Pioniers in schaduwbeeld: het eerste parlement van Nederland 1796-1798

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SUMMARY

Pioneers in silhouette. The first Dutch parliament 1796-1798

This monograph is the first book-length study to explore the history of the first National Assembly, the second National Assembly and the Constituent Assembly of the Batavian Republic. Taken together, I refer to the three representative bodies that gathered in The Hague between 1 March 1796 and 4 May 1798 as the first Dutch parliament. The word ‘parliament’ in this phrase is to be understood in its present meaning of a representative assembly composed of elected members acting without an imperative mandate.

I wanted to write a history of the first Dutch parliament that would not only be understandable to the small group of Dutch late eighteenth-century specialists, but could also be read and understood without much previous knowledge of the era and the subject matter. In order to achieve this goal I have given considerable attention to the sometimes complex political context of the Dutch Revolution. In doing so, I have sought to find the right balance between accessibility and scholarly relevance by combining the perspectives of political history and political culture.

This has resulted in a book in which prosopography, institutional history and constitutional history are brought together with a study of daily parliamentary practice, parliamentary rules and conventions, the deputies’ images of self and other and their views on key concepts such as party and representation. The political behaviour of the first Dutch members of parliament has been analysed by looking at their backgrounds, expectations, prejudices, ideas and conceptions of politics, without neglecting the immediate revolutionary circumstances.

I have opted for an approach that is both chronological and thematic: all chapters have different subjects, but the book as a whole is structured largely chronologically. Each of the thematic chapters serves a specific purpose and can be read as a stand-alone narrative. Where possible I have also sought to engage with the existing corpus of literature on parliamentary culture, thus allowing comparison with parliaments in other countries and ages.

In the first two chapters I discuss the conception and the establishment of the first National Assembly (Nationale Vergadering), as well as the revolutionary circumstances under which these developments took place. Chapter three is a survey of the backgrounds of the members of the first National Assembly, who were decisive in the creation of the parliamentary culture existing during the years under scrutiny. This chapter starts from the idea that in a study of parliamentary culture the personae behind the members of parliament matter. The relatively narrow timespan of this book offers an advantage in this respect. In existing studies covering a longer period of time
members of parliament often feature as rather one-dimensional characters who serve the sole purpose of demonstrating the dominant parliamentary culture at a given time. In Pioniers in schaduwbeeld I have attempted to offer more up-close-and-personal portraits of some of the more important deputies.

In chapter four I address how the Batavian parliament worked. By examining the ways in which written and unwritten rules were created in the first National Assembly, I have approached one of the major themes of the history of parliamentary culture. Other subjects include the staff of the parliament, the role of parliamentary commissions, and the procedures with regards to debating and voting. I have given particular attention to the differences and similarities between the deliberative practices of the Batavian parliament and those of both the Dutch Old Regime and the French revolutionary parliament. This chapter serves overall to shed light on the mechanisms at work behind the debates presented in the following chapters.

Chapter five serves a similar dual purpose. In the first place it is intended as a starting point for what I hope will become a more integrated view of the political party in Dutch history. The advent of the first modern Dutch political party is usually associated with the formal establishment of the Anti-Revolutionaire Partij in 1879, or with the foundation of the Algemeene Kiesvereeniging in 1868. These events should no doubt be seen as milestones in the Dutch history of party politics, but they mark neither the beginning of political theorisation on ‘party’ as a phenomenon, nor that of party formation in practice. In the fifth chapter I argue that the Dutch revolutionary era should no longer be ignored by students of the formation and development of political parties. Subsequently, I show how the supporters of two Batavian parties organised themselves, how they shared principles, and how they themselves understood the nature of parties. An important advantage of this approach is that it allows me to single out the deputies who rejected all party affiliations whatsoever. Whereas this group has played virtually no role in earlier histories of the Batavian Republic, I argue that independent members of parliament should be taken into account as leading actors on the late eighteenth-century parliamentary stage.

The sixth chapter contains an analysis of the different sets of ideas about what the creation of a representative assembly entailed and what the future parliament should look like. These ideas surfaced during the debates leading to the Ontwerp van Constitutie (draft constitution) of 1797. By means of a study of the Dagverhaal (the parliamentary proceedings of the first National Assembly) and the minutes of the meetings of the constitutional commission, I discuss (amongst other issues) two debates: whether the legislative power was to be the only constitutional power to represent the people, and whether the parliament was to be unicameral or bicameral.
In August 1797 the Ontwerp van Constitutie was put to the test in the first referendum ever held in Dutch history. In the months preceding the plebiscite the Dutch witnessed a political showdown without precedent. In the first section of chapter seven I focus on the parliamentary dimension of the confrontation between supporters and opponents of the constitution; furthermore, I examine the ways in which members of parliament were involved in the extra-parliamentary yes and no campaigns. Political conflict is also given centre stage in the remainder of this chapter, in which I give an account of the road to the coup d’état that was, during the second National Assembly which followed the rejection of the Ontwerp van Constitutie by the Dutch people, staged by the Republican party. This coup, which took place on 22 January 1798, was intended to strengthen the power of the parliament vis-à-vis the provincial governments. It was also an attempt to break out of the straitjacket of regulated parliamentary politics as it had taken shape in 1796. The eighth chapter is devoted to explaining the position of the parliament – now named Constituent Assembly (Constituerende Vergadering) – within the new revolutionary order that had arisen from the coup. Expanding on chapter six, I also offer an analysis of the place of the legislative power within the framework of the 1798 Dutch constitution.

In these two final chapters I have partially opted for a more event-oriented type of history writing. In doing this, I have attempted to show that more attention to cultural aspects of the political domain (as presented in the earlier chapters) can have important interpretative implications for political history as a narrative. I believe that ultimately this return to the narrative history of the Batavian Revolution is of fundamental importance, if only because otherwise students must continue to depend on older text books that have been considered outdated by several generations of historians.

Possibly the most crucial revision of the narrative of the Batavian Revolution relates to a theme to which I return frequently throughout this book: it was far from clear what it meant to be a member of parliament for the Batavian citizens who had been elected to this newly created office. There were several possible answers to this question, which became manifest for the first time after the elections for the first National Assembly in March 1796, when some of the elected citizens refused to take office. Historians have never paid sufficient attention to these recalcitrant Batavians. Reluctance to take office, however, shaped significantly the debates in which members of parliament reflected on the responsibilities belonging to their office. This theme was prominent also after the coup of 22 January 1798, when many of the sitting members abandoned their office.

The remaining deputies struggled with the fact that there was a discrepancy between how they saw themselves (as conscientious and steadfast public servants) and how they were increasingly seen by the public (as usurpers lining their own pockets). The most concrete manifestation of this
struggle is the decree of 4 May 1798. With this resolution, which historians have too easily dismissed as arising from a lust for power, the Constituent Assembly transformed itself without elections into a constitutional Representative Body (Vertegenwoordigend Lichaam). The history of this resolution, in which the French envoy Charles Delacroix played an important role, is analysed in the last section of chapter eight. The adoption of this resolution marked the end of the first, pre-constitutional phase of the Dutch parliament and with that the main body of this book. The story of the first Dutch parliament was given a meaningful conclusion when the Representative Body was dissolved as the result of a new coup. The epilogue makes clear that the decree of 4 May played a crucial role in the legitimation of this coup, and that contemporaries understood this decree in fundamentally different ways.

For this book I have made use of administrative source material, egodocuments, pamphlets, and political periodicals, but by far the most important source was the aforementioned Dagverhaal. The contemporary proceedings of the sessions of the parliament constitute a unique source that has never been fully appreciated. Nowhere else in the sources do historians find a similar opportunity to see an extraordinary generation of eighteenth-century politicians enter into dialogue with each other about all that they deemed important. One of the aims of this study was to reveal the exceptional richness of this source and lead the way into what will hopefully become a fruitful new line of research.