



XPAT MEDIA







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About The Holland Handbook

Welcome, expat, to the Netherlands! We are proud to present you this twentieth edition of *The Holland Handbook*, which we hope will prove to be as good a friend to you during your stay in the Netherlands as it has been to numerous other expats over the past nineteen years.

This book has been compiled for a very mixed group of readers who have one thing in common and that is that they want to find their way in the Netherlands: the expat employee, the expat partner, foreign entrepreneurs, and the many foreign students who come to the Netherlands to train or study. Also for those involved in expatriate affairs who want to keep abreast of the latest developments in their various areas of interest, this book has proven to be a very welcome source of information. Last but not least, this book is a wonderful reminder, including beautiful photographs, of life in the Netherlands for those who are moving on to their next posting – or back home.

The Holland Handbook is the result of the enthusiastic efforts of more than 20 authors, organizations and proofreaders of various nationalities and with very different backgrounds. Most of them are specialists who work for international companies and organizations and who have an impressive amount of know-how when it comes to providing expatriates with information.

The diversity of the editorial team makes reading this book a journey in itself. You will find technical information on practical subjects interspersed with personal experiences, background information and columns – all written in each contributor's personal style. With so many topics to cover, *The Holland Handbook* may at times take an unexpected turn –

however, as this book is primarily meant as a reference book and not as a book to be read in one go, you can simply select the topic you want to read up on, even if you only have a few minutes to spare.

Though *The Holland Handbook* contains a wealth of information, we do not have the illusion that it is at all complete. It is meant as an introduction, or orientation if you will, into the various subjects that can be of interest to you. By referring you to the relevant literature, addresses and websites, we have provided you with as many sources of additional and/or more in-depth information as we can think of. Undoubtedly we have forgotten a few subjects, websites or books. If you feel that we have left out something that should not have been missed, we would greatly appreciate it if you let us know about this, for instance by sending an e-mail to editor@xpat.nl.

We hope you have a pleasant, enriching and successful stay in the Netherlands.

Bert van Essen and Gerjan de Waard
Publishers



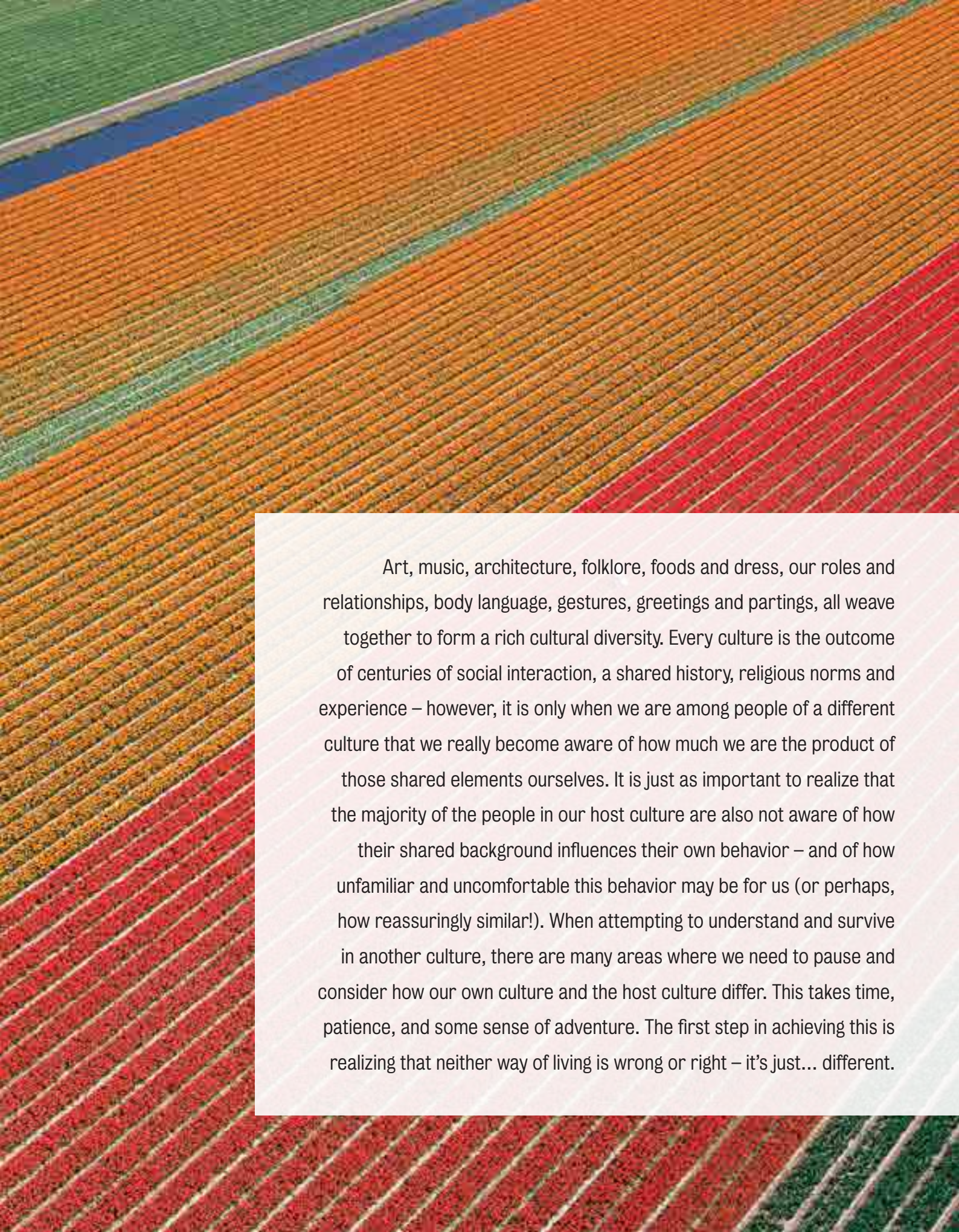
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The Holland Handbook

Your Guide to Living in the Netherlands



Art, music, architecture, folklore, foods and dress, our roles and relationships, body language, gestures, greetings and partings, all weave together to form a rich cultural diversity. Every culture is the outcome of centuries of social interaction, a shared history, religious norms and experience – however, it is only when we are among people of a different culture that we really become aware of how much we are the product of those shared elements ourselves. It is just as important to realize that the majority of the people in our host culture are also not aware of how their shared background influences their own behavior – and of how unfamiliar and uncomfortable this behavior may be for us (or perhaps, how reassuringly similar!). When attempting to understand and survive in another culture, there are many areas where we need to pause and consider how our own culture and the host culture differ. This takes time, patience, and some sense of adventure. The first step in achieving this is realizing that neither way of living is wrong or right – it's just... different.

A New Life in the Netherlands

Adapting to a New Country and a New Culture

BY DIANE LEMIEUX

So you decided to come live in the Netherlands. You may have been tantalized by the idea of exploring old-world Europe with its architecture and museums. Or maybe it was the possibility of viewing kilometers of flower beds and sand dunes from the seat of a bicycle that attracted you to this country. Perhaps the adventure of undertaking something new, something different is what tipped the balance for you. Whatever it was that made you say yes to a move to the Netherlands, here you are and the country is just outside your door, waiting to be discovered.

But now, instead of having time to visit, like a tourist on an extended trip, you are faced with the task of undertaking all of life's daily chores in an entirely new environment. Whereas at home you did most of these things without thinking, you must now spend time and energy discovering where to buy milk and how to pay the phone bill. The climate is different, you need to get used to the types of products that you can and cannot find at your local grocers', and you have to orient yourself using street signs and product labels you do not understand. You suddenly discover that English is used far less than you had expected, and that Dutch is far harder to learn than you had hoped.

This is the process of adaptation, of creating a new home in this foreign country. Eventually you will be settled in a new house, and will have established routines that make life seem more normal; you will have identified a favorite grocery store or market, know where to purchase your home-language newspaper, and may even have discovered a favorite café for your usual Sunday morning breakfasts. This book will help you with this process of adapting to this country you have adopted, however briefly, as your home.

But this book also has a different focus; to describe the culture of the people who live here, as well as the practicalities of life in the Netherlands. The word 'culture' as it is used here is not about the artistic and historic expressions of culture you find in museums. It is about everyday behavior, the glue that binds communities, the norms and values that regulate social life. Like all cultures, the Dutch culture is expressed through language, through social structures and habits, through the way people communicate with each other. This culture is subtle and you will discover it slowly over time, as you increasingly deal with the 'locals'. It is something you will piece together as you interact with your neighbors, as you watch your colleagues at work, from the way you are treated in the shops or when taking the train.

The Dutch, of course, are not explicitly aware of their culture, just as we are not aware of our own. It is only because we are here as foreigners, observing another culture, that we become aware of the differences between the way members of the host culture react, and our own expectations of how one 'should' act. We came, expecting certain patterns of behavior from our hosts: the stereotypes typify the Dutch as being tolerant, frugal and hardworking. From the stories of the red light district you may expect a very liberal society and, knowing of the reputation the country has as a leader in graphic design and architecture, you may expect an innovative attitude to life and work. And yet you will also find conservative attitudes and behaviors.

Dutch society is a highly complex, multi-cultural mix of historic and modern influences, whose daily practice and social behavior may not live up to the values and etiquette that you are accustomed to. Your daily chores bring you into a series of intercultural encounters with the Dutch which sometimes leave you wondering 'what just happened?' It is this process of accumulated 'incidents' that we call 'culture shock' and that is blamed for much of the strife associated with expatriate living.

It is popularly understood that culture shock is a process, containing a set of phases which will all pass, eventually leading you to return to your normal, happy state as a well-adjusted individual. What is not often explained is that culture shock is experienced differently by every individual, depending on their own culture, attitudes, expectations, and previous international experience. Furthermore, moments of frustration and anger may occur at any time during a stay in a foreign country and are a normal part of adjustment. However, culture shock is also a process which can be controlled and minimized.

The advice given by most intercultural or adaptation specialists is to get to know your host culture. Understanding the underlying reasons for the behavior of the Dutch helps to see them as individuals and not as a global 'them'. *The Holland Handbook* has been written by both Dutch individuals and expatriates with years of experience in living with and explaining the Dutch to foreigners. They describe the historic and cultural aspects that influence the behavior you observe, making it more comprehensible and logical. You don't have to like everything about the Dutch culture or adapt to every aspect of it either. But with a bit of understanding and good will, you will most probably come to find at least a few friends in this society, people who will make the experience of having lived in the Netherlands a memorable one.

You Have Arrived in the Netherlands

BY HAN VAN DER HORST

What does it mean to be in the Netherlands? You crawl ahead on the highway behind laboring windshield wipers, watching the ragged horizon of apartment buildings go by as the gray clouds are chased along by a strong south-western wind.

As the slowly moving traffic jams come to another halt, you have the chance to focus on your fellow drivers. Your first conclusion is obvious: you are in a wealthy country. This is evident from the newness of the cars and the number of traffic jams. So much so that radio announcers have long since stopped listing all of them and simply recite the longest. No wonder, as this country welcomed its 8 millionth car in 2017. Meanwhile, as you will surely notice, the government is working hard at widening the highways, or laying new ones – a cause of considerable temporary inconvenience. Towards the end of 2015, for instance, it opened an addition to the A4, which connects The Hague and Rotterdam, thanks to which these two cities – which are only 20 kilometers apart – are now linked by two highways instead of one. Not that this put an end to the traffic jams around Rotterdam, the second largest city of the Netherlands. They will also soon be starting on the construction of a new tunnel underneath the Nieuwe Waterweg (New Waterway), west of Rotterdam, as well as tackling the bottlenecks around Utrecht. Another innovation that is on the agenda is the replacement of gasoline by electricity in order to reduce the emission of CO₂. Meanwhile, the highway network around of Rotterdam appears to be running for the position of national champion when it comes to traffic jams and delays. This is due to the end of the crisis and the recovering economy. And you can be sure that the roads will be becoming even more congested; while there are more people than ever with a job, the Dutch government has also decided to recruit 50,000 Polish employees – sure to add to the congestion, even though a decrease in economic growth has been predicted.

This traffic situation has revived an age-old discussion; the levying of a traffic jam toll – a dynamic toll such as they have in Singapore that makes drivers pay to make use of the highways. Whereby they pay more during rush hour and much less, for instance, at night. In return, the road tax that everyone owes would be reduced, or abolished. ICR would make this all possible, but there are many objections: the average employee, for example, has no choice but to travel during rush hour – should they be ‘punished’ for this? On the other hand, thanks to modern technology, working from your own home and flexible working hours are certainly an option. Plus, it is not only up to the employees to make things work; their employers can contribute to the solution too. Not to mention the introduction of the self-driving car – no longer something from science fiction. *So many heads, so many opinions*, the Dutch say – which means that one thing is certain: before any decisions are made, many years will have gone by. So, for now, we are just going to have to contend with the traffic jams. Incidentally, no need to fear tolls on the highways during peak hours. This remains a taboo, as far as the third Rutte cabinet is concerned. The ANWB, the largest

organization representing the interests of drivers in the Netherlands, expects that travel time will increase by 50% over the coming years. The two billion euros that the government plans to allocate to improving the infrastructure is not nearly enough to improve matters.

Stuck among the traffic are many trucks, which are well-kept and loaded with valuable goods. These goods are seldom raw materials, but rather finished industrial goods. The prominent phone numbers and e-mail addresses that can be found on the sides of the trucks are testimony to the fact that this country has a good network of electronic communication and that the electronic highway is fully operational. You can’t see this from behind your steering wheel, but these past years the chances that the trucks are carrying products that have been manufactured in the Netherlands are small. Already at the start of this century, the Dutch government decided that this country is a post-industrial services economy. The throughput of goods – entering and leaving the country through harbors such as Rotterdam as well as the airports – has become an important sector of the Dutch industry. At the same time, the Netherlands is among the top four food exporters in the world, not to mention being a top exporter of plants and flowers. You will see countless Eastern European URLs on the sides of trucks bearing Eastern European license plates (from Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and Rumania): the wages and taxes in these countries are lower, so that these transportation companies can offer their services at lower rates, forcing more and more Dutch transportation companies to move their business to Eastern Europe. A similar step to what the shipping companies ended up doing during the second half of the former century when their ships started bearing Panamanian and Liberian flags. Some of these changes are contributing to an increasing undercurrent of nationalism and anti-EU sentiments among the Dutch, as membership of the EU is allowing other transportation companies to offer their services at cheaper rates, leading to unfair competition. More and more measures are being taken to ensure that the competition on the road does not become dangerous. For instance, for some time already, all drivers are required to have a computer in their truck that registers exactly how long they drive; if their breaks are too short, they are fined heavily. A new measure forces drivers to sleep in a hotel and not in their truck.

Coming back to the nation’s wealth: there is an apparent contradiction to the perceived wealth, if you look around you. The cars are far from luxurious. You are surrounded by middle-class cars, and you can see how strongly the Asian market is represented on the European car market as, during the past few years, the Dutch have embraced smaller, more economic cars – due to the crisis and the accompanying tight pockets, but also thanks to the temporary introduction of fiscal measures aimed at stimulating the purchase of environmentally-friendly cars. Where are the Rolls Royces, Daimlers, Aston Martins and Ferraris? In the Netherlands, if you want to see one of these cars, you will have to visit a dealer’s showroom. On the road, the most expensive cars you will see are the standard Mercedes, Audis, Landrovers, Volvos and BMWs. And, should you actually spot a Rolls Royce trying to make its way through traffic, you will notice that it does not really command any respect. To the contrary. It will even seem as if the owners of the middle-class cars think it inappropriate for such a showpiece to be on the road and will want to prove, by the way they drive, that they are worth just as much as the fellow in the Rolls. This is even more so among the younger generation. To millennials, a car is something to get from point A to point B and not a status symbol or an expression of your personality – as was sometimes the



case for their parents. Many don't even bother to obtain a driver's license as they are not planning to spend their days in a traffic jam, just to be unable to find a parking spot upon reaching their destination. They prefer public transportation, (electric) bicycles and rental cars. Why buy a car, if you only plan to use it occasionally? In 2018, the new Chinese car manufacturer Lynx & Co decided to enter the Dutch market, offering short and long lease periods for cars. This way, it thinks it will be able to spark a revolution in Dutch transportation.

The overall picture, however, becomes a quite different when you look at the distribution of wealth. The wealthiest 10% of the population owns more than half (61%) of the total wealth in the Netherlands – in fact, one-third of this belongs to the top 2% of this group – while the bottom 60% owns approximately 1% of the nation's total wealth. In 2017, the Dutch became richer – by 53 billion dollars – but almost half of this went to the wealthiest 1% of the Dutch. This trend is further strengthened by the fact something that has been typical to western economies for the last couple of decades; while the economy grows, the wages don't keep up. This is the case for the Netherlands too, even though there are a lot of job openings. Also, the number of fixed employment contracts has been decreasing since 2008, while the number of people working in self-employment, with no personnel (the so-called ZZP-ers), who are treated by the law as entrepreneurs, has grown substantially.

Yet, the Dutch wouldn't be the Dutch if they thought this concentration of wealth in the bank accounts of just a few was alright, and they have been pleading for a raising of the wealth tax. Die-hard socialists? One of them is a card-carrying Liberalist.

Starting in 2014, the economy showed a slight upswing and the asking prices of houses started to go up – after having gone down 20% over the past years. In 2015, this recovery began to show signs of a true economic upswing. Towards the end of 2017, the Netherlands was leading, in terms of growth percentages, in the European Union. One should keep in mind that, in Europe, a growth percentage of 1.5-2% is already considered quite positive. Nonetheless, this economic growth was sustained over 2016 and through 2017. Unemployment has gone down and the social-democratic minister of finance, Jeroen Dijssel-

bloem, gave us a pleasant surprise in his last budget (2016): the national budget showed not a deficit, but a surplus. The same was the case for the 2017 and 2018 budgets. If the current policies are continued and the economy continues to improve, this surplus could continue to grow over the coming years. The politicians have calculated that 11 billion euros could become available for spending or investing – though some economists and the president of the national bank, Klaas Knot, warn against such notions: it might be a good idea to set this money aside for tougher times, which are sure to come again in the future. The Netherlands has had a tendency to spend in times of fortune and to close the purse in times of crisis. The opposite would be more sensible. Through this all, the secularization of this once very Christian country was evident: no one referred to Joseph, who advised the pharaoh to set aside his surplus during the seven fat years, to prepare for the seven lean years that were on their way. The pharaoh appointed Joseph to be his prime minister. But that was 4,000 years ago. In 2018, the political cards are quite different in most countries. Can we expect lean years? Bank president Knot is seriously taking this possibility into account. He is also worried about an over-extension of the real estate market. Thanks to the efforts of the European Central Bank to artificially keep the interest rates at a minimum, mortgage burdens are at an all-time low. The demand for housing has gone up and is back to where it was before the crisis. The increase in prices – initially limited to the larger cities – is now spreading across the country. The wait is now for a new bubble to pop. And aren't stock prices currently too high, thanks to the fact that too many people are looking towards investments to maximize capital yield, now that putting their money in a savings account is unattractive – thanks to the same low interest rates? Are the swings on the bitcoin market – discovered by the average Dutchman as an speculation option – a preview of what is to come?

Han van der Horst (1949) is an historian. Among expatriates, his best-known book is *The Low Sky – Understanding the Dutch*.

Urbanized Center

The Randstad, in the provinces of North-Holland, South-Holland and Utrecht, is strongly urbanized. There are no real metropolises with millions of people in Holland. The largest city, Amsterdam, does not have more than about 853,000 inhabitants. Still, Holland is a highly-urbanized country. Every few kilometers, there is an exit to one, two or three municipalities that have a couple of thousand to not many more than 100,000 inhabitants. These cities and towns all have their own character and are all equally picturesque. In the urban areas, you will find neither hovels nor palaces. What you will find are primarily middle class houses. Even Wassenaar, Aerdenhout or Rozendaal, the Dutch equivalents of Miami Beach and Beverly Hills, look comparatively modest. There is an undeniable air of wealth, but none of the glitter of excessive opulence.

The cities of the Randstad – Rotterdam, Delft, The Hague, Leiden Haarlem, Amsterdam, Hilversum, Utrecht, Gouda and Dordrecht – form an almost continuous circle or half-moon. The Dutch call this a ‘rand’, or ‘edge’, hence the name Randstad. In the middle of this lies a green area, with small and medium-sized villages. Together with the Southeastern area of Brabant (Eindhoven), this area is the country’s economic powerhouse, where the majority of companies are located, money is made and culture is generated.

You will also not find harbors filled with expensive yachts. Those who buy a pleasure yacht in the Netherlands will have a hard time finding a spot for it, as the harbors are all full. Not with luxurious three-masters and a regular crew, however, but rather with motor and sail boats of all shapes and sizes. And should there be one that sticks

out above the rest, chances are it is flying a foreign flag. You would almost think that socialism reigns here, even more so than in the countries of the former East Bloc. A conclusion several conservative as well as liberal bloggers would be happy to support. However, economic statistics show the opposite. When it comes to per capita income, the Netherlands is securely situated towards the top of the European Union. After all, the wage system is pretty balanced and there are no extreme differences.

When it comes to wealth, the situation is different. There are approximately 157,000 millionaires in the Netherlands and one in three households has at least € 100,000 in a bank account. The rest has to make due with less. Often much less. One point one million households have a negative wealth; as in, they are in debt – though, fortunately, this number is going down, now that the economic crisis is slowly receding. Should you run into a Dutchman who complains about the taxes and how the middle class is suffering, ask him to show you the numbers. Whereby it must be noted that the crisis did contribute to poverty. In 2016, there were 1.25 million ‘poor people’ – on a population of 17 million. Of these, 595,000 had been in this situation for more than three years. Before the crisis, there had been 850,000 poor people. In the spring of 2017, it was calculated that the number of children living in poverty had gone up to 400,000. Princess Laurentien, the socially-engaged wife of the King’s youngest brother Constantijn, decided to become involved with their plight and started – with the help of the government – the Missing Chapter Foundation that aims to involve these financially-deprived children in projects aimed at combating poverty among children. State Secretary Jette Klijnsma, of Social Affairs, has made € 100 million available for this project. In the Netherlands, someone who has less than € 973 to spend a month, is considered poor. Couples who have no children are considered poor if they have less than € 1,330. Does this sound like plenty to you? Most Dutch people have high fixed expenses, so that only a modest amount, in the range of € 30-60, remains a week, for food and clothes.





The Netherlands



They Must Be Giants

BY STEVEN STUPP

One of my first observations about the Netherlands was how tall the Dutch are. Actually, tall doesn't do them justice. They are really tall. Damn tall. I am not used to thinking of myself as short; I'm above the average, adult-male height in my native land. But after a few introductions, where I looked up and found myself staring the person in the throat, the point hit home.

According to the statisticians, the Dutch are currently the tallest people in the world. The average height for men is 6 foot, 0.4 inches (1.84 meters); the women come in at a respectable 5 foot, 7.2 inches (1.70 meters). Cold averages, however, don't convey the entire picture. Connoisseurs of numbers know to look at the tails of a distribution. There are quite a few Dutch men, and even a few women, who are over seven feet tall (2.10 meters). This poses some interesting problems. For example, they are taller than the height of many doorways in the Netherlands; I have no doubt that the risk of accidental concussions is now a painful reality. On the other hand, size does offer some advantages: the Dutch are already a volleyball powerhouse, and if basketball ever catches on in the somehow misnamed Low Countries, they'll give the Michael Jordans of this world a run for their money.

What is truly remarkable is that the Dutch are getting taller. While the average height in all first-world countries increased dramatically over the last century, this growth spurt has slowed down of late and seems to be leveling off. The increase in the average height of the Dutch, however, shows no sign of abating. In the last decade alone, the average height of 18 to 39-year-old men and women has increased by 0.9 inches (2.3 centimeters) and almost 0.7 inches (1.7 centimeters), respectively. It is in this context that height has taken on an interesting significance in Dutch society. Enhancing one's stature has become surprisingly important. Techniques range from the large hats Dutch policewomen wear – it makes them appear taller – to surgery.

The Dutch are often critical – and rightly so – of cosmetic surgery, such as face-lifts, tummy-tucks and breast implants. That stated, every once in a while a particularly short Dutch man or woman (typically, shorter than five feet tall or some 1.5 meters) undergoes a fairly radical surgery called the Ilizarov procedure, in which a patient's femurs are broken and the bone ends are separated using a metal frame. Over time, the bones grow together and fuse, thereby increasing the patient's height. Aside from the pain and the risk of infection, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the procedure and the patients usually seem pleased with the results. A similar technique is used in other countries, but it is reserved for cases of exceptional dwarfism. What defines that, I suppose, is a question of perspective.

Male tourists will encounter this quote-unquote difference in perspective the first time they go into a public bathroom. The urinals are mounted sufficiently high on the walls to make it almost impossible to use them, unless you stand on your tiptoes. Unfortunately, there are no boxes or phone books in the bathrooms to level the porcelain playing field and to give foreigners a much-needed leg up! As a conse-

quence, I always enjoy the look of shock on the faces of many male visitors in the Netherlands as they return from the wc (the Dutch phrase for toilet).

An exchange I once had with a Dutch friend is also illustrative. She was reading a Dutch magazine when I suddenly heard "Tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk." (A sound the Dutch like to make. In this case it conveyed sympathy.) "That's terrible," she said. I asked her what was wrong. "There's a letter here from a mother whose daughter is only twelve years old and is already 183," she replied. That seemed unremarkable, so I asked, "Pounds or kilograms?" A bewildered look crossed her face and her head recoiled in shock. It took a few seconds for what I had said to sink in. Finally, she blurted out, "No, centimeters!" (While there is nothing inherently wrong with being very tall, the Dutch mother was concerned that her daughter might be teased or could encounter other social problems.)

That conversation also emphasizes the fact that, no matter how hard you try, you remain a product of your country of origin. People in many countries (in particular, Americans), even if they don't have the problem personally, are obsessed with weight. The Dutch are plagued by their size, although they seem to deal with their affliction better than most. As an aside, the Dutch still don't really have a weight problem. While there are overweight people in the Netherlands (the overall trend mirrors that found in other countries), obesity is less prevalent, and frankly, is never carried to the extremes that occur in places like the United States. How is this possible? Simple: they don't eat as much and what they do eat contains a lot less sugar and fat. If anything, some of the Dutch have the opposite problem with regard to weight. I know a few Dutch women, and even a few men, who are not anorexic, but do have an odd problem: they can't gain weight. They eat lots of junk food and still can't gain weight. What do you say to someone who tells you, with complete sincerity, that they have always wanted to know what it feels like to go on a diet? Welcome to a different world.

Aside from the general improvement in the standard of living over the last half-century and the more even distribution of wealth in Dutch society, the best explanation I've come across for the remarkable growth spurt in the Netherlands is their diet. Specifically, the infant diet. In a laudable program, the government-subsidized *Consultatiebureau* provides regular advice to parents about their children's health and nutrition through four years of age. The objective is to improve the well-being of newborns. It has been an admirable success. The hypothesized impact on the height of the general population is apparently unintended. Alternatively, in a new twist to the age-old, survival of the fittest argument, a few British colleagues once proposed a theory over a couple of beers in a pub. "It's all a simple matter of natural selection," they said. "How's that?" I asked. To which they answered: "What with all of those floods, only the tall could survive."

Steven Stupp is the American author of the book *Beneden de zeespiegel* (literally translated: Underneath the Sea Level). He resided in the Netherlands for several years, and in this book he tells us, with characteristic dry humor, about the cultural shock of living here, while sharing what he got to know about the country and her inhabitants.



The windmills of your mind are not playing tricks on you. You have (or your Significant Other has) accepted that job in the Netherlands. The dust, created by the whirlwind consequences of this decision, has started to settle and you are beginning to wonder what type of country you have come to. Having read about culture shock in the preceding introduction, you now know that the best step towards familiarizing yourself with this new culture is knowing more about it. First off, relax in the knowledge that the Netherlands has one of the highest standards of living in the world. But what about their government and politics, economy, the climate, and their religion? This chapter will tell you about how history and living below sea level helped shape the politics of this nation.

The Netherlands in a Nutshell

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS **STEPHANIE DIJKSTRA AND HAN VAN DER HORST**

HISTORY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE DUTCH OF TODAY

In the Middle Ages, there were many countships and the occasional duchies on the territory of the Netherlands, which for the larger part coincide with the current provinces. By way of a long historic process, the King of Spain inherited all of these in the second half of the 16th century. However, his hands were tied by the many privileges that the cities and rural districts had acquired in the time of the counts and dukes. These had to do with autonomy and other regulations, as a result of which the King was obligated to appoint the local governors from a predetermined select group of persons, recommended by prominent local families.

Philip II's intention was to end these privileges. For his day and age, he was a modern ruler who believed in a powerful central authority that maintained the same procedures everywhere, and who based his decisions on the ethical and ideological principles of one sole religion, that of the Roman Catholic Church. However, in the Netherlands, there was much sympathy for Protestantism, especially that of John Calvin.

Philip II's ideas were therefore not met with much enthusiasm. There was a successful uprising – in which a central role was played by William of Orange, the patriarch of the Dutch royal family. William of Orange was a stadtholder – a representative of the king – in several of these countships, including Holland, and he found he could not agree with the loss of the existing privileges nor with the persecution of the Protestants, which was a central element in the royal politics.

The uprising against Philip II resulted in the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, in which the old privileges and local autonomy remained of central importance. This republic could be seen as a union of states, something like the European Union, in which the independent states worked together closely without relinquishing their sovereignty. In this system, no one could muster enough power to conquer a position of dominance in this republic and, if one was too much of a braggart or made too much of a show of wealth and power, one only succeeded in creating enemies. A politically high-ranking position could only be based on influence and not on power. Even the stadtholders, who were always recruited from the House of William of Orange – and who managed to make their position a hereditary one – were unable to acquire very much power. Though they might have had the authority vested in them by Philip II, this was subject to the many constraints that also came with the system of privileges and old rights.

To get something done in the old Republic required the formation of coalitions with others, while also making sure to not unnecessarily offend one's opponents. Central conditions to being successful were: respect for others, a modest life style, a willingness to listen and the capacity to restrain oneself. Calvinism, the source of this philosophy, was embraced in a liberal way by a majority of the elite, and was very influential.

The Netherlands is no longer a union of states, but instead a democratic state whose unity is symbolized by the King – a descendant of William of Orange's older brother Jan. However, the mentality of the Dutch has remained the same. Even though Dutch society has become strongly secularized, it is still greatly influenced by Calvinistic philosophies. Still evident today is the strong Protestant work ethic characterized by overtones of moderation in all aspects of life, decision-making by consensus, and the stymieing of individualism. The Netherlands is a country in which ostentatiousness and boastfulness are akin to sinfulness, and where orderliness and cleanliness are next to godliness. Showing off your wealth is still considered equal to showing a lack of respect, and secretiveness is looked upon with suspicion – hence the open curtains after dark, serving a triple purpose: to demonstrate a lack of ostentatiousness, the evidence of orderliness and to show that there are no secrets. The Protestant work ethic is further reflected in the way in which the country is run, a system generally referred to as the 'Poldermodel'.

POLDERMODEL

A piece of land that is completely surrounded by a dike for the purpose of protecting it against high waters is called a polder in Dutch. You can find them in all shapes and sizes. The largest in the Netherlands, Flevoland (large enough to have become the Netherlands' youngest province), measures 48,000 hectares. The management of such a polder requires a tight cooperation between the users. The smallest mistake can result in disaster, as a dike is only as strong as its weakest point.

Life behind the dikes has influenced the Dutch culture. It might be going too far to say that it is solely responsible for making the Dutch a democratic people, however, it is clear that they are partial to detailed agreements, to which they must strictly adhere – for all are responsible for 'their part of the dike'. Foreigners never fail to notice the large degree of organization and planning in Dutch society.

The Netherlands Without Dikes

The Netherlands literally means Low Lands: 40% of this nation's land lies below sea level. Dunes, dikes, dams and delta works protect us against the water of the sea and the rivers. Without these barriers, the Netherlands would become largely immersed under water.

NORTH SEA

GERMANY

Middelburg

's-Hertogenbosch

Arnhem

Utrecht

The Hague

Rotterdam

Amsterdam

Lelystad

Zwolle

Assen

Groningen

Leeuwarden

This coming together to reach a consensus, this give and take in the various areas, all characterize Dutch society and Dutch politics. It has resulted in, for instance, the downward adjustment of wage demands, the tolerance of drugs and the legalization of prostitution. This attitude can be summarized in a 'new' word, invented by the British press in 1997: *poldermodel*.

This *poldermodel* has not been consistently popular, however. During the first years of the 21st century, the Dutch themselves started to have their doubts about it – led by the suddenly very popular newcomer Pim Fortuyn, who appeared almost as if out of nowhere in the political arena, but was shot to death on May 6, 2002, before he could truly embark on a political career. Fortuyn and his followers were of the opinion that all this *poldermodel*-consulting and searching for consensus only distracted people from the real problems in society and was keeping them from making important decisions that were long overdue. The economic recession, the increasing unemployment, and the reduction in income of the average Dutch citizen further fed the criticism of the *poldermodel*, and the subsequent cabinets, led by CDA-Christian Democrat Jan Peter Balkenende, were strongly influenced by this train of thought. However, only 10 years later, setting aside Dutch nature in favor of a different approach proved to be harder than initially anticipated and the Dutch re-embraced their old tradition of consultation and detailed agreements.

THE DUTCH POLITICAL SYSTEM IN BRIEF

THE GOVERNMENT

The Dutch government is what one calls a 'monarchical government', meaning that it is not only comprised of the ministers and the state secretaries, but also the monarch, King Willem-Alexander. Another term for describing this is: a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system, whereby the constitution has determined how the powers are divided between the monarch and the other institutions of the government. For instance, the Parliament has been given certain rights allowing them to check the power of the government (listed further on in this chapter). Notably, though the ministers are accountable to Parliament, while the King, who has no political responsibility, is not. In fact, since 1848, the person of the king is inviolable. The ministers are responsible for everything he does or says. This puts him in a delicate position; the King, the Queen and their princesses cannot make any public statements without consulting with the Prime Minister first.

THE CABINET

The cabinet is made up of the country's ministers and state secretaries and its responsibilities are: preparing and implementing legislation, overseeing the local government, carrying out the day-to-day business of government and maintaining international

relations. The observant follower of Dutch politics will notice that the number of ministers tends to change from one cabinet to the next. This can be due to the introduction of a new post that resorts under an existing ministry, but that is considered sufficiently important under the current circumstances to warrant its own minister. Sometimes, the reason behind the addition to, or reduction in, the number of ministers or state secretaries is merely a political one. The numeric distribution of the members of the cabinet must reflect the representation of the coalition partners in the Parliament as closely as it can. Otherwise one of the coalition partners might feel sold short, which could eventually lead to the fall of the cabinet.

THE PARLIAMENT

The Netherlands has a representative democracy and its Parliament (*Staten Generaal*) is made up of two chambers: the Upper House (*Eerste Kamer*), whose 75 members are elected by the members of the provincial councils; and the Lower House (*Tweede Kamer*, or Second Chamber), whose 150 members are elected directly by the people.

The two Houses of Parliament have been given four rights: the right to set a budget; the right of interpellation; the right to put questions before the ministers and state secretaries; and the right of inquiry. The Upper House focuses primarily on the passing of legislation, while the Lower House has been given two further rights: the right of amendment and the right to propose legislation.

Until 1917, the Netherlands made use of the district system for elections. This was then replaced by proportional representation, making the country, province or municipality one single borough. And then there is the quota; if you divide the total number of votes collected by the number of seats in the representative body, you have a quota. In order to win a seat, you must attain this quota. For instance, the Lower House has 150 seats; in order to win a seat, one has to have won 1/150 of all votes. In this system, voters vote for a party that submits a list of candidates. It is possible, however, to vote for a particular candidate. Though this will always count as a vote for the party, those who receive more than 25% of the party's quota for a seat are guaranteed a seat in the Parliament. The other

seats are divided according to the order in which the party candidates appear on the list. Prime Minister Mark Rutte would like to reduce the number of parliamentary members to 100, in order to cut costs. However, this requires an amendment to the Constitution. And this takes time – and requires a two-thirds majority in parliament.

The elections for the Second Chamber (by the people) and the Upper House (by the members of the Provincial States) do not take place simultaneously. In fact, they are separated by a number of years. This means that a government can have a majority in the Second Chamber, without having one in the First, as a consequence of which the ministers can find themselves in a position that they have to make concessions in order to garner the support of the members of the Upper House, who are in the opposition – thus muddying the waters a bit.

THE POLITICAL PARTIES

The Dutch Lower House of Parliament is elected by proportional representation and, since the 2017 elections, there are 13 political parties in the Lower House. Traditionally, the three most established are the PvdA (or Labor Party), a social democratic party that has its roots in the trade union movement; the cDA (Christian Democrats), a merger of three confessional parties that bases its ideas on religious principles; and the vvd (Liberals). In the 21st century, the Dutch voters have become more diverse, thanks in part due to the rise of populist politicians. In the '80s of the previous century, the largest parties – cDA and PvdA – would generally always garner 40 to 50 seats in parliament. However, after the March 2017 elections, the vvd – with only 33 seats! – came out the largest. A record approximately 80% of the voters cast their ballot this time; severely punishing the vvd and the PvdA, in particular the latter, which went from 38 seats to nine. Many of its constituents felt betrayed by the policies that the party had chosen to support the past four years. Also the right-wing vvd of Prime Minister paid a price, and ended up relinquishing eight seats. Still, Rutte managed to label the elections a victory for his party, as the new parliament in general is more right-wing than the previous one. In other words, there was once again majority support for Rutte's



What About My Personal Prosperity?

As we approach the end of this century's second decade, the Netherlands has refound its prosperity. In March 2019, more people than ever had a job. The various sectors had no trouble filling their job openings and a call went out to start targeted recruitment efforts in eastern Europe. Small wonder; 2018 saw the creation of 239,000 new jobs. The Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics calculates that 3.4 billion working hours were clocked in that year. For the first time, the number of job openings exceeded that of 2008 – the time immediately before the credit crisis. Of the 17 million residents, 312,000 were unemployed – and we all earned a total of 362.8 billion euros. Economic growth was at 3.1% and the Rabo Bank predicted an economic growth of 2.9% for 2019. In the spring of this year, however, it was already clear that this may have been a bit optimistic; just as in the rest of the world, the Netherlands is experiencing a slight flattening of the curve, though it is still going up – at a more modest rate of 1-1.5%, which is more in step with the situation in other very developed countries.

Still, there was some overall dissatisfaction. Despite the assertions of the politicians, few Dutch people felt the difference in their wallets, even though the government, in its 2019

budget, had promised that the general purchasing power of the population would increase, primarily through a lowering of the income tax. Which was not borne out by the facts.

This can be explained by two things: one, the growth in employees' salaries is decreasing, as it is in other developed countries. Currently, it is hovering around zero, while the growth in income is being monopolized by the executive top and by shareholders. And then there are a few more issues in the Netherlands. For instance, not only did the credit crisis entail a great number of dismissals, the negotiation position of the employers also became stronger. As the country is known for its strict protection against dismissal – despite a number of changes aimed at offering malfunctioning employees less protection – employers prefer to make use of temporary contracts. Or to hire self-employed persons, on an as-needed basis. During the crisis years, this was easy to do. Currently, their situation is somewhat tougher to maintain due to a lack of personnel, but old habits die hard. Now, compared to the situation before the crisis, the Netherlands has a great deal more independent professionals, who are theoretically self-employed but in reality work for a company. Consequently, the percentage of temporary contracts remains very high.

Secondly, as a consequence of the low interest rates since 2008, the pension funds are forced to maintain the same level of payments, without compensation for any devaluation.

A third element is the raising of the taxes; municipalities have the tendency to increase their local taxes every year. Furthermore, the government has raised the VAT on the basic necessities, while the energy taxes have also gone up. The average Dutchman loses 40% of his income to taxes and levies – without even

taking into account the obligatory healthcare insurance, whose premiums are also increasing quickly, due to the fact that Dutch healthcare costs are rising quickly.

Fourthly, during the credit crisis, the construction industry experienced a slump and, now that the housing market is going through an upswing, it is hard for the contractors and developers to keep up with demand. The result is a sharp increase in house prices (that is greatly reminiscent of the year before the 2008 collapse) and rental prices. This all means that it has become hard to find living space. If you don't have plenty of savings or generous parents with deep pockets, you will find it hard to find a house, certainly in the big cities. Particularly Amsterdam has become so expensive the police officers or teachers who find a job in the city, will not be able to move there. What good does economic growth do you, if you can't even afford a home for yourself? The number of homeless people is increasing steadily and more and more of these people are not living on the streets because of alcoholism, mental illness or addiction, but simply because a divorce or the loss of their job has left without a home. And they cannot count on any support from the government; most municipalities feel that they should be able to 'take care of themselves' and be able to arrange their own home.

Mid and small-sized companies have their own reasons for living modestly and not expanding, even though they are benefitting fully from the new economic growth. After all, they cannot fail to notice that the large, transnational companies are succeeding in largely avoiding paying taxes, thanks to their smart tax constructions and favorable tax laws. The politicians defend these measures, saying that – without these tax measures –

policies. All in all, nonetheless, a coalition of four parties (VVD, CDA, D66 and the ChristenUnie) was required to make a majority.

As noted earlier, there are also several other parties, whose popularity waxes and wanes in accordance with the political climate in the country, and some of which last only a few years, while others have been around for decades. An example of the latter is the D66, a progressive liberal party that was founded in 1966 and which has fruitlessly been campaigning for the introduction of the district system and the election of mayors. Having gone from three to 12 seats between 2006 and 2010, the party went to 19 seats in the 2017 elections, after apparently regaining the confidence of the voters. The other smaller parties that can be found in Parliament are

GroenLinks, the fundamentalist protestant parties SGP and ChristenUnie (with its five parliamentary members now part of the coalition), and the Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD, or Party for Animals).

THE SMALLER PARTIES

The SGP, which has had two or three seats in the Parliament since 1920, is part of national folklore. Its constituents are among the most orthodox protestants of the country; many of whom still reject television and consider the taking out of insurance as an unlawful way of escaping God's hand. Until recently, the SGP also still rejected female suffrage. This past decade, the party and its principles have been under fire, as some of its views are consid-

these companies and their jobs would move abroad. This argument was particularly used to defend the continued taxation of dividend payments on investments held by shareholders abroad only. The protest that this has generated has caused the government to consider introducing dividend tax after all – though impression remains that the tax authorities are imposing full taxes on local mom-and-pop enterprises, while Starbucks gets away with paying nothing.

This is all fueling a discontent that the populists on the right are happily using to their advantage. They blame the cumbersome bureaucracy, the myriad of rules, and the self-delusion of the elite – as well as the European Union, which is continuously chipping away at the Dutch sovereignty. Yet, compared to the United Kingdom, there are not a lot of people here in favor of leaving the European Union. Political newcomer Thierry Baudet has promised a referendum that will allow the Dutch people to vote on a ‘nextit’ or not. Meanwhile, the Dutch are following the developments surrounding Brexit with interest. The charismatic speaker of the House of Commons John Bercow (“order, order”) has become quite loved in the Netherlands as well.

This has all led to a general sense of dissatisfaction, which is greatly to the benefit of the rightist populists.

Incidentally, the Dutch government would be sad to see the United Kingdom leave the European Union. It has strong ties with the country and a Brexit would surely damage the Dutch economy. The Dutch commercial sector is quite worried about this and has already initiated measures to help cope with the consequences, should a form of Brexit be passed that will complicate the contacts with clients and suppliers. It will miss the United



Kingdom for another reason too: the two countries tend to form one front during inter-European consultations and now the Netherlands will have to find new allies in order to counter the muscle of the dominant twosome created by France and Germany.

In conclusion, Brexit and the looming ener-

gy transition (see page 26) are two extra factors that are causing a degree of pessimism in the Netherlands. In March, it became clear that the Dutch population is indeed not particularly optimistic about the future; not only that of the country, but also their own. How about *my* personal prosperity?

ered inappropriately close to Muslim fundamentalism – a globally hot topic at the moment. Still, its members appear to be loosening up somewhat; recently its parliamentary members even appeared in political tv programs – something that until very recently would have been seen as akin to consorting with the devil.

GroenLinks started out as a merger of several parties that represented a combination of greens, pacifists and communists. Its focus is on environmental issues. In the 2017 elections, it grew to 14 seats, thanks to its new young leader Jesse Klaver, who has been compared in the media to both Obama and Kennedy.

The ChristenUnie was founded in 2000, and is a merger between two religious parties. It wants to balance the tendency towards

materialism and individualism, by focusing on a joint responsibility within society for each other. It is a stable party with active constituents, that nonetheless never manages to acquire more than five or six seats.

The Netherlands is the only country in the world with a Party for the Animals; Partij voor de Dieren. The party started with two seats in 2006, but now has five, and its parliamentary members focus on supporting animal rights, fighting the inhumane treatment of animals in the bio-industry, and creating an ecologically-based policy. They are professional politicians who are taken seriously by their colleagues and who have ensured that animal well-being is a recognized action item for the Dutch government.

Concern About the Impending Switch in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is at the doorstep of a complete reconstruction. It has signed all the international agreements aimed at bringing climate change to a halt – and, in order to achieve this, the emission of CO₂ will have to be drastically reduced. After all, as the Dutch government says, the Netherlands has its responsibility in this matter as well.

This will have drastic consequences for the set-up of the country and presumably also for its residents' daily lives. Before 2050, the Netherlands will have to have stopped using coal, oil and natural gas and will have to have switched entirely to solar, wind and perhaps even tidal energy, as well as geothermal energy. And the more controversial source: nuclear energy. This means that the majority of homes will have to undergo drastic renovations. Transportation will have to be electric, and ships maybe too, while air transportation will have to be reduced, unless someone designs airplanes that do not use fossil fuels – which is highly unlikely. The same goes for companies and public institutions. By 2030, the first step down this path will have to have been taken.

The plans for this have been drawn up in typical Dutch fashion; in consultation with all interested parties. First, the Dutch government united representatives of all business and societal sectors who were expected to be able to do something about the climate problem, by inviting them to sit at the so-called sector tables. There were five such tables: Constructed Environment, Mobility, Industry, Electricity, Agriculture and Land Use. Their supposedly independent chairmen all had a commercial, political or highly-placed bureaucratic background – such as the general chairman Ed Nijpels, who, in the '80s of the previous century, had been vvd Minister of Environmental Affairs. The general members were lobbyists, for instance those of the installation technology sector or the environmental movement, and clearly proved their effectiveness. For instance, the representatives of the industrial sector managed to stop a proposal to impose a CO₂ levy. It goes without saying that the representative of the installation technology sector was greatly in favor of having as many Dutch homes as possible switch to solar or wind energy-driven heat pump installations. When, towards the end of the negotiation process, the representatives of the environmental movement left the negotiation table in a huff, it took extensive talks with a number of ministers to develop a proposal that was considered acceptable by all and that could be considered worthy of political debate.

The subject generated several plans that caused great alarm among the citizens. For instance, there was a proposal aimed at forbidding the sales of gasoline and diesel-run cars by 2030 – which would have drastic consequences for the value of the national car supply and would hit the consumers' wallet hard. The idea was also put forward to subsidize electric cars – which currently can only be afforded by the upper middle class. The absence of a proposal regarding CO₂ – which would lay the brunt of the costs on the general population, rather than on large corporations – generated general dismay. Furthermore, it was unclear how the necessary renovation of the houses would be funded,

should the Netherlands stop making use of natural gas. Chairman Ed Nijpels appeared rather lackadaisical on the matter; loans could be made available to help stimulate an increase in the sustainability of homes, which could then be funded through the savings made on energy expenses – which were sure to go down once the houses were snugly insulated and making use of a heat pump installation that was connected to the central city warming system that processes residual heat from industrial processes. Or, alternately, the people could sell the land their house stood on, and then lease it back from the municipality.

These ideas caused quite some unrest among the people. Populist leaders Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet turned this into political capital, by denying the existence of global warming and talking about 'climate insanity' and a half-baked elite that was trying to financially ruin the regular people and in particular the middle classes. At the same time, they said that a small country like the Netherlands would have little impact on this global issue, while the other countries were not doing anything at all – which is a huge, albeit widely-ascribed-to, lie. There was also plenty of criticism from the center-right, being the liberal-conservative vvd, led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte – which the country's largest newspaper, *De Telegraaf*, happily repeated. Similar mumblings were heard from the cda – the vvd's Christian-Democratic coalition partner. The two other partners, the leftist-liberal D66 and the strict-Calvinist ChristenUnie, embraced the climate plans, though the latter really only did this because these plans tied in nicely with their Christian ideas on stewardship.

The general accounting for all this came with the elections for the Provincial States in March. Thierry Baudet, of the Forum for Democracy, enjoyed the greatest victory. Being as how the members of the Provincial States appoint the Dutch senators, Prime Minister Rutte lost his majority in the senate. He will therefore have to court the radical opposition party GroenLinks – which combines a strong leftist ideology with a demand for a strict environmental policy – in order to get its support. This will not go down well with the climate skeptics among his party's supporters – which is bound to bring about further political defeat. GroenLinks is very critical about how the costs are distributed; it is particularly fearful that the most of it will be borne by the ordinary people. It notes that the taxes levied on energy – which constitute more than half of what is being paid – are constantly being raised, while the corporate sector is being spared, based on the argument that otherwise – or so say the politicians – these companies will pick up and leave the country. In other words, says GroenLinks, the big polluters are being spared, while the modest ones are being subjected to taxes, fines and restrictions.

Another question is whether the plans are even practical. The Dutch construction industry is already having trouble keeping up with the demand for new houses, due to a serious lack of personnel. Many masons and other construction workers were fired after the 2008 crisis and, having learned their lesson, have found a new trade and are not planning on going back into construction. Also the installation technology sector does not have enough people to supply the country with new heating installations, leading to long waiting lists and high prices.

In other words, the concern about the impending switch in the Netherlands is well-founded. At the same time, the increasing popularity of climate skepticism is reason for concern. Sticking your head in the sand and looking the other way is sure to create a risk for society – particularly one that has a delta of large rivers for a home. The consequence could be that the Dutch will have to, as the local saying goes, "pump or drown". If pumping is eyed with too much suspicion, then drowning might become inevitable.



The plans to phase out fossil energy has nothing to do with the problems in the northern province of Groningen, which is where most of the country's natural gas is sourced. Extraction started in the '60s and is still going on. Since 2010, the area has regularly been hit by earthquakes, albeit it mild ones that remain below 4 on the Richter scale. Though there have been no human casualties, houses and other buildings have suffered fatal injuries. They have incurred tears and require solid propping to keep them from collapsing. Though the victims – the owners – have been promised compensation, the actual payment thereof has been hindered by political conflict and treacherous procedures. Consequently, the population of this area has lost much of its faith in the government – even though this has not yet led to any fierce protests.

The government has, nonetheless, decided to close down the extraction of gas in Groningen as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, no deadline has been given – which, according to many cynical Groningers, is a clear enough message.

It is becoming clear that the issue of natural gas, earthquakes and the way the people of Groningen are being dealt with is sure to lead to an increasingly serious scandal that will take years to cope with. Whereby it should be noted that the Netherlands can import all the gas it wants, from, for instance, Norway, Russia or Qatar.

Increasingly, it is becoming a movement that represents environmentally-conscious voters who see the climate challenges and the decreasing biodiversity as a danger to the continued existence of the human race.

The Party for Freedom (pvv) revolves around the dissident vvd-member of Parliament Geert Wilders, who, at the start of 2004, was forced to leave his party when he refused to accept his party's policy on non-Dutch nationals and their support for the admission of Turkey to the European Union. Wilders started a new, rightist, political party aimed at enticing Pim Fortuyn-voters (see further on), and his propaganda mainly focuses on his rejection of Islam; he wants to close the borders to newcomers, particularly those of Muslim conviction. He has since received so many threats, that he currently lives under strict personal protection. Other than that, the party appears to have no more than a few items, most of which have barely been thought through. For the 2017 elections, Wilders presented a list of demands that was no longer than one page. Here, he presented himself as a defender of health care and of a pension that would start paying out at the age of 65, which could be financed using funds that would be released by abolishing development aid and art subsidies, and by closing the borders to refugees. Wilders also expects the Netherlands to experience an economic boom, if only it were to leave the EU and the euro. This has led to a relatively considerable success – by Dutch standards. Having won 23 seats in 2010, which were reduced to 15 after supporting Rutte's first unpopular cabinet, it grew to 37 seats in the polls just before the elections – though they ultimately had to make do with 20.

In 2012, a new party, 50 Plus, also managed to win two seats in the Dutch Parliament, which they doubled in 2017, even though the polls had consistently predicted much more. Many of the older generation are furious about the lowering of the pensions and fear that they are the ones who are going to end up paying the price for the economic crisis.

To explain the term 'Pim Fortuyn-voters' (under pvv): in the 2002 elections, newcomer Pim Fortuyn's party – Pim Fortuyn himself was murdered by an environmental activist just days before the elections took place – emerged as the great victor with 26 seats. The LPF, as this party was called, booked a lot of success with its rightist-populist program, which greatly focused on traditional Dutch 'norms and values'. However, within just a few months, the party fell apart due to personal infighting. When new elections were held towards the end of 2002, the party was brought back to just eight seats, and no longer held any political clout. Now, the LPF is no longer represented in the Parliament at all. Political polls show that the voters have indeed turned towards Geert Wilders.

The number of parties in the current Lower House has risen to 16, due to the fact that several rebel members of parliament have left (or been forced to leave) their original parties and start a new one. Which is permitted in the Netherlands. A notable example of this is Geert Wilders' pvv, though the vvd has lost more members this way, as has the PvdA.

NEW PARTIES

In the new parliament, Wilders now has a competitor; the Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy). This is the brainchild of the young intellectual dr. Thierry Baudet, who caused a stir with his Ph.D. thesis, in which he defended the nation state. Baudet considers himself a defender of western civilization, though he abhors modern art and atonal music. He is of the opinion that western culture experienced a decline in the 20th century, and is

The Prime Minister

Mark Rutte has entered his tenth year of being prime minister. On October 14, 2010, he entered his official office – in the historic Tower of the Binnenhof government offices on the Hofvijver – for the first time. However, he left the official minister's home, the equally historic 17th-century Catshuis, for what it was; a place to receive highly-placed guests or to hold meetings. He prefers his homey middle-class apartment in The Hague.

It is quite an achievement to hold on to the position of prime minister for so long in this country that is known for its political divisiveness. A Dutch prime minister does not so much have power, as influence. He is First Among Equals. He is the president of the Council of Ministers and without his colleagues' support, he can't do anything. A Dutch prime minister, after all, leads a coalition of parties, each of

which has its own traditions and issues of interest, but Rutte has shown that he can govern together with leftist as well as rightist parties.

His 'nest' is the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (vvd), which was founded in 1948 as a meeting place for liberal thinkers. Certainly in the current century, nationalism and conservatism have found a solid home within the party – which has generated a host of nicknames for the vvd, such as the 'party of having, getting and keeping' or the 'vroom-party', as it defends the interests of drivers in the Netherlands, who feel they are being taxed to death. Rutte does not make any clearly ideological statements and can get along with everyone. He has been blessed with great social intelligence and loves to say that he is surrounded by good people who want to do good things. However, when there are no cameras present, he has been known to bang his fist on the table and he does not like to be confronted with surprises that require quick improvising to save the day.

Nothing is known about his personal life. He has passed the 50 mark, but still lives in his apartment, alone. He goes out with his best friends. He loves his old mother. He does his own shopping in the neighborhood. Some-

times, he can be found in a respectable café, and he likes to scratch the back of those he needs in an excellent, but modest Indonesian restaurant. His sexual preferences are not really clear. During interviews, he can come across as a thoughtful and responsible patriarch of the people, but most of the time he is easy-to-laugh and cheerful. This is how he gets through the day.

It is getting harder, though. Rutte has survived the economic crisis and is now running the country in a period of economic growth. Nonetheless, his new cabinet – underpinned by the vvd, cda, d66 and the ChristenUnie – is frequently finding itself confronted with all types of hurdles, each of which could prove to be fatal. It also doesn't help that his government has a majority of merely one seat in the Lower House and has just lost its majority in the Senate.

None of these are issues that have consequences for the prime minister himself. It is the specialized ministers that get into trouble, though these issues have been known to cause a shock wave that threatens the entire cabinet. An excellent example of this is the child pardon affair, part of the refugee portfolio. This type of portfolio is known among the Dutch politicians as a headache portfolio.



GENERALLY SPEAKING...

The Dutch are reticent when it comes to refugees. The politicians claim that there must always be a place for the persecuted, but that the country 'cannot simply open its doors to the entire world', in reference to the economic refugees, whom the prime minister refers to a 'seekers of luck'. Asylum seekers are subjected to a prolonged and thorough check and the chance that they will be granted refugee status is marginal. Just like anyone in the Netherlands – regardless of the issue – those who are rejected have a right to appeal before the court, which they frequently make use of. This is often the beginning an endless process – as the state itself also likes to go into appeal if it doesn't like the outcome of a case. In the meantime, the refugees' children grow up in the Netherlands – only to find themselves facing deportation after several years. In these cases, their classmates and teachers often revolt against the injustice, which makes the deportation personal. For instance, a couple of years ago, a little boy called Mauro (who has since become a pastry chef and a father) became the face of deportation, while more recently the Armenian twins Lili and Howick, and the little Iraqi boy Nemr had the dubious honor. They all speak perfect Dutch. They ascribe to the local values. They have friends. Yet they are being deported to a 'home country' where they don't stand a chance. In that case, a pardon is in order, or so says public opinion. Another part of the population – the more rightist part that sympathizes with the populists – is more in favor of inflexibility. According to them, the parents are to blame for their children's problems, not the country, so there is no need to feel sorry for them. As leader of the vvd, the prime minister has to operate carefully, and behind the scenes, to find a solution. With him in the background, a measure was introduced regarding a pardon for minors who were to be deported – for which no one qualified. For instance, all parents who had objected to their deportation in the past – in other words, who had gone to the courts – did not qualify, nor did anyone who had ever missed an appointment. It was, of course, inevitable that people should find out how the pardon was being implemented in practice. This led to a new, retractive, stance in which the State Secretary for Alien Affairs, Harbers, was forced into the role of punch bag. The end result was that Harbers lost his discretionary freedom to allow children who

were to be deported to stay in the Netherlands. He could not even be *requested* to show clemency. And this allowed Rutte to convince his supporters that this sort of thing would never happen again.

ECONOMIC NATIONALISM...

An entirely different example regards the situation surrounding the national airline klm. Already in the '90s, this company embraced the ideas of a free market. Contrary to what was happening in France, state companies were increasingly being privatized, based on the idea that competition and market forces would yield the best product at the lowest price for the consumers. This way, the state lost its hold on the construction industry, on the production of energy – which is now in the hands of a few large conglomerates – and on iconic companies such as Hoogovens and klm. Hoogovens was taken over by the Indian multinational Tata Steel and klm was bought by Air France – though it *did* retain its own management and character. Rutte and the vvd were greatly in favor of this approach. They are big fans of market forces, and feel that, if a foreign multinational takes over a Dutch economic icon – well, tough luck. That's how it goes. That's how the market works.

Yet... mid-2018, the new CEO of Air France klm, Ben Smith from Canada – untouched by a 'nest syndrome' or company traditions, indicated an intention to bring more unity to the company, which would eventually lead to an end to klm's autonomy. This triggered a considerable societal debate that was strongly influenced by the ideas of the company's personnel. This debate brought to the fore several preconceived notions that the Dutch personnel had regarding themselves and the French. They saw themselves as democratic, hard-working and focused on earnings, while they saw the French as authoritarian, headstrong, bureaucratic and only in it for their own honor and glory. It also became clear that the Dutch government had meanwhile acquired more than 5% of the shares, which allowed it to interfere with company policy. The Dutch Minister of Finance, Wobbe Hoekstra, saw himself forced to fly to France, to smooth out the wrinkles this had caused in his relation with his French colleague, who saw this development as a sneaky move. While the French themselves had, in fact, held a firm grip on key industries through, for instance, their hold on Renault or airplane manufacturer Dassault.

This purchase of the shares was, indeed, entirely in conflict with the generally-accepted ideas within the government – yet the prime minister had made it possible, as times are a-changin'.

EVERY NOW AND THEN, MARK RUTTE LOSES HIS TEMPER – ON THE RECORD...

He usually does this when he wants to express the people's anger when it comes to matters that he knows are taking place in the extreme rightist corner. When, in 2017, Dutch people of Turkish descent organized a demonstration in support of President Erdogan, he told them to "get lost" if they felt the politics in another country were of such importance. On another occasion, he expressed a desire to 'beat them up' himself – concluding that he couldn't, "unfortunately". Such bold statements have exposed the prime minister to heavy criticism from the left, and particularly from supporters of a multicultural society. But this is all part of the master plan, as it allows him to demonstrate to his supporters that he can be firm if so required, thus protecting his more right-leaning supporters from populist attack.

EVERY NOW AND THEN, THE PRIME MINISTER MAKES A PROMISE HE DOESN'T KEEP...

At the start of his career, he promised every Dutch family € 1,000. In the fall of 2018, he assured the people that everyone would come out better by the end of the year. These promises bring him temporary success, but in the end the facts catch up with him. However, by then, his remarks are so far in the past that no one really holds him at fault for his flexible interpretation of the facts.

This is how Mark Rutte manages to hold on to his office in the Tower, though he it has been somewhat at the expense of his credibility in recent months. For years, rumors have been circling that he would like to transfer his career to the European Commission, or that he would perhaps even like to become president of the EU Council of Ministers. Though he repeatedly vehemently denies this, the people simply refuse to believe him.

Besides, the voters are slowly but surely tiring of his pragmatic ad hoc approach. They are looking for a leader with a vision and a sweeping narrative.

in favor of using education – and in particular history – to revive a pride in the Dutch nation. He wants to make the executive power stronger and wants to introduce binding referendums so that the government can appeal to the people directly. The party is against immigration, but does not take this as far as Wilders and the pvv, who want to ban the Koran and close all mosques.

In 2017, to everyone's surprise, Baudet won two seats in the parliament, which he and Theo Hiddema, an old dandy known for his bon mots, occupied. In the polls, the support for the Forum voor Democratie started to grow quickly. The first real electoral test was in March 2019, during the elections for the Provincial States took place. Baudet's part came out the largest – which sounds more impressive than it really is, as the Dutch political landscape is so divided that this comes down to 15% of the votes. The outcome of this election has consequences for national politics as well, as mentioned earlier, as it is the members of the Provincial States who elect the 75 members of the Upper House, or the Dutch Senate. The 13 senators of the FvD have now robbed Prime Minister Rutte's party its majority, which means that he will have to seek support for his policies among the parties in the opposition.

Wilders doesn't have much of a retort to this, and his party incurred a heavy defeat as many of his voters switched to Baudet. The Forum remains more popular – if only because of the fact that it has members. They have been joining the party in droves since it was established, and by the spring of 2019, its membership had already exceeded 230,700 – which is more than the membership of the Liberal Party vvd, the country's largest party in parliament. However, it does not yet have a network of local departments, like the traditional Dutch parties do. And its top layer has reserved a lot of power for itself, virtually insulating itself against the risk of removal. Any members who have created problems have been evicted without pity by Thierry Baudet – barely to the detriment of his position in the polls. He continues to garner support for his stand that the political power is in the hands of a small group of 'cartel parties' that scratch each other's back, even though there is always one that is officially given the position of 'opposition'. The Forum for the Democratie, says Baudet, could break this open and release the iron grip that the parties have on the country. Which is why the party is greatly in favor of binding referendums. At the

same time, Baudet wants to increase the executive power in relation to judicial power. In 2017, he openly expressed admiration for authoritarian leaders such as Hungary's prime minister Orbán and for Vladimir Putin – one thing that he actually shares with Geert Wilders.

A party on the other end of the spectrum, DENK, is a party that represents the interests of foreign nationals and immigrants and that is of the opinion that Dutch society is marked by institutional racism. It has been formed by two dissident PvdA parliamentary members with a Turkish background. They separated from the socialist party and their primary supporters are Turkish Muslims. Its leader, Tunahan Kuzu, is a kindred spirit of the Turkish president Erdogan, leader of the conservative Islamic AK party. In 2017, it won three seats, and many consider DENK to be a prime example of the populist parties that are currently in the Dutch parliament. Denk also participated in a number of municipal elections, and with quite some success. It was able to contribute one to three members in a number of municipalities – and that is not so bad at all for a party with a limited constituency.

There is also another new party, that focuses on ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, called BIJ1. It is strongly Caribbean in nature, though it explicitly states that is for anyone who wants an inclusive society. Time will tell whether BIJ1 will manage to establish a place for itself in Dutch politics. Its main competitors are those predominantly white parties – such as D66 or Groenlinks – that claim to support the same wishes.

FORMING A CABINET

Because there are so many political parties in the Netherlands, there are numerous coalition possibilities. Consequently, several months generally pass after the elections (in 2017, this was almost 7 months), during which, after extensive deliberation, a cabinet is formed with a program to which the majority of the members of Parliament can give their approval.

Does this mean that the Netherlands does not have a government in the interim? Of course not. After the cabinet's resignation, the Prime Minister tenders the resignation of the entire cabinet – which the King 'answers' by requesting the cabinet to stay on until there is a new one. The incumbent ministers then continue to run





the country – until the new cabinet is formed. However, decisions that might lead to extensive discussions in Parliament are delayed until the new cabinet is in power. A chamber majority places them under a ‘controversial banner’ and they are then taken off the agenda because they are part of the ‘formation process’.

THE THREE LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

The Netherlands not only has a central government, but also provincial and municipal governments and the water boards. The central government occupies itself with matters of national interest. The provincial governments concern themselves with social work, cultural affairs, environmental management, spatial planning, energy and sports. The municipal governments occupy themselves with traffic, housing, social services, health care, sports, culture, the water supply, public schooling and recreation. In 2013, the second Rutte cabinet placed a number of care and social measures with the municipalities, based on the idea that local governments are closer to the people, making it easier to create tailor-made solutions of high quality. There are, however, a lot fewer funds available for this than the government had at its disposal for these same measures. However you look at it, the daily life of the citizens has become increasingly important to the municipalities – though this has not yet led to an increase in interest among the people for local politics. They are still more focused on ‘The Hague’ and the government. Even when voting in municipal elections, they tend to let themselves be led by their national political preferences, rather than any opinion on the quality of the local leaders. Though there is an increase in local parties, this seems to be fed by people who are worried about the influence of populists on a national level.

In order to help fund these activities, the provinces and municipalities receive government funding and levy their own local taxes. You can read more about the local taxes that may affect you on page 100. The last elections for the water boards took place in 2015, at the same time as the elections for the Provincial States – but yielded no major shifts.

VOTING AND STANDING FOR ELECTION AS A NON-DUTCH NATIONAL

Voting

If you are an EU citizen, you are allowed to vote in municipal elections under the same conditions as Dutch nationals. This means that you must be at least 18 years of age on the day of the election

and you must be a resident of a particular municipality on the day on which the candidates are nominated. If you are a non-EU national, you may vote under the same conditions; however, you must also have been a legal resident of the Netherlands for a continuous period of at least five years. To vote for the water boards, you must be living in a ‘watership’, at least 18 years of age, and have Dutch/EU nationality or – if you are of another nationality – be a legal resident of the Netherlands. For more information on whether you can be considered a legal resident for voting purposes, you can call the Ministry of Home Affairs (see the end of the chapter).

If you are a member of consular or diplomatic staff, you are not allowed to vote in the Netherlands, nor is your spouse/partner or children (if they are members of your household).

If you are an EU citizen, and a resident of the Netherlands, you are allowed to vote in elections for the *European Parliament* provided you do not vote in the same election in your home country, are 18 years of age or older, and are not disqualified from voting in the Netherlands or your home country.

Only Dutch nationals may vote in elections for the Second Chamber of the Parliament (the members of the First Chamber are elected by the members of the Provincial States) and the Provincial States.

Standing for Election

You can stand for election to municipal councils under the same conditions as stated above for voting. The only difference is that you must satisfy these conditions not on the day of nomination, but on the day you are admitted to the municipal council. You can also stand for election in Dutch elections to the European Parliament, provided you do not stand for election elsewhere.

Only Dutch nationals may stand for election for the First and Second Chamber of the Parliament, as well as for the Provincial States.

ECONOMY

The Netherlands is in the world’s top ten in export volume and ranks in the world’s top twenty for GNP, even though, in terms of square kilometers, it is one of the smallest countries in the world. Though it is true that, in population density, it is on a par with countries such as India and Japan, nonetheless this only amounts

to a population of 17.3 million.

GATEWAY TO EUROPE

The Netherlands owes its favorable ranking, among others, to its advanced transportation infrastructure, with, at its hub, both the port of Rotterdam (the largest European seaport in the world in terms of container activity) and Schiphol Airport (the third largest airport in Europe). Also the country's advanced telecom infrastructure and its extensive (hi-speed) railway network help support the Netherlands' position as 'the gateway to Europe'.

Traditionally, the Dutch economy has been one that other countries are eager to participate in, which has been reflected by the huge investments made in the country's economy and companies over the years. This willingness to invest in the Dutch economy is largely due to the country's stable and flexible work environment (thanks to the Poldermodel), its central geographic location, its well-educated multilingual work force and the amount of know-how available here.

Individuals, often enticed while traveling here to stay and find a job, are as motivated as companies are to settle in the Netherlands, particularly since the opening of the frontiers within the European Union. The Dutch government, recognizing the value of top-notch specialists who contribute to the knowledge pool and economy of the Netherlands, has also introduced a number of tax measures aimed at making it more attractive for non-Dutch nationals to come and work here (you can read more about this in chapter 5). Also the bureaucratic red tape has been simplified, reducing the number of hoops employers and employees have to jump through to obtain the necessary papers.

RANDSTAD

After Paris, London and Milan, the Randstad (the area including, and between, Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) is the largest economic urban area in the EU, measured in terms of gross domestic product. This is largely due to the strong presence of financial and commercial services; the motors of Dutch economy.

SECTORS

Though the economy of the Netherlands is relatively resilient, it is nonetheless dependent – as a country of trade – on the economic situation in the rest of the world. It might not drop as quickly as the overall economy, but it will not bounce back as quickly either, due to the relatively high costs of labor (wages and pension premiums). The most important trade commodities for the Netherlands are machinery and transportation equipment, followed by chemical and mineral products.

As the 'gateway to Europe', the Netherlands' most dominant sector is the services sector, accounting for approximately two-thirds of both its GNP and its work force. Another dominant sector is that of mineral extraction, particularly the production of natural gas. Other sectors that consistently contribute to the Dutch economy are the restaurant, trade, and repair services sector, and the health care and related services sector. A final important sector is the agricultural and food sector; it generates approximately 10% of the GNP; 75% of the agricultural produce is exported.

The Dutch economy benefits greatly from the fact that the world's largest chemical companies are based here, while the Netherlands is one of Europe's largest suppliers of high-tech goods for both the industrial and the consumer market. As mentioned earlier, the Netherlands is also Europe's second largest producer of

natural gas, as witnessed by its reserves in the north of the country, while Rotterdam imports and refines huge amounts of crude oil that is shipped to the rest of western Europe. Thanks to these offshore installations and refineries, the Netherlands has many activities in the oil and gas industries, including a strong research and development technology and a specialized construction industry.

A little aside: in confirmation of the country's reputation as the nation of tulips, the Netherlands exports 4 billion flower bulbs a year, mostly tulips. Thirty-five percent of these remain within the EU, while 65% leave the EU. Of the total bulb exports, 15% go to the US, and 11% to China.

WELFARE

All in all, this makes the Netherlands a wealthy country, with a high per capita GDP boosted by social security measures guaranteeing a minimum income, health care and education.

CLIMATE

BORING!

Unfortunately, the Netherlands simply does not have the most exciting of climates. Granted, there are magnificent winter and glorious summer days but, sadly, not very many. This can be very hard to take for those who have not grown up here (and even for those who have!). Many expats comment on how the gray and dreary skies and constant rainfall make it all that much harder to be motivated to get out of bed in the morning and that the only thing that makes it even harder in the winter is that the sun comes up so late. So, what are the facts and how do you get through this?

WINTER

Let's take December. During the first almost two decades of the 21st century, the average temperature during the month of December was 4.4° C – hardly North Pole conditions. The coldest December of this century so far was in 2010, when the average temperature was -1.1° C (also not very shocking). Of course, when it does decide to dip below zero, it goes way down below: in the winter of 2011-2012 and the next, the temperature somewhere in Lelystad did go down to a frigid -22.9° C...

And how about January? January is known as the month of ice – but does it deserve this name? Not according to the Dutch Weather Institute (KNMI); only the occasional January has been good and cold – notably towards the end of the previous century, giving the Netherlands its last Elfstedentocht (11-town ice-skating tour that only takes place when the water freezes over on all the lakes and canals in Friesland solidly enough to support thousands of ice-skaters and spectators).

In fact, it can be concluded that Dutch winters have been heating up over the course of the past 100 years. This is blamed on the uncommon strength of the western winds, which allow the warm temperatures of the seas (7° C) to influence the winter temperature, rather than the winds that come in from the north-east. Unfortunately, this also means more precipitation, which, in combination with mild winters, amounts to an awful lot of rain. Hence the dreary, bleak, rainy, wimpy winters.

SUMMERS

And the summers? The Netherlands is known for its wishy-washy summers in two senses; warm and dry one year, cool and wet the