”, also referred to as adaptive governance (figure 1). The role of the government is to set targets, guarantee that a solution will be found and use sanctions when necessary. If the issues are complex and if there is a lack of understanding, but with a small effect for outsiders, the role of the state may be smaller and concentrate on procedures. This situation refers to steering by procedure or reflexive governance (figure 1).

	<i>Issue and general solution more or less understood</i>	<i>Issue and general solution complex and not understood</i>
<i>Major risk to outsiders</i>	Steering by objectives (adaptive governance)	Steering by comparison (open coordination)
<i>Minor risk to outsiders</i>	No steering (subsidiarity)	Steering by procedure (reflexive governance)

Figure 1 Policy alternatives, issues and external effects
Source: adapted from Van der Meer, Visser en Wilthagen (2005)

But how does a government reform? How to approach reform? How does the state get support for reform? Does the government put through reforms (unilateral imposition) or does the government involve other actors seeking for consensus? It seems that the Dutch government reforms by unilateral imposition in the 2000s. It appears the state do not want to renegotiate long-term problems. The market becomes more important. The Dutch government also points towards more self-responsibility.

Therefore the role of the state is crucial for understanding how actors respond to the shifting social and economic challenges. Hemerijck and Vail (2004) emphasize that the role of the state is being under-theorized within much of the literature on corporatism. They claim that

“... capacity and strategy are crucial for understanding the dynamics of corporatist politics, particularly in periods of reform, fiscal austerity, and slowed economic growth [and they illustrate] that corporatism is a dynamic and evolving process of dialogue and political exchange between the state and social partners, rather than a fixed institutional structure producing stable and predictable political patterns and policy trajectories.”

The Dutch case

The Netherlands has a tradition of governments sharing political space with the social interests associations which traces far back to even the 16th century. But it was the Great Pacification of 1917 that reflected the tendency to share policy space (Hemerijck, 2002). After the Second World War the Netherlands were known by strong government intervention in wage setting and a role for social partners in governmental policy making.

In 1982 this pattern was halted when the new Centre-Right coalition announced a “no nonsense” policy of fiscal consolidation, implying no consultation of the social partners. The Wassenaar agreement introduced an explicit separation of governing labour between state and social partners, where wage setting was the response of trade unions and employers without governmental intervention.

However, the economy fell back: recession in 1992, which led to massive job losses. The trade unions reacted by moderate wages, but this did not satisfy the government. Moderating the wages was not enough. The government threatened again with wage intervention. At the other side, there was also a struggle going on about the Disablement Insurance Act (Wet op de ArbeidsOngeschiktheidsverzekering, WAO). There were too many

disabled people in the Netherlands that consequently benefited from this act. In 1993, A New Course (Een Nieuwe Koers) was signed. The social partners and the government agreed the economic situation was extremely worrying and that something had to be done to recover the economy growth and to keep the levels of competitiveness. The trade unions agreed on further wage moderation and further decentralization of wage bargaining and flexibilisation. The employers agreed on more working-time reduction (Hemerijck, Van der Meer and Visser, 2000:260-268; Slomp, 2002: 237-238). After A New Course, the economy and the employment growth recovered. Nevertheless, the reform of social security and labour continued when a ('purple') coalition of liberals and social democrats became into power.

In the period of economic growth from 1993-2001, it became clear that the social partners became more involved in government policy making negotiating the supply-side of the labour market.

In the Agenda 2002 agreement, concluded in 1997, a broad qualitative agenda had been agreed. Important elements were flexibility, security and wage moderation. These elements evolved out of the Flexicurity agreement in 1996. With this agreement, trade unions and employer organisations agreed to improve security for a-typical workers in the exchange for slight flexibilisation. Nevertheless, wage moderation continued to be an important element. Under the second Purple Cabinet (1998-2002) there were hardly any reforms. The pacts were continuing and were successful. The economic situation within the Netherlands is relatively well. This period seems to be characterized by introvert complacency.

There was a downturn of the economy in 2001. The rising wages had a negative effect on the competitive position of the Netherlands. It also became clear that the qualitative agenda did not work out. There was public deficit. In addition, a new government had to be able to do a lot of work to solve the problems that resulted from these developments.

The downturn had an effect on the elections. The winner of the elections in May 2002 was the new established populist party LPF (Lijst Pim Fortuyn – List Pim Fortuyn). The result of the election was nationally and internationally hot news. The result formed also a black page for Dutch political history: Pim Fortuyn, being the leader of the LPF, was murdered.

In May 2003 a new coalition (Balkenende II) was formed after the fall of the Balkenende I-Coalition. Prime Minister Balkenende announced that they put drastic reforms, among which early retirement and pension, on the agenda in order to solve the problems that arose under the Second Purple Cabinet. The government among other things economized 1.7-billion euros on VUT and pre-pension. They want to use this to cover the budget deficit. This resulted in a long period of negotiation. Finally, the Najaarsakkoord 2003 (Fall Agreement), a tripartite agreement, was concluded. It was the first agreement that contained a settled wage ceiling. One representative of the trade confederation explains that it was necessary to create space. The trade unions (and the employers' organisations) accepted wage moderation: a maximum rise in wage of 2,5 percent.

The Najaarsakkoord 2004 was almost impossible to settle. The government wanted to reform early retirement and pension. The Agreement of 2003 was made conditional upon the agreements on early retirement, pension reform and life course savings before April 1, 2004. This deadline passed out without succeeding in reaching an agreement. The trade unions did not agree with the government. They also disagreed with the employers' organisations that advocated the government. The employers' organizations hide behind the government. The government put a lot of pressure on the negotiations. In addition, the trade unions declared dead the agreements of the previous year and slammed the door to further negotiations on May 18th. Their constituency agreed on this. The government, however, continued with their announcements of reforms to the social security system. The result was a series of strikes and demonstrations by the employees: the biggest demonstration was on October 2, 2004. This

demonstration on the Museumplein became the second largest national union demonstration after the Second World War. The government was impressed, for they did not thought the trade unions were able to mobilize in such massive numbers. The government invited the trade unions to settle an agreement. This agreement was settled after permission by the constituencies of the employees via a referendum. The employers' confederations were not of importance anymore; they had to sign the agreement.

Conclusion

The role of the state changed in the 2000s. The problem load was bigger contrary to the 1990s. The state became a negotiator at its own right. It wanted to push through reforms. It announced a reform agenda. It appears the state do not want to renegotiate long-term problems. The market becomes more important. The Dutch government points towards more self-responsibility. Respondents confirm this role of the state. They describe the agreements of the 2000s as forced agreements by the state. The agreements of the 1980s and 1990s are characterized as agreements that influence the climate with respect to the international and national developments: agreements on main lines. It leaves social partners more space. Contrary, the agreements in the 2000s are more detailed and focus on objectives. Respondents refer to the pressure to change (problem load) as the main argument for this difference. The recession was worse than expected. Another reason for concern is the ageing and the growth in people with the age of 65+. This is a threat to the labour market, the pension system and the international competitiveness.

Social partnership became under attack. The Dutch model of consultation and central bargaining was blamed for slowing down the response to developments. All the interviewees, however, blame the government that given more time and more leadership and with a longer implementation period of one or two years, they would have managed to implement a new

pension system that maintained the possibility of early retirement. However, in 1997, 2002 and 2003 the pension system and early retirement were already on the agenda. Partners had the possibility to come up with a solution. Nevertheless, most of them had no solution. The only exception was the metal industry. They formulated policy, which was able to maintain early retirement. However, it was too late. One does not have to forget, that the consequences of this problem (financial unsustainable) are familiar to all actors for several decennia. Most interviewees implicate they do not want to change the pension system: they want to protect the baby boom generation and allow them to retire early. At the other side, they pay less or no attention how to guarantee the entry of the labour market. The Dutch labour market also needs people to enter this market, e.g. to stay competitive and guarantee productivity. The balance has to be remained. I will elaborate on this in the last section.

From the previous section it becomes clear that the role of the state is very important. One can notice that there is a shift within the social pacts. Based on literature and fieldwork it seems the Dutch case can be divided into three eras. The 1980s are characterized by ‘shadow of hierarchy’, whereas the 1990s are better characterized by logic of information and reflexive governance. The 2000s show that the state governs. Interviewees characterized the 2000s agreements as forced, detailed and aimed at objectives. During the 1980s-2005 the government always exposed to a more or lesser extent their ‘shadow of hierarchy’, but it is the intention of the government in the 1990s and 2000s that mark a different sort of pacts. Therefore it seems that the 2000s are better characterized by adaptive state-centrism.

However, it does not become clear if the agreements of the 2000s are exceptions or that a new era of social pacts have risen. This has to be studied more in depth. In the next section I will present my ideas for further research.

Further research

The change of the role of the government with respect to early retirement is no radical change it is a slow process. The Dutch government and the Dutch social partners are familiar with the ageing problem for a few decennia. Reform was needed in order to maintain the pension system. The question is how to reform. Does the government put through the reforms unilateral or does the government seek for consensus with social interest associations. From the story outline it seems that one could conclude that it is difficult to make “hard” arrangements on such long-term problems and that the consensus seeking ‘poldermodel’, characterized by logic of information and reflexive government, is not enough.

To test the hypothesis as formulated in the introduction, I need two comparisons. First, if this change towards adaptive state-centred governance as a result of cognitive change is true, than this change in approaching must also reveal itself in comparable long-term problems from which the consequences will be known in the near future. The contemporary discussion is nowadays focused on the exit of the labour market. The insiders of the labour market protect this exit. The Dutch labour market also needs people to enter this market, e.g. to stay competitive and guarantee productivity. The balance has to be remained. An example of this category of long-term problems is unemployment rates of minorities. The research will therefore also be focused on the unemployment rates of minorities.

Second, if the first comparison is confirmed, it is also possible that this new approach of state-centred governance originate in the changing government. This is my alternative hypothesis. When this is the case, this change is not the outcome of learning, but instead of power (and ideology). Therefore I need most-similar design, a comparison with a continental country that deals with the same problems, that tries to solve these problems by social pacts and in which the composition of the government did not change (political spectrum). This country is Belgium.

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