
Abstracts

Special issue: On the Future of Political Parties in the Netherlands

Between Interest and Principle. Political Parties in Social Democratic Perspective Frans Becker and Paul Kalma

Social scientists and journalists analysing contemporary political democracy tend to focus on the so-called 'gap' between politicians and their electorate. This approach does not do justice to the complex developments in Western democratic society and their influence on the political system. The authors argue in favour of a critical evaluation of the tradition of political sociology of the '50s ('the social bases of politics'). Without embracing Kirchheimer's typology of the 'catch-all party', they emphasize the value of his frame of reference. Sociological changes in the electorate; the emergence of new social and political issues; the diminishing role of politics as the 'steering centre' of society – they all force political parties to enter new arenas, to take new positions (for example on post-materialist issues) and to adopt new strategies. In order to survive as independent political actors, political parties will have to avoid the Scylla of becoming part of the bureaucratic machinery and the Charybdis of media-oriented populism.

The Party's over? Liberals on the Necessity of Political Parties K. Groenveld and P.G.C. van Schie

Originally, liberals had their reservations about the phenomenon of political parties, and were also hesitant in forming parties of their own. Eventually, liberals came to realize that political parties are indispensable links between the citizens and the state. By now, however, questions are being raised whether the party is over for political parties. Old political certainties have been shaken by the 'depillarization' of Dutch society and the greater social autonomy of the individual. It is unlikely, however, that Dutch politics will come to resemble the American political life in such a way that the role of parties will become marginal. Yet, parties need some sort of revitalization to stay or become attractive to those citizens who are interested in the public cause. Therefore it is necessary, among other things, that parties start providing an open forum for debate, start formulating an integrated view on issues of general interest (this will give voters clear information about where the party stands for and can be further used as a basis for policy); and that politicians become more modest and confine themselves to the core business of the state.

From Liberation Practice to Freedom Management. A Christian Democrat on the Future of Political Parties C.J. Klop

In the last three decades the membership rates of the political parties have declined from 15% of the electorate to 3%. In the perspective of competent and responsible citizenship in a democracy, this degree of adherence should be considered inadequate. Beside the traditional mass party of the pillarization period of 1920-1960 and the modern professional-electoral cadre party that has evolved since the sixties, the author suggests a third option. This option is a modern, participative democratic type of party that organizes 8% of the voters as members of a political party. Not in favour of their political careers, but as an expression of competent and responsible citizenship. To reach this target,

first a shift in the character of political leadership is necessary. Secondly, a restoration of functions that the parties have rendered over to more individualized ways of political participation. The experience of meaning in the citizen's daily life should be connected to the activities of the political parties. Especially the civic citizenship in single-issue social movements, lobby and action groups should be removed from its a-political interrelatedness with governmental bureaucracy and brought back into the domain of the political parties. Political culture and political structure should thus be newly attuned to each other. Moreover the parties should claim functions in the field of European decision-making. This all puts great responsibilities on the shoulders of the parties, much more than they deploy nowadays. Only in this perspective temporary direct financing of political parties from government-budgets can be adequate.

The Meaning of the Political Party. The problem of Institutionality and the Importance of the Eccentric Position

C.W. de Vries

What we experience these days is the crisis of the political party. But this specific crisis cannot be analysed on itself. It is part of a broader development in the meaning of politics. What we see now is the movement of the making of politics from the old political institution to the apparatuses of the state-executive. This process is not a simple one. It evolves specific bureaucratic transformation of processes in which politics develop, and a similar transformation in the politisation of the state-bureaucratic way of formation and functioning. This process knows a development on even a wider social scale. Looked upon in this broad meaning, we see a total process of institutionalisation of social relations taking place. And as such it goes beyond the old sociological meaning of the institution, and changes it. What is produced is a kind of parallel network of formal legitimized institutions. This creates the character of institutional society in which we come to live. We can look upon these developments as objective ones. But they are not without problems. For example there is a question of what will happen to the public character of political developments. What happens to the democratic framework? What will be the meaning of political action in a society that reorganises itself in a pluriformity of interests that derives its meaning from the structure of the institutional framework? If we direct ourselves to the political party then we must focus on the eccentric function of political formation. Against the background of these overall questions, it becomes relevant to stress the factor of the extrapositional character of politics in itself. In the parliamentary democracy this quality indicates the formation of the political party as a mass party. But then it also points out for us the specific function of organizing public or semi-public reflexion on political experience in the qualitative sense of the word. This last remark becomes all the more urgent since institutional functioning absorbs political experience in the meaning of experience of the political. It regroups and transforms this basic quality from a functional experience into an experience of functional rationality. It is among other cultural organisations and networks that the political party has to take a stand here. It is up to the party to rearticulate the technocratic and bureaucratic modification of experience into a political-cultural experience that can be reflected upon. It can be seen as its specific responsibility to reformulate the general experience so that it can regain relevancy to the public making of politics again.

The Future of Dutch Political Parties

A.M.J. Kreukels

In this 'epilogue' the main conclusion of the preceding four articles in this issue – that there is a future for the four main Dutch political parties – is subscribed, as is the general observation that this, more than ever, implies the need to boost party membership. Taking a closer look at the proposed strategies, however, one misses a thorough analysis of the actual programmes, profiles and cultures of the parties, in view of active and passive adherency. This seems particularly important in the nineties, given changes in voting and balances between parties. Finally this 'epilogue' touches on the issue of links between political parties and organized interests, for example in the fields of education, agriculture and business. While the aforementioned authors shun such 'dependencies', when looking for solid ground for political parties, the importance of these links is emphasized here, because they seem essential in the positioning of political parties in the complex and dynamic nation states of today.