

Government retrenchment as pacification politics: Understanding the Dutch case

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Abstract: In the 1980s the global reform ideology of *New Public Management (NPM)* was adopted in the Netherlands, although in a particular variant. Successive coalition cabinets, some of them including the Christian democrat and social democrat parties, pursued a mode of retrenchment via a range of meta policies going beyond merely the privatization of government agencies. Sustained and politically broadly accepted, this particular retrenchment mode offered political leaders a way to channel their diverse political preferences. Interestingly, the ‘hollowing out of the state’ induced by *NPM* matched well with the substantively ‘hollow’ character of the meta politics of pacification. Over the years such politics has been characteristic of the Dutch political system and political culture, as once identified by Arend Lijphart. Recently, perceived crises on various policy domains indicate the limits of technocratic governing. At the same time the latter has proved to be functional in keeping a segmented society together.

Keywords: Government retrenchment, state withdrawal, meta policies, meta politics, pacification, pillarization

Sparpolitik als Befriedungspolitik: Der niederländische Fall

Zusammenfassung: In den 1980er Jahren wurde die globale Reformideologie des *New Public Management (NPM)* in den Niederlanden in besonderer Form implementiert. Nachfolgende Regierungskoalitionen, die sowohl christdemokratische als auch sozialdemokratische Parteien einbezogen, verfolgten eine Politik des staatlichen Rückzugs, über eine Reihe von Metapolitiken, die über die bloße Privatisierung von Regierungsbehörden hinausgingen. Diese spezifische Sparpolitik, die sowohl nachhaltig als auch politisch breit akzeptiert war, bot politischen Führungspersonlichkeiten die Möglichkeit, ihre unterschiedlichen politischen Präferenzen zu kanalisieren. Interessanterweise passte das durch *NPM* induzierte „Aushöhlen des Staates“ gut zum substanziell „hohlen“ Charakter der Metapolitik der Befriedung. Seit mehr als einem Jahrhundert ist eine solche Politik charakteristisch für das niederländische politische System und die politische Kultur, wie einst von Arend Lijphart identifiziert. In jüngster Zeit haben jedoch wahrgenommene Krisen in verschiedenen Politikbereichen die Grenzen der technokratischen Regierungsführung aufgezeigt. Gleichzeitig hat sich diese Form der Regierungsführung als funktional erwiesen, um eine segmentierte Gesellschaft zusammenzuhalten.

Schlagwörter: Sparpolitik, Rückzug des Staates, Metapolitik, Befriedung, Säulenbildung

1 Introduction

In the summer of 2023, the parties in the Dutch coalition cabinet could not reach an agreement on migration. Till then, Mark Rutte, the Dutch prime minister, had been leading his fourth government more or less smoothly – a coalition of, on one hand, the conservative liberals and Christian democrats and, on the other, the progressive liberals and the Calvinist Christen Unie.

Rutte now opted for a confrontation *within* the cabinet and seemed to have strategically chosen this particular subject. Migration looked to be the ideologically most contested issue on the cabinet's agenda and hence the least fit for a politically 'lean' deal-making. No agreement was reached. Rutte and his government resigned. Three days later, on July 10, Rutte announced his personal exit from Dutch politics.

After quite a while the overall orientation on government retrenchment has become an object of public debate in the Netherlands. This is probably so, since the consequences and limits of state withdrawal 'in the real world' have become more and more apparent. The long-term hegemony of consensus has become object of increasing criticism, with public opinion, commentators, the political opposition in parliament, but also decentral governments asking for more substantive political direction. In January 2021, the third Rutte cabinet stepped down after the publication of the report of the parliamentary committee on the so called 'daycare allowances affair' (Peeters & Widlak, 2023). The latter may have triggered this new national call for more political-administrative attention to what, under the heading of *implementation*, in practice actually happens with good intentions.

The fourth of the successive cabinets chaired by Mark Rutte, a conservative liberal from the VVD, saw itself confronted with several other 'crises' as well: apart from the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a general housing shortage, inappropriate assistance to asylum seekers, an inadequate government response to earthquakes in Groningen due to gas drilling, an extending impact of organized crime, a flawed organization of youth protection, high energy prices caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine – not to mention climate change. All of those perceived crises – at least: real issues – induced a growing reproach that national government did not take its responsibility but was, instead, too much inclined to let things go. The cabinet crisis in the summer of 2023 highlighted above was initiated by the prime minister himself, aimed at putting an end to this latter reproach at least on the issue of migration.

It is empirically open if this – after all, rather abrupt – ending of the Rutte IV cabinet can be considered as marking the beginning of a new era, with a historic relevance similar to the start of the first cabinet led by Ruud Lubbers in 1982. That start initiated a period of more than four decades in which a range of coalition cabinets from varying political denominations – even those representing the traditional *capital* versus *labour* controversy – succeeded each other, all adopting, in one way or another, an overall ideology of state withdrawal. Whatever one could say about that period, it was characterized by a broad consensus about such an adoption while, simultaneously, the political system as a whole showed a certain stability. Recently, however, crises have been proclaimed all over, indicating cracks in the sustained consensus. How can one understand this situation?

This article offers an empirical overview of the *NPM*-inspired public sector reforms that took place in the Netherlands between 1982 and 2023. In this overview the present author unfolds the claim that the nature of the reforms fits within the general Dutch culture of