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Like so many other deltas in the world, the Dutch Delta is heavily urbanized. Because this is important to understanding the delta, this chapter first explores its urban development and its highly fragmented urban pattern, a situation that is strongly related to a rather fragmented system of government. Section two discusses an ongoing political controversy in the so-called South Wing of the Randstad, the growing conurbation stretching from Leiden to Dordrecht. In the third section, we discuss some important aspects of the system of water management in the Netherlands, such as its growing international importance.

FRAGMENTED GOVERNANCE AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

A Decentralized Unitary State

The urban pattern of the Netherlands—as well as large parts of the neighboring Belgian region of Flanders—is scattered and occasionally even fragmented. The structure of public administration has contributed to this considerably. The country's urban fabric was formed in different historical layers. Different periods added different patterns, from the Middle Ages (the first major period of city formation) to the Industrial Revolution (a period of massive urbanization and the emergence of vast urban-industrial complexes) and right up to today, which is characterized by a fanning out and fragmentation of urban morphologies.¹

The Netherlands has never been subject to a form of centralized government like those found in France and the United Kingdom, for instance. In those countries, highly centralized government has produced a monocentric urban structure. The Low Countries—including parts of present Belgium—have been dominated by powerful regions for a very long time. Even

5.1 (opposite page): Administrative boundaries: municipalities, provinces, and water boards. *Map by S. Nijhuis and M. T. Pouderoijen, Delft University of Technology.*

mighty sovereigns reigning over these countries had to adapt.² The Republic of Seven United Provinces, which came into being in 1588 during the Eighty Years' War with Spain (1568–1648), was nicknamed the “Republic of Seven Disunited Provinces.”³ This situation changed drastically when Napoleonic France occupied the Low Countries in 1795. Provincial autonomy quickly came to an end in 1798, although it was partially restored in 1801. After the French occupation in 1813, the country was turned into a kingdom.

The revolutionary wind blowing through Europe in 1848 also touched the Netherlands, but it was a mild breeze. The new 1848 constitution not only restricted the power of the king but also embraced the principle of self-government. The country was divided into municipalities, and each one was autonomous save for certain powers reserved for the provinces or central government.⁴ The provinces also became self-governing. This system is thus drastically different from the English system, for example, in which local government has only those authorities explicitly granted to it by central government.

Still, the country is not a federation. A “decentralized unitary state” is the most common characterization. Cogovernment is the underlying principle: Central government involves the provinces, the municipalities, or both in the formulation and execution of its policies. The fundamental philosophy is that unity cannot be imposed on the country from above but must come from a plurality of forces hashing out their differences within an agreed-upon framework.⁵ In other words, the unity in a “decentralized unitary state” is brought about by consensus building, an activity that is also known as “poldering.” Interestingly, the Dutch verb *polderen* (“to polder”) is derived from the noun *polder*, which is the quintessential water management unit for most of the country and parts of western Belgium (see Chapter 2). Reclaiming land and building defenses to keep areas protected from the sea was possible only through cooperation and by balancing different interests on the level of a polder; it was not the result of top-down grand schemes.

Subtle Vertical Relationships in Planning

The idea of the Netherlands as a decentralized unitary state has left its imprint on many policy domains. Obviously, spatial planning is one of them. The first

comprehensive act, the 1965 Spatial Planning Act (*Wet op de Ruimtelijke Ordening*) differentiates among three systems of planning based on the three levels of government.⁶ The relationships among these levels and among the different types of plans each level is expected to produce are subtle. There is no clear-cut hierarchy defined by a binding national plan, which was characteristic of the German-inspired legislation that came into force during the 1940–1945 occupation. When making plans and designing policies, lower levels of government have to interpret the plans and policies of higher levels of government. This is a rather shaky structure for arriving at consistent spatial planning policies up through the vertical axis of government. Nevertheless, this is in line with the Dutch tradition of *polderen*. Consistency arises mainly through consultation and negotiation. Although the revised 2008 planning act introduces new instruments and new types of plans, this fundamental tradition is unlikely to change.⁷

According to landscape and nature conservationists, there are good reasons for a more stringent approach to provincial and (especially) municipal planning policies. In general, most municipalities are inclined to make more plans for new housing and industrial sites than what higher levels of government find desirable. This leads to a difference between the principle and practice of ideas such as urban “concentration.”⁸ This is clearly visible in many areas in the Netherlands. Probably the most fragmented urban region is found in the South Wing of Randstad, the area between Leiden–The Hague and Dordrecht. Moreover, some of the urban development in the South Wing no longer looks sustainable from a water management perspective. The city expanded into various polders that were created by draining a number of peat lakes during the latter half of the 19th century. This is a typical urbanization pattern in the South Wing, especially in the areas north and northeast of Rotterdam.⁹ For many years, people believed that one of these polders, Alexanderpolder, now part of the Rotterdam agglomeration, contained the lowest point of the country, which is 6.25 meters below average sea level. Yet the actual winner is the South Lake Polder (*Zuidplaspolder*), which is at present the subject of fierce debate about whether part of this polder should be used for yet another urban extension. This debate shows that there is growing doubt about the long-term sustainability of the Dutch water defense system.

FRAGMENTED GOVERNANCE: THE CASE OF THE RANDSTAD SOUTH WING

Randstad as a Deltametropolis?

To a large extent, the urban fragmentation in the Randstad's South Wing continues to be caused by fragmented governance. We have seen a veritable explosion of organizations that consult and coordinate among different levels of government to increase territorial integration beyond the local level. Nowhere else is the quest for a suitable scale of governance as evident as it is in the Randstad, where we can see constant shifts among the level of entire Randstad, the Randstad's north and south "wings," and the various metropolitan regions in it. This shows that the public authorities in the Netherlands have a very poor track record of setting up and maintaining governance at the level of the Randstad. But this is true of all tiers of government, even at the very top. In several versions of a single, otherwise coherent document on spatial planning published between 2001 and 2005, the government endorsed totally different concepts of the Randstad. At first, the government embraced a concept that moved from functional integration to a focus on the Randstad as a whole. This old spatial concept was renamed the "Deltametropolis." It emphasizes that the identity of this conurbation is heavily influenced by its location and that the characteristics of the water system should be taken seriously in future spatial planning decisions. Later on, another coalition government was reluctant to depart from planning that did not rely on the territorial divisions of government. The Randstad is located across four provinces, and this coalition proposed returning to a Randstad model in which the different wings each fit neatly into one province. By reframing the Randstad in this way, one interesting element of the Deltametropolis was lost: the emphasis on water systems, the qualities they add to Randstad, and the conditions they impose on future urban development. The concept of the Deltametropolis lives on as the name of a civic foundation whose goal is to turn the Randstad into one integrated metropolitan region. The existence of this trust is proof that spatial planning and urban design is not solely the domain of government but is supported by a variety of actors in civil society ranging from the Dutch automobile association (ANWB) to professional organizations and their journals.

Cooperation within the Randstad

The gradual merging of the urban areas in the Randstad is not paralleled by some sort of integration of governance, although looking at the North Wing of the Randstad we can see that cooperation in the so-called Amsterdam Metropolitan Region (*Metropoolregio Amsterdam*) is quite effective in defining strategies and connecting them to operational decision making.¹⁰ Other players in the area have accepted the city of Amsterdam as the leader in this region.¹¹ In fact, the dominance of Amsterdam in “its” region goes as far back as the 17th century.¹²

Cooperation in the South Wing, however, is thin, perhaps extremely so. There is a South Wing Governance Platform (*Bestuurlijk Platform Zuidvleugel*), but it is only a small executive organization consisting of a few people and is run mainly under the auspices of the province of South Holland. The governance structure of the South Wing is dominated by its two main cities: Rotterdam and The Hague. The cities have always relentlessly competed with each other, which has led to a lack of integration in spatial planning and strategy development. Each urban region has its own vision. The South Wing Governance Platform has more or less lumped the two regional visions together and has thus added very little value to the effort. The province has recently followed suit and has drafted a structural vision under the new spatial planning act to replace the age-old area plans. In doing so, however, it ignited a heated political argument in which the municipalities claimed the provincial philosophy of governance was far too draconian. (The debate continues to this day.) In addition, there are all sorts of plans and visions at municipal level. All in all, there is a plethora of plans that strictly adhere to the official configuration of government, including ancillary arrangements to form collaborative areas. The boundaries of each urban region and the South Wing are mostly regarded as fixed. In the South Wing, the process of “governance rescaling,” as it is called in academic literature, is tied to classically organized public governance. This situation is not unique to the Netherlands, or for that matter to international relations.

WATER SYSTEM MANAGEMENT

The Water Board: A Moral Institution...

The making of polders—a process that started in the Middle Ages—was not the result of hierarchical decision making or any sort of centralized government. It

5.2: Water boards in the Netherlands. Map by M. T. Pouderoijen, Delft University of Technology.



was actually initiated and carried out by local people after they got consent to do this from their sovereigns, who in most cases were happy to grant them permission because territorial expansion would increase their tax bases. Eventually, this kind of polderen led to the development of water boards, because sea defenses and waterworks are only as strong as their weakest points. Individual landowners could not maintain the infrastructure on their own, and local communities could not carry out the inspections. Regional meetings were organized to discuss these communal problems and how they could be solved.¹³ Local communities started to elect representatives to attend these meetings. This eventually led to the water boards, an institution now more than 700 years old, which makes it the oldest democratic institution in the Netherlands and one of the oldest such institutions in the world.¹⁴ In his seminal study on Dutch culture in the 17th century, Simon Schama speaks about a “moral geography” and cites 16th-century hydraulic engineer Andries Vierlingh, who saw the reclamation of land from

the sea as the result of an act of God: the Dutch got permission “from above” to create land. This meant the Dutch had some kind of holy right to their country that could not be taken away by outside rulers—hence their resistance to the Spanish king during the Eighty Years’ War. It is not too difficult to imagine that the water boards (which came into existence in the 12th century) were not considered mere utilitarian organizations but were deeply rooted institutions. Although Napoleon was quite successful in getting rid of provincial autonomy, even he did not succeed in turning the thousands of polder and water boards into large public authorities.¹⁵

...Losing Its Territorial Roots?

We can describe the water boards as “functional governmental bodies” responsible for flood protection and water management, as opposed to general democracies like central government, the 12 provinces, and the 440 or so municipalities.¹⁶ While the latter institutions are based on the principle “one man, one vote,” the water board is based on the rule “interest, pay, say”—or what Americans might call “pay to play.” The distribution of seats on the water board among landowners, residents, and wastewater dischargers is based on this rule and can vary according to local circumstances. For instance, in heavily urbanized areas residents get a higher proportion of seats. The provincial authorities are authorized by the national government to define and supervise the work of the water boards.

The number of water boards has dwindled over the years, especially after 1953, when a storm surge disaster killed more than 1,800 people in the southwestern Netherlands. This led to the conclusion that the system of water boards was no longer capable of carrying out its responsibilities and had to be reorganized. In 1955, there were about 2,500 water boards. In 1969, the number was brought down to about 1,000. Since then, this number has been brought down even further to 26 water boards, which is less than 1 percent of their number at the time of the 1953 flood. Other developments led to more changes in the character and work of the water boards. The growth of the population and the expansion of urban areas across the country has increased the number of participants interested in local and regional flood protec-

tion and water management.¹⁷ This had led to a significant increase in the diversity of interests in water management. For instance, the managers and owners of nature reserves like to see high groundwater tables because that is good for nature. In contrast, farmers want to see low groundwater tables so they can use heavy machinery on the land and begin working it as soon as possible after the winter.

The fact that social conflicts over water management are increasing does not mean there is great public interest in what water boards are doing. There are stakeholders who are directly affected by the activities of water board, such as farmers, landowners, and administrators in rural and cultural landscapes or the nature reserves. Their land is checked annually to determine whether the drainage system of ditches and canals meets certain requirements. But for most people, the water boards are outside of their awareness. This is quite different from Dutch attitudes about land and water in the past. A clear indication of the present situation is the voter turnout for the November 2008 water board elections, which was a meager 24 percent. This was even worse than the turnout for the election of Dutch seats to the European Parliament in 2004, which was around 39 percent. (The turnout for national elections is usually around 80 percent.)

This has led to serious doubt about the authority of the water boards that is further compounded by the fear of climate change. Many people believe that the challenges of climate change will have to be met by strong water boards capable of dealing with the increasing risk of natural hazards. Some political parties favor abolishing the water boards altogether and having the provinces take over their responsibilities. Others fear this will lead to a grave loss of expertise and exchange; the water boards provide a venue for people with different interests to communicate, which is how politics works (or so they claim). There are also pleas for an integration of provinces and water boards and a new territorial division at the middle level of people who are at the perimeters of water systems.¹⁸

Disputes about the territorial organization of Dutch government usually end up becoming political trench warfare. Given this, the most likely course of events is that the process of amalgamating water boards will continue, similar to what is happening on the level of municipalities—a creeping reorganization of govern-

ment. Foreign rulers like Napoleon who were capable of changing a government system with a stroke of the pen are no longer around, at least in the European Union part of Europe. However, there is an outside force that is putting some pressure on the Dutch practice of water management. This force is the EU, which operates with the consent of the member states; contrary to popular belief, the EU is not a superstate.

Upscaling Water Management

Water management is not just a Dutch domestic affair but also a policy domain of the EU. According to the Treaty on European Union, the EU is entitled to craft environmental policy. This has led to a growing number of environmental directives, including a handful on water systems. EU directives set up standards that must be met and incorporated into the laws of its member states. For our purposes, the most important standards are contained in the 2000 Water Framework Directive (WFD) and the 2004 Flood Directive.

The WFD sets up targets for surface and groundwater quality. A crucial element of the directive concerns river basin planning. International cooperation is obligatory wherever river basins straddle borders. Because the rivers basins of the Ems, Rhine, Meuse, and Scheldt are far larger than the country itself, this is quite important. In reality, though, there is no master plan for each river. Each member state makes its own plans and then coordinates these plans with other countries in the watershed. The European Commission acts as a supervisor and can force countries to comply with the plans.

There is another level of government beneath these international river basins. This level is made up of the river basin districts. There are 16 of these districts in the Netherlands. Because there are 26 water boards, in only a small number of cases do the perimeters of the water board areas match those of the river basin districts. Thus, the administration of water management in the Netherlands is not very consistent with the notion of watersheds.¹⁹ So, in planning and plan implementation, water management agencies monitoring the water boards also have to adapt to the way the WFD has divided the country up into river basin districts. No bureaucratic bottlenecks have been made public so far. Nevertheless, the WFD might induce the next stage in the reorganization of the Dutch water board system.

The 2004 Flood Directive is interesting because the

Netherlands pushed extremely hard for it. The territorial logic of this directive is similar to the WFD's logic for transnational river basins and the international cooperation required for their effective management. But effective transnational flood management does not occur automatically. For instance, the Netherlands and Germany have historic differences in their respective views on water issues and how they should be solved. They also have different ideas about administrative responsibilities for these issues and have dissimilar political wills to act on them.²⁰

However, every member state must respect one important principle in the directive: "In the interests of solidarity, flood risk management plans established in one [m]ember [s]tate shall not include measures which, by their extent and impact, significantly increase flood risks upstream or downstream of other countries in the same river basin or sub-basin, unless these measures have been coordinated and an agreed solution has been found among the [m]ember [s]tates concerned."²¹ This principle is of great importance to the Netherlands because it is more or less the drainage basin of the north-western section of the European continent. The Flood Directive implies countries like Germany and France cannot do things upstream that could raise flood risks in the Netherlands, even if the purpose of these activities is to prevent flooding upstream. In other words, to transfer risks across borders is forbidden. This is just one more example of how classic notions of state autonomy have become obsolete, especially within the EU. In the case of water management, this should hardly be surprising, although state sovereignty has been a *casus belli* all over the world throughout history.

The Westerschelde: Quarrels with Flanders

The borders of the Netherlands coincide with a delta that contains four major European rivers: the Scheldt, Meuse, Rhine, and—to a lesser extent—the Ems. There are not many countries in the world where this is the case. Flood protection is a genuine national issue and very high on the national political agenda, especially since 1953. Compared with the vast majority of other countries in the world, the Netherlands makes disproportionately large investments in flood defense and the water system in general. The word *delta* is often used as a prefix in politics, even in those cases where the issue is not water related (e.g., "The country is in need of a Delta Plan for...").

Parts of the Dutch Delta are shared with other countries, though. For example, the Ems estuary in the north is shared with Germany. Another one formed by the Westerschelde in the southwest has been at the center of centuries-old international tension. The Westerschelde is located entirely on Dutch territory but connects the Belgian harbor of Antwerp to the North Sea. There is a long history of conflict about access to this harbor. When Antwerp was conquered in 1585 by Spanish troops during the Eighty Years' War, the harbor was instantly blocked by the northern Netherlands, with dire economic and demographic consequences for the city. This blockade lasted more than two centuries until 1795, when the British took over the blockade as part of their war against France. Between 1815 and 1830, during the period of the "United Kingdom of the Netherlands," the Westerschelde was opened, but it was blocked again by the Dutch in 1830 when Belgium separated from the kingdom. The two countries were eventually forced by the main powers in Europe to sign the Separation Treaty (*Scheidingsverdrag*) in 1839. Determining the border between the two countries was a huge issue. The Dutch did not want Belgium to take control of the Westerschelde, so Zeeuws-Vlaanderen became part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. But the Dutch had to guarantee access to the port of Antwerp. They did, but they insisted on collecting a toll. Eventually, the right to levy this toll was bought by the Belgians in 1863.

Both Rotterdam and Antwerp have become major ports. Rotterdam is by far the largest, but Antwerp is growing faster. Because both harbors serve roughly the same hinterland, they compete with each other. There are serious accusations from Belgium that the Netherlands is blocking the development of the harbor. How? As in other tidal deltas worldwide, the rivers are constantly moving around huge volumes of sand. The Westerschelde is no exception, so keeping the seaway to the Antwerp harbor open is a major challenge. Also, the seaway has to be deepened somewhat regularly because the ships have become much bigger. Currently, the largest container vessels can reach Antwerp only during flood tides. In 2005, the Netherlands and Flanders signed a treaty to deepen the seaway. According to EU environmental law, the loss of ecological value has to be compensated for somehow in the vicinity of the project that is causing this loss. How and where

this will be done is also part of the treaty. Evidence is piling up that this ecological compensation is the only way to get judicial approval for the waterworks.

But the Dutch executive government and parliament have tried to back out of this. This has provoked the ire of Flanders, of course, where the Dutch moves are interpreted as yet another attempt to block Antwerp's harbor. Recently, the Dutch government has come back to the original plans, but a lot of political damage has been done. Moreover, the story isn't over. In spite of parliament's ratification of the treaty with Flanders, there might be a majority that will go against its ecological compensation section. The recent chapters in the Westerschelde story fit into a long history of problematic cross-border cooperation between Flanders and the Netherlands in which the Dutch act as the main culprits.²²

CONCLUSION

The present division of government in the Netherlands was created 160 years ago when the country was on the brink of massive urbanization, industrialization, and territorial integration via massive infrastructure projects. At present, the system of governance is highly fragmented; there are many public entities in the Randstad that are lying on top of one another in a complex pattern. In this decentralized unitary state with a decentralized system of planning, "ordered" spatial development has been brought about on the local level but far less so on the regional level—as is clearly visible in the Randstad, the Dutch "Deltametropolis" par excellence. Particularly at this level, we see very limited integration of urban development, infrastructure development, and the distinctive natural features of the water systems, ecological systems, and the landscape. Interestingly, water management in the Dutch Delta has reached a new level of intensity. The EU is reorganizing water management not according to historic divisions but according to the boundaries of the watersheds. As European law pushes aside national law and national practices, the Dutch simply have to adapt. And although Dutch politicians often complain about European legislation—often forgetting that such legislation is brought about by the complex interplay among European institutions and EU member states—they have been using directives to push for transnational flood management. The Westerschelde example shows that water system management is still a *casus belli* between

countries, and that history continues to play a strong role in these matters.

ENDNOTES

1. Hohenberg and Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1994*.
2. Knapen, *De man en zijn staat*.
3. Faludi and Van der Valk, *Rule and Order*, 33.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.; Toonen, “The Unitary State as a System of Co-governance.”
6. Some say that this act embodies a unified system of planning. Due to loose connections among the three levels of planning—especially between national spatial planning on the one hand and provincial and municipal planning on the other—we prefer the characterization in the main text.
7. For instance, see Spaans, “Recent Changes in the Dutch Planning System.”
8. For an excellent account of how the mechanism works, see Needham, *Dutch Land-Use Planning*.
9. As explained elsewhere in this book, these lakes were formed by peat reclamation on a grand scale.
10. Haran, “Macht in dienst van samenwerking.”
11. Ibid. A factor that contributed to this is the fact that the city of Utrecht (which is 30 kilometers away from Amsterdam) is not a member of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region. Obscure political relationships within the small province of Utrecht are a main reason for this.
12. Glaudemans, *Amsterdams Arcadia*.
13. Huisman, *Water in the Netherlands*, 38ff.
14. Boelens, *The Urban Connection*, 154.
15. De Rynck, *De eeuw van de stad*.
16. Huisman, *Water in the Netherlands*, 90. In 1812, under French occupation, the French system of municipalities was adopted. There were then 1,144 municipalities. In 2010, the figure could drop below 400 as the result of amalgamations.
17. Ibid., 39.
18. Priemus, “Op naar het provincieschap.”
19. Ravesteijn and Kroesen, “Tension in Water Management.”
20. Becker et al., “Transboundary Flood Management in the Rhine Basin.”
21. Directive 2007/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2007 on the assessment and management of flood risks, art. 7, para. 4.
22. De Vries, “Breaking the Deadlock.”