



# BACK TO BASICS

## Parliaments and parties should be more accessible to citizens again

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In the western world, common citizens have gradually - over the last century or so - acquired influence on political decision-making. Admittedly, there are prominent thinkers in political philosophy (including Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Rawls and Nozick) who founded their theories on the idea of a 'social contract', an imaginary agreement between free individuals who instituted a sovereign to arrange for them certain matters in the public interest, particularly security. However, in historical reality, that has never really been the case. In point of fact, power that had often been gathered to rulers by force had to be curbed through difficult struggle, or sometimes partly taken away from the sovereign by stealth to be more widely distributed.

### **The rise of citizens; ideal and practice**

Parliaments and political parties are the institutions that have come to symbolise and channel the influence of the citizenry. The earliest parliaments arose because the monarch needed money and could not levy taxes all by himself; at the very least, he needed the consent of his most influential subjects for such a levy. Consequently, as early as the late Middle Ages, sovereign and parliament would collaborate on the one hand, in order that taxes for an objective supported by parliament could be levied; on the other hand, parliament explicitly might oppose the monarch, as an autonomous power which could refuse the sovereign's demands.

Basically, the democratization of parliaments which came about particularly in the nineteenth and/or twentieth century - following the extension of the right to vote and the introduction of one (wo)man, one vote - changed nothing in that situation. True, the power was shifted from the sovereign to the ministers, and parliamentarians not only represented the people but were also mandated by them; however, the representation of the people remained an autonomous force that had to cooperate constructively with the national government while at the same time maintaining critical control of it. Although the legitimacy of the people's representation was enhanced, that did not automatically increase the legitimacy of the government. Whether or not this happened depended upon parliament succeeding in sustaining - in a well-balanced way - the prevailing views and interests of the population.

Ideally, general interests were at stake in that context: security, public order and fair justice; the roads; a certain basic level of education and other so-called 'collective facilities', ie. matters that are in everybody's interest but cannot - or not sufficiently - be brought about through private initiative. In reality, as in the past, special interests played a part. Anyone in power or control will - first and foremost - take care of his own interests, and thereby it is useful if such interests can be presented as 'the public interest'.

In the nineteenth century, the ideal - aptly phrased by Edmund Burke, the eighteenth century Irish-British philosopher and politician - that a parliamentarian should be able to form his judgement independently and be able to act upon it freely, prevailed in many countries. He should be free from coercion by the national government and from pressures imposed by his fellow-parliamentarians; neither should he act upon the instructions of pressure groups or the electorate. Since voters with an above-average interest in politics wanted to know what they might expect, political parties emerged which put up candidates and supported them in their campaigns, and also began to formulate manifesto policies. They felt that the candidates supported by them should stand for these policies (principles at first, but later more concrete issues as well). Not all (candidate) parliamentarians took kindly to this approach; subscribing to such manifestoes would affect their independent judgement. Nevertheless, all political parties eventually took to drafting manifestoes, and they expected their parliamentary candidates to support the party manifesto and to secure majorities in parliament for the various policies - unless, at least, coalition required compromise.

According to political scientific literature, an election manifesto is the result of an open and free debate between the active members of a party. Thus, benefit can be derived from a maximum of insights, and admitted partial interests can be weighed as well as possible. Here too, practice often deviated from the aggregation function theoretically allocated to parties; election manifestoes were often 'pre-cooked' or heavily influenced by the party leadership. Nevertheless, such a manifesto is basically the ideal tool to allow citizens - as members of a political party - to exercise their substantive influence.

## How parliaments and parties have drifted away from the citizens

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, citizens in western democracies are better educated, better informed and (in spite of the economic crisis since 2008) more prosperous than in preceding centuries. Therefore, their ability to exert a well-considered influence on politics should be, theoretically speaking, more substantial than ever before. If ever there was a time when the ideals of the independent judgment and critical function of parliamentarians and political parties could be accessed - as channels through which society's ideas and concerns find their way into political manifestoes, based upon a clear understanding of the public interest - that time is now.

However, over the past decades the democratic systems in most of the western countries have strayed farther away from this ideal picture rather than coming closer to it. Parliaments are considered by fewer citizens to be true representatives of the people. Citizens do not look upon political parties as their 'crow bar' into the system, but rather as part of a system that is alien to them. The importance of political parties may still be supported by citizens in general, but a study - conducted in 32 countries - published two years ago shows that only 10% of citizens feel that parties are interested in their opinions.<sup>1</sup>

Research performed in the Netherlands shows that that the number of citizens who subscribe to the statement 'You become a Member of Parliament through your political friends rather than because of your abilities' rose from 29% to 47% between 1977 and 2010.<sup>2</sup>

Are the citizens to blame for that? Citizens who just do not have a clue and who - with no interest in politics - have an utterly negative view? Now that would be strange; after all, commensurate with the higher level of education and the greater possibilities of obtaining information, citizens' interest in politics and the extent to which they follow political developments have increased all along the line. There has always been an undertow of negativism about what dissatisfied Dutch voters have called, from time immemorial, 'the powers that be in The Hague' (the political hub of the Netherlands), who allegedly take no notice of the common people. The fact that an increasing number of citizens have a negative view seems much more a consequence of the fact that an increased number of people are closely connected to politics and that they do not like what they see.

We should be wary of generalizing, but in quite a few western democracies parliament functions less and less as a critical watchdog. The members of the party or coalition that underpins the government are deemed to provide the political majority that allows the government to proceed. After all, the 'governability' of the country should not be jeopardized. An overly critical attitude by parliamentarians is only bound to ensure 'political instability'. Thus, the control function of parliament is gradually being superseded by the notional function of placing a formal stamp of approval on the most important decisions that have been taken elsewhere, be it by the government, at an international conference or by the European Council. Sometimes, slight marginal changes are possible, but in the case of

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international affairs there is seldom room for this and a de facto 'yes' is the only viable option; anyway, that is how it is described to parliamentarians, and they feel much the same way themselves.

On these lines, parliaments are sometimes bullied by governments. In addition, fear of giving an impression of internal dissension has tightened the reins on parliamentary parties. In the 1990s, an international study into the 'unanimity score', ie. the extent to which parliamentary factions vote as a block, conducted in fifteen countries, showed that in fourteen of the countries under review, the score fell between close to 95% and an impressive 100%.<sup>3</sup>

Unless members of parliamentary factions happened almost always to see eye to eye, this would indicate a phenomenon that the members are actually no longer free to vote according to their personal views if they deviate from those held by a majority within the party. The country with a 100% score in the survey - Ireland - showed just recently how far parliamentary party discipline may reach. Some parliamentarians who voted against an adjustment to the law on abortion - which is considered in many countries to be an ethical issue par excellence, where voting according to one's conscience is still admissible - were ruthlessly removed from the parliamentary party.

Research in the Netherlands has shown that the number of parliamentarians who feel that their own view should prevail in the case of a disagreement between their own view and that of the majority of the parliamentary party - Burke's independence of judgement - fell from 40% to 5% between 1972 and 2006.<sup>4</sup> What is the problem if parliamentarians themselves are not bothered by it? The problem is that the judgement of associate ministers - and, hence, of the country's government - or of other people in the party leadership becomes binding, rather than the party's own factual balancing of the country's best interests.

Obviously, it is neither conducive nor logical when parliamentary factions continually display dissent at the ballot box. And if a parliamentary faction operates on common principles its members will make a unanimous judgement on many bills. Moreover, the voters need to know to what extent they may rely on a party. However, the situation is not healthy if members of a parliamentary faction are forced into artificially uniform judgements through rigid discipline and disciplinary action.

The fact that parliamentarians themselves consider it logical that, eventually, the bottom line is that they will just have to climb down, reflects the changing role of political parties. Parties do not usually realise their elective function by seeking a diversity of views within their own circle hoping that minds will thus be sharpened. Whoever manifests himself/herself within a party as a critical mind is considered to be a potential 'danger', to be eliminated from the list of candidates. If plans misfire with one of the carefully selected candidates, and if he/she - as a parliamentarian - dares to oppose parliamentary party discipline then the sanction remains that he or she can forget about running in the next round for re-election.

More and more often, such discipline is applied not only to parliamentarians but to party members as well. Rather than encouraging debate with a view to generating new ideas and solutions to political problems, party leaderships only too often labour under the fear that the media will exaggerate any dissent within the party. Consequently, major debates about essential matters involving as many members as possible are often avoided; there is a preference for confining debates to relatively harmless issues that are less sexy from the media's point of view. It would seem that party members are considered, first and foremost, as valuable for their contribution and usefulness during campaigns; but not in terms of their participation and independence of thought. Modern citizens draw the conclusion that membership of a political party is not attractive, and therefore almost all the political parties have been confronted with a decline in membership over the past decades.

### **A return to control for party members and voters**

All things taken together, parliaments and political parties are increasingly closing ranks, thus shutting themselves off from society in a broader sense. By contrast with countries with a majority (district) system, prospective parliamentarians may manage to enter the arena quite well in political environments where proportional representation prevails, without an (appreciable) electoral threshold. All the same, these new parties usually do not reveal themselves as more open to debate; nor do they loosen the reins of parliamentary party discipline. The party apparatus of the two most successful newcomers to the Dutch parliament who have managed to establish themselves during the past two decades is even more rigid than that of the established political parties. Neither the 'old-fashioned socialist' SP party nor Geert Wilders' PVV tolerate any 'dissent' voices within their own realm; to prevent members from becoming a nuisance, Wilders does not even allow members into his party.

Political dissatisfaction among the electorate is increasing

not only because politicians simply have to take 'hard' decisions in times of economic hardship but also because parliamentary groups and political parties are no longer seen to be organisations of the voters, or respectively of the members, whereby the latter can exert serious influence. The fact that parliaments and parties have become more closed and compulsorily homogeneous in societies that have become more open and diverse causes friction. And if parliaments and parties fail to adjust, they run the risk of voters either backing out or opting for radical alternatives.

In France and the Netherlands, for example, some parties are experimenting with forms of participation that are open to non-members. It is good that such parties acknowledge the fact that doors need to be opened. However, it remains to be seen if things go too far. If you do not need to be a member of a party to exert influence on it, what does membership offer after all? There is an imminent risk that such a party will only retain members who are interested in a political career and that there will be no more involved, common citizens in the main body of the party. In addition, there is a risk of outsiders 'hijacking' a party. After all, what would inhibit the members of a pressure group or action group - after payment of the symbolic euro that such parties ask for having a say - to press on with their own agenda without further discussion?

Influence may be counterbalanced by obligation: that is a more sustained commitment to a party on which someone wants to exercise influence, as evidenced by paying a serious financial contribution. Conversely, parties will have to recognise that obligations to members should be offset by the possibility of their genuine influence. That influence applies to policy - what will the party be advocating? - but just as much to the people who will be serving the electorate as the people's representatives on behalf of the party. Party members should have a choice when it comes to the selection of parliamentary candidates. And in systems where lists of candidates operate, voters should also have a realistic chance of applying change at their insistence, and, hence, in the composition of factions.<sup>5</sup>

If members of parliamentary parties realise that, eventually, they are not accountable to party leaders but to the party members and the electorate, coercion by the parliamentary party and factions may become less effective. This will increase the likelihood that citizens will have the last word and that those in power cannot rely unquestionably on support for a full parliamentary term. It may bring democracy closer to its essence. After all, the valuable principle that has been acquired over a century of trial and error - that the citizens ultimately determine government - should not now slip out of our hands. ■

1. Russell Dalton, David Farrell and Ian McAllister, *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage. How Parties Organize Democracy*, Oxford, 2011, p. 216.

2. Bojan Todorovic, Kees Aarts and Harry van der Kaap, *Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies. Data Source Book 1971-2006, 2009* ([www.dpes.nl](http://www.dpes.nl)).

3. Sam Depauw and Shane Martin, 'Legislative party discipline and cohesion in comparative perspective', in: Daniela Giannetti and Kenneth Benoit (ed.), *Intra-Party Politics and Coalition Governments in Parliamentary Democracies*, London, 2009, pp. 103-120.

4. Rudy Andeweg and Jacques Thomassen, *Binnenhof van binnenuit: Tweede Kamerleden over het functioneren van de Nederlandse democratie*, The Hague, 2007.

5. More recommendations in the study (unfortunately, only available in the Dutch language): Mark van de Velde, Joost van den Akker, Caspar van den Berg, Patrick van Schie and Herbert Zilverentant, *De plicht der politieke partijen. Kiezers, partijleden en politici in een open partijdemocratie*, Teldersstichting, The Hague, 2013.