

Less!

Speech of Prof. Roel Bekker, University of Leiden (Albeda Chair), former Secretary-General for Government Reform in the Netherlands at the OECD-symposium in Paris 'Building a Government for the Future: Improving Policy Performance and Managing Complex Challenges' on 12 November 2013.

The Dutch Government has established some 30 years ago a very interesting agency, The Research Institute for Social Policy. One of their regular reports is about trust in government. The overall result is not very surprising: trust in government and especially in politics is low. Like in other countries. And the reasons are more or less the same as explained in the wonderful study of the Kennedy School with the ominous title 'Why people don't trust government'. But there is an interesting chapter in the same report, about the appreciation of our public services. It turns out that people are rather negative about government as a whole but rather satisfied about the specific public services they receive themselves. Health care policy is considered to be bad, and of course trust in the minister of Health is low. But my own doctor is great and the treatment I had in my hospital was excellent. The same goes for the school system which in general is called insufficient. But not the school of my children. That's an excellent school. People seem to be very negative about government or public services in general but rather positive about the specific services they get.

Government faces this kind of paradoxes today. The list is almost endless: people want less civil servants but more policemen, more nurses, more teachers, more inspectors. People want less regulations for themselves but a lot more regulations for their neighbours, and not only regulation but also strong enforcement of the rules in that case. They want more roads,

but taxes are too high. To quote the Kennedy-study: 'We've got to fix the deficit. But the taxpayers shouldn't have to pay. The government should have to pay'.

It's a good time for cynics. But politicians cannot afford to be cynical, at least not in public.

In general the political point of view in many civilized countries is that we have too much government. That has already been a theme in the days of Ronald Reagan and Margareth Thatcher and was identified with the more right side of politics. But also on the left side there is a growing awareness that government has become too big and that there has been too much confidence in government as the final solution for problems in society.

Less government is a popular message. But that's in general. When it becomes more specific, it's a little harder. A politician has to create hope for the future. He has to promise more efficiency, better regulation and stronger enforcement concerning malpractices, fraud or misbehaviour. And no dangers: dangers arising from environmental problems, from infectious diseases, from climate changes, from financial and economic turbulence, from disturbing public order and terrorism, from difficulties in society related to immigration. A politician has to show action and responsiveness.

The media play an important role in this. A few years ago John Lloyd wrote an nice book, with the title 'What the media did to our politics'. Not very much good, was his opinion, to summarize it. Politicians and media live together in a deadly embrace which is fired up by the real time influence of an anonymous public expressing their opinions and demands, and even threats, on Facebook, Twitter or whatever social medium that is available. Internet has made traditional boundaries something of the past, enabling citizens to gather information from all over the world and communicating with whoever they want at whatever time they

like. The government is expected to react very fast on everything that appears in the media or on internet, whereby no time is left for proper investigation or quiet deliberation.

Politicians suggest that they can do the magic trick of promoting 'less' on the one side and 'more and better' on the other. Till they hit the wall and till they realise that magic is something for wizards, not for administrators.

We can see today that these developments affect government immensely. Representative democracy seems to lose ground with a population that wants direct response and doesn't believe in authorities anymore. Referenda have become popular, but also opinion polls that inform us on a daily basis about the preferences of the general public. Extremist parties of the right and the left gain enormously, promising that they can protect us from all threats by emphasizing old fashioned values and the merits of strictly nationalist policies. And by consequently avoiding any real responsibility, in order not to spoil the rosy future they promise.

As I have said in my inaugural lecture as professor at the University of Leiden, with the meaningful title 'Dangerous liaisons', politicians tend to become more and more 'political'. Whatever that word exactly means, it's about emotion, about instant response, about the eagerness to be re-elected. It's about appearance, about their role as actor on the scene, which is so very nicely illustrated by the title of the popular BBC-program: The Politics Show. They emphasize their responsibility to address all the problems society is putting on their desk. They often blame the civil service for being 'not fit for purpose', as British Secretary John Reid once said about the Home Office. They complain about the lack of political sensitivity among civil servants and want to appoint more people from their political colour in the highest ranks. The first thing newly elected prime minister of Australia Tony Abbott

did was to sack three distinguished secretaries who were considered to be too much affiliated with the leaving government. Frank and fearless advice from the civil service, it's traditional role, is not so much appreciated anymore, politicians rely more and more on a growing number of special advisers.

Civil servants on the other side know that they easily can be blamed and are not willing to become the scapegoat. Wait and see, is their motto, restricting themselves to their formal duties. They have to struggle to be heard, as is clearly showed by the mission statement former British permanent secretary Michael Bichard once developed for his ministry. 'To remain the most important adviser of the minister', it says. Perhaps that's even too optimistic.

The gap between the political system and the administrative system is growing, to the detriment of good government which used to be shared so successfully by the two systems in the past. The capability and effectiveness of tackling problems are decreasing. Interesting is to see that only in very stressful situations, like the banking crisis, the two systems come together in an effective way, taking very drastic decisions like in the Netherlands buying overnight the ABN AMRO bank following unprecedented procedures.

What could be elements for government in the future?

First about what we should not do: it's my conviction that the solution is not to ask for more Leadership, as is so very popular among politicians and consultants who claim that all problems would disappear if only a new Churchill or a new Kennedy would be in charge. I belong to the leadership-sceptics and agreed strongly with the excellent book of Barbara Kellerman of Harvard, with the significant title 'The End of Leadership'. She clearly demonstrates that today's problems are too complicated for Big Leaders and that we have

to look for better, more sophisticated ways of tackling problems. Where networks, partnerships, negotiating, mediating, taking two steps forward and one step back are more prominent than the Big Decisions taken by the Highly Charismatic Leader. Pragmatic incrementalism, a traditional characteristic of civil servants as I have demonstrated in a book about remarkable civil servants of the last 40 years. A book in which I used the metaphor 'marathon-runners' to describe civil servants, in contrast with 'sprinters' as politicians can be characterised.

But what could we do? Of course we have to pay attention to some big issues. These are about the principles of democracy, the legitimacy of government and the authority of its actors. And the role of stabilizers in society, which we used to have in the past in the form of unions, the church, political parties but which disappeared or lost their significance in a huge wave of information, individualization and internationalization. The electoral system today doesn't play anymore the role of providing us with a stable government consisting of 'the best and the brightest', as David Halberstam once described the team around Kennedy. In our country for instance we had six cabinets in the last 10 years. Funny and not so funny whimsical politics can easily find a place in the parliamentary playground. A Party for the Elderly and a Party for the Animals are the latest offshoots of our electoral process which already had produced rather large new parties on the extreme right and left. But I'll not go into the details of this discussion which is a necessary one, but also time consuming and difficult.

I will focus on the issues that are a little more manageable. It's about the initiatives you can take as civil service itself.

My first remark has to do with the structure of government. It's very striking that while the world has changed immensely, the structure of government in all civilized countries has remained more or less the same. We have a specific number of about 15 ministries with almost everywhere and for a long time the same scope. Compartmentalised and bureaucratized as they are, they are not integrated enough to tackle the real issues of today. I think that is one of the biggest problems we face, the more so since the political system basically cherishes the compartments. Politicians want to be recognized as the hero in a clear area, not being dependent on others or sharing their success with colleagues. Asking politicians to abandon the traditional domains is like talking with a turkey about Christmas. As permanent secretaries we didn't wait for political decisions but took the initiative ourselves to tear down the walls between the ministries.

We used management as a lever for change. We for instance introduced shared service centres with a governmentwide responsibility for ICT, HRM, outsourcing, security, offices et cetera. The offices of ministries were merged so that all ministries came into walking distance of each other.

In HRM we used to appoint civil servants in the service of a specific ministry. We changed that, civil servants are now formally appointed in the service of government as a whole. We also changed our system of job descriptions. We had more than 30.000 different job descriptions on a total of 120.000 jobs, which is the maximum of inflexibility. We abandoned that and now have less than 50 job descriptions, thereby increasing flexibility enormously. Working in projects and programs became the rule more than the exception.

My second remark: our system of government is an excellent system for 'more'. But it's not so very fit for implementing 'less'. Less also means 'different'. 'We need a different attitude

and new ways of working, new ways of policy making and new organizational patterns. I give you some examples.

We had a rather successful program for deregulation which started by developing a good method to make visible the amount of regulation and to reliably count the number of rules. It took several years in which officials tried all the tricks to decrease regulation formally while increasing it in reality. But after this initial stage it shows to have results. The Regulatory Impact Assessment, a compulsory test for all new regulation, is a powerful instrument.

'Less' was also the keyword in a very important exercise high ranked civil servants did in which we reviewed 20 of the most important policy areas on their possibilities to save money. That has produced a wonderful, eighteen volumes big guidebook which politics could use for sensibly cutting expenses. Could, I underline that word, in fact they did a lot of gymnastics to escape the difficult and inevitable choices. Saying 'no' is much more difficult than saying 'yes'!

Interesting is also that in implementing 'less' and 'different' we in our country do not so much rely on formal legislation but very much on agreements with a lot of parties in society. The present cabinet for instance has reached agreements about health care, education, housing, energy, social policy in often very long and complicated negotiations with all kinds of parties in society: unions, employers, doctors, hospitals, housing corporations, teachers, you name it. Of course these agreements are fragile and not so binding as a contract or a law. But they have impact, it's not so easy to escape. In order to reach these agreements you need a very broad and sophisticated network and a thorough knowledge of all the sentiments in a specific sector. Civil servants have to play a big role in this process, since they

represent the continuity , have the expertise and are mostly considered as neutral and to be trusted. That's by the way not something that exists because of sheer luck, you have to invest in that qualities and work hard to get a position.

'Less' and 'no' are words that civil servants must dare to say. To be heard, civil servants have to be highly skilled, very competent. Respected in their policy areas as the dominant experts. We lost that a little, we undervalued the experts, by strongly promoting general managers and a lot of mobility.

Some more words about the civil servants.' Less' is also a keyword when we talk about the number of civil servants. It's not a big political risk to announce less bureaucrats. A lot of countries implemented huge cuts in the size of their staff in the last 10, 15 years. I was in charge of the Reform program in the Netherlands from 2007-2011 and had the flattering nickname 'the butcher of The Hague' which clearly demonstrated what aspect of my work was considered to be the most important.

There is a good case for less civil servants. But you cannot go on with reducing the staff with 3 or 4 % annually. After having cut inefficiencies and red tape you have to develop more intelligent ways to streamline and improve the administration. And especially: if politics want less civil servant, there is at the end of the day only one sustainable strategy, and that is: less policy.

Evidence based policy is my final point. That sounds trivial. Of course everybody is in favour of good evidence. But in practice it turns out differently. Fact free politics started as something of a joke in describing behaviour of the political actors in the politics show. But it has become a new label for those who want to abstain from the experts of the past since

they are seen as obstructors of real and rapid change or opponents of the deeply felt sentiments of the people.

It's remarkable that a lot of countries are missing a reliable and respected public infrastructure for the knowledge needed for policy making. Sometimes its independence is questionable or its quality substandard. Or it's losing impact due to political manipulation, as has been the case in the climate debate. Sometimes it doesn't even exist because there is no funding available. The field of public administration itself is a clear example. We lack reliable, comparative data on the functioning of government and the performance of the administration as was so clearly demonstrated in the OECD Value for money-project. Developing a good knowledge infrastructure is in my opinion an essential condition for good government, including the discipline to listen to the results.

To conclude. We live in interesting but also complicated days. Problems in society are big and wicked, and in many cases don't fit into the traditional pigeonholes of our government. Government itself is facing some kind of identity crisis, in which politicians have to find new ways of accommodating the very unpredictable, daily changing wishes of the general public, amplified by a great variety of media. A general public that is equipped with a lot of information and communication power. Civil servants have an own responsibility for developing their position and their craftsmanship, their values.

Politicians and civil servants have walked hand in hand for many years, but the gap between the two is widening. In order to be better prepared for the serious and elusive problems of the future, we need changes in almost all the aspects of our system: the structure, the people, their functioning, their skills. More government is not the solution as we have seen, less is a good motto. But that means also: different. A competent, independent and loyal

civil service that dares to speak truth to power, that dares to say no, is essential for achieving this.

Am I optimistic? Sometimes not, but mostly yes. I feel in that respect supported by someone who cannot be suspected of any love for big government, Thomas Friedman. I quote from his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*: 'One of the most important and enduring competitive advantages that a country can have today is a lean, efficient and honest civil service'. I couldn't have said it better.

Thank you very much.