Out of character: debating Dutchness, narrating citizenship

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7. Enculturation: testing malleability through cultural demands

After 2002 civic enculturation tests would become a central focus of attention in debates about governmental effort to instrumentalise Dutchness. Of course, a whole host of other policies and regulations have been at play in the post-2002 contentions, but civic enculturation tests are the core, and in some sense, sole program geared explicitly towards the deliberate assimilation of individuals into the national fold. It thereby forms the core policy measure through which post-2002 governments sought to remedy the failure of integration and attend to the public that Fortuyn had made visible. Civic enculturation became a highly valorised object of public concern as newly elected governments would have to demonstrate their ability to get enculturation right from now on. As has become clear in the previous chapter, this implied overseeing a break from a multicultural past in the most deliberate way possible. In an essay based on a public lecture entitled ‘The rebuilding of the Netherlands’ the new leader of the christen-democrats, Jan Peter Balkenende, set out such a position:

Cultural openness, respect for opposing opinions and attitudes cannot and should not lead to tolerance and indifference. Integration and sociality can only take shape through acceptance of the principle of the Dutch rule of law and adaptation to the substantive components of Dutch culture. The values grounded in the Constitution are its core. Communalism [gemeenschapszin] presupposes common, shared values. This means that multiculturality as such is inadequate as a basis for integration. (January 25 2002, NRC Handelsblad) (#106)

As the prime minister of multiple, post-2002 governments, Jan Peter Balkenende would become the spokesperson for a politics of moral revanchism. Reiterating the moral-dispositional connotations that were already built into the notion of ‘actief burgerschap’ throughout the 1990’s (Bovens & Hemereijck 1996; Koenis 1997; Tonkens 2008; Ossenwaarde 2010; Van Houdt 2014) the idea that citizenship was first and foremost concerned with the normative and moral consensus at the basis of public life came to inform the policy agenda of civic enculturation (Driouchi 2007: 95). Access to citizenship would come to be discussed in the terms directly linked to a wider discourse on the lack of shared norms and values. If strangers were to become citizens, it was cultural assimilation to such norms and values that was in order (see also De Leeuw & Van Wichelen 2012; Boomkens 2010).
Although the motif of failed multiculturalism runs through much of the discussion over civic enculturation in the immediate months and years after Pim Fortuyn’s assassination in spring of 2002, its significance for debates over enculturation courses became particularly effective as political parties responded to the parliamentary investigation report delivered by the so-called Commission Blok. In many ways similar to commissions in other European polities – most notably the Parekh Commission in the UK (Parekh 2000) and the Stasi Commission in France (Stasi 2003; see also Akan 2009) – the Commission Blok was ordered by parliament to evaluate the integration policies of the preceding decades. With much of parliament having already taken firm positions on the failure of integration policy, the commission’s report played a curious role in the consolidation of political cleavages and electoral dynamics at the time.

The Commission operated under intensive political and public scrutiny. As we have seen, the very notion of a ‘Fortuyn revolt’ implied that the failure of integration and the political blame for that failure concerned the democratic legitimacy of the political system as such. The triangle of discontent-in-old-neighbourhoods, political-denial-of-problems and a danger-of-extreme-popular-reaction had been the discursive sine qua non of integration pessimism for a long time already. With the spectacle of his rise and tragedy of Fortuyn’s assassination, this articulations of the problem gained immense public significance.

The Commission’s work would demonstrate whether the political system – through the highly esteemed conduit of a parliamentary investigation\(^{15}\) – would be able to do what it had putatively failed to do for all too long: present the realities behind the political upheavals in earnest. Thus, the Commission operated in a perilous situation: it would finally bring out the facts without prejudice or bias, while what could count as those unbiased facts could, for a large majority of parliament, only point out the utter failure of past governmental action. It is also in the light of this peculiar situation that the concise, yet intricate conclusion of the commission can be best understood: ‘The Commission has determined that the integration of many allochthones has been completely or partly successful and this is a formidable achievement. Both of the allochthones in question and the receiving society.’ (Commission Blok 2004: 520) (#107). The Commission went on to point out that the ‘formidable achievement’ of successful integration could not be attributed systematically to governmental policies. In short: integration had been a

\(^{15}\) Members of parliaments have the constitutionally recognised right to call for a ‘parliamentary investigation’ that, if affirmed by a majority, is executed by a committee of parliamentary representatives who have the right to conduct interviews under oath.
success, while integration policy had little to do with that (Commission Blok 2004: 520-522).

This rather unremarkable and predictable conclusion of any policy evaluation exercise – policy cannot be shown to have systemically caused the desired policy outcomes – was nonetheless highly significant and was extensively covered in news media and discussed in parliament. For those political parties that had explicitly set out to demonstrate a veritable break with the failed past – in particular SP, PvdA, VVD, and CDA – the conclusions of the Commission indicated that more needed to be done in order to bring not-yet-integrated denizens and citizens into the national fold. Through its quite critical reception in parliament, the effect of the Commission’s work turned out to be an unexpected reversal of its conclusions: integration was still considered a failure, the Commission Blok has not been able to bring the reality of that failure into view because they followed all too studiously the parameters of integration policy explicated in a now rejected political period and, crucially, the lack of policy effects in the past should raise, not lower, expectations of new policy efforts. Much of the debate over *inburgering* following up on the contentious conclusions of the Commission Blok centred on what precisely this extra effort should be. If a break with the past was needed, it would be imperative to demonstrate that a resolutely different policy direction would be taken.

**Not so new: learned citizenship**

If the instrumentalisation of Dutchness within civic enculturation policy would constitute a radical break from the past, it should be clear what kind of past is at stake here. It is therefore important to emphasise that the very idea of civic enculturation and its institutionally concrete manifestation – class room courses supervised by instructors; textbook curricula; questionnaires and language assessments – have nothing whatsoever to do with the political upheavals at the start of the millennium.

The idea that aspirant-citizens need to demonstrate – in some form or fashion – that they are integrated in Dutch society has been part of regulating access to Dutch citizenship from its very beginning (Van Oers et al. 2010: 22). There is no period in time in which the goal of integration did not inform the reasoning over and justifications for access to Dutch citizenship (Jones 2007; Schuster 1999; Heijs 1995). The notion of a test in which such integration could be ascertained has also been part of such regulation for at least three decades (Van Oers et al. 2010). The pedagogical understanding of Dutch citizenship – that it is something to be learned – is nothing new either: *burgerschap* has appeared as a
learned and civilised set of dispositions in the individual for quite some time, rendering the idea that it must be *learned* to be obtained almost self-evident. Nor is there anything new about the idea that a failure of integration policy should be repaired by the introduction of enculturation courses geared to individualised applicants.

Civic enculturation in the forms of targeted courses emerged out of an earlier recognition of failure, as it took shape after the so-called national minorities debates of the early 1990’s. The authors of the WRR-report on the minorities policies (WRR 1989) and the evaluators of the minorities debates held across the country (Van der Zwan & Entzinger 1994) were themselves at the forefront, advocating the introduction of mandatory enculturation courses as part of the fundamental change in governmental policy. What was new here was the idea that government should become actively involved in *organising* and *regulating* the instruction prior to a test. Government should step up its efforts to integrate aspirant-citizens and claim responsibility for the effectiveness of that integration policy. As Arie van der Zwan explained in an interview with NRC Handelsblad in June of 1994 after having published a report with Han Entzinger (1994):

> If one *demands* newcomers to adapt to Dutch society and let them achieve something by employing them, one takes away the odium of profiteers who just come in and use our institutions and provisions. So that will also affect the population, who will be more inclined to accept them and will deem this to be a just and equitable approach. In this way people can earn their own presence. (June 14 1994, *NRC Handelsblad*, italics added) (#108)

Van der Zwan and Entzinger formulated their argument for a mandatory enculturation program in line with discourses concerning the activation of unemployed and welfare-dependent populations (WRR 1990; Engbersen 1990). Their report is built around the notion that too much assistance and leniency towards those at the margins of society will unintentionally reinforce their dependence and passivity. Thus, their plea for a combination of labour market flexibility (allowing employers to hire newcomers at sub-minimum wage) and mandatory enculturation follows closely the more general tenants of the citizenship narrative: active citizenship appears as the disciplined ability to be autonomous, active and self-regulating (Van Gunsteren 2009; Ossenwaarde 2010).

One way of describing the shift in civic enculturation policy after 2002 would be to state that it has moved from a program that is concerned with socio-economic lags of newcomers to one that is concerned with cultural ones (see WRR 1989; Rijkschroeff et al. 2003; SCP 2003; Entzinger 2006). While this is not entirely inappropriate I want to argue that a simple dichotomy between ‘economy’
and ‘culture’ obscures much of what we need to grasp in order to understand the post-2002 contentions over Dutchness in civic enculturation programs. At the very least, it is important to recognise that the distinction between ‘economy’ and ‘culture’ is itself informed by certain ideas about what it takes to be and become Dutch. Van der Zwan and Entzinger’s argument is certainly not agnostic about Dutchness. In fact, they suggest that a mandatory program will allow newcomers to demonstrate that they have earned their right to be part of the nation. Dutchness is not absent from access to citizenship here: it appears quite forcibly as the notion that one cannot become part of the nation without effort and strain, without a test of perseverance. If *burgerschap* is understood to be something that can only be acquired by being learned, then the argument for mandatory enculturation cannot be understood as being ‘economic’ at the exclusion of ‘culture’.

When considering Dutchness, then, it is not all that significant whether the enculturation program proposed by Van der Zwan, Entzinger and others was mainly geared to socio-economic achievement and mobility as opposed to more explicitly ethnocultural justifications, which became more salient after 2002. The distinction between socio-economic and ethnocultural integration measures is used all too indiscriminately as a way to qualify the tendencies of integration policy (see Entzinger 2013), which is not to say that it is entirely meaningless. What may be more significant is the fact that already from the early 1990’s the idea of civic enculturation is part of a more general movement in which contractual conditions are introduced in relation to citizenship: access to full inclusion are made dependent upon achievements and activity of the *individual*.

This contractual logic is much more than a bleak, technocratic approach in which rights must be earned in exchange for effort and success in the labour market. With the contractual logic comes a far less ascetic, deeply emotional narrative about the effects of these policies on both the constitution of the newly residing persons as well as the feelings of justice and acceptance of the native population. As Van der Zwan and Entzinger argue in the quote above, those who are already Dutch citizens ‘will be more inclined to accept them [aspirant-citizens] and will deem this to be a just and equitable approach’. The newcomer becomes more active and emancipated, while the native becomes less anxious. The new contractualism is explicitly meant to transform the moral economy of both newcomers and native. What’s more, their relationship is at once concerned with socio-economic *and* ethnocultural issues. The socio-economic dependencies and dynamism of cultural others appear as particularly relevant to the potentially racist and xenophobic anxieties of the native, Dutch population.
The recognition that newcomers are being disciplined and made to do their best should arouse feelings of esteem for the new co-patriots and thereby make manageable the ethnicised tensions that had become visible during the ‘national minorities debate’. The ‘socio-economic’ effort of newcomers is thus imagined to have distinctly ‘cultural’ effects: namely creating assurance among the natives that newcomers could come to belong among ‘us’. Far from being a non-cultural program of incorporation, the very idea of a civic enculturation program is sharply inflected by notions of what it is specific about Dutch citizenship and what will enable a more peaceful and ordered process of integration: national inclusion is dependent on demonstrable effort, autonomy and economic self-reliance. In other words, what seems most significant for questions of Dutchness is the fact that civic enculturation courses and their tests were introduced from the outset as a mandatory program that would inculcate activity and self-reliance in newcomers. It is precisely by being mandatory and demanding that civic enculturation programs test what needs to be tested: the individual inclination of the aspirant-citizen to take their life into their own hands and attain access to national citizenship through concerted effort. As shall become clear, it is the mandatory character of the program that would later become the main focus of discussion and contention.

David Pinto, vocal critique of the minorities policy of the 1980’s, aptly articulates the complex way in which mandatory enculturation will include newcomers into a community of citizens for whom cultural identity becomes irrelevant and individual empowerment the only relevant horizon. In a piece that advocates a far more extensive, European program of migration control and nationally-based assimilation efforts, he writes:

Right from the start, policy makers that shaped the minorities policies in the eighties should have given attention to cultural differences. Had they done so, they would have prepared both the immigrants as well as the receiving society for the cultural and religious differences, to which immediately must be noted that it is first the migrant who should make the effort to fully participate in his new environment. This should have been done through a mandatory enculturation contract. […] The enculturation program is bound to a deadline and results. After the enculturation period one can no longer appeal to specific policies [Pinto implies group-based policies for ethnic minorities singled out by government] for foreigners. For possible assistance or welfare, foreigners from that moment on need to go to the general institutions that are there for all residents in this country without regard for differences in race or colour. (January 5 1995, NRC Handelsblad, italics added) (#109)

Pinto’s specific recommendations were not followed, but in his critical engagement he does explicate succinctly what is at stake in inburgeren more generally: through a concerted and disciplining effort focused on the cultural distance of the newcomers to Dutch society the particularity of Dutch civic life can be learned and
newcomers will attain the ability to be autonomous individuals, subsequently losing their ability to make claims on the basis of the ethnic identities that they will have shed in the process of enculturation. Policy battles and public debates continued over how such a governmental effort would be best implemented and what it would take to get newcomers to develop these dispositions of Dutch civic life. The discussions mainly focus on two interrelated axis: language proficiency and labour market mobility (Bjornson 2007; Driouichi 2007). What remains intact is the very idea that Dutch citizenship is something to be learned and must be learned in order for integration to be a success and popular discontent to be managed.

It is from these initial suggestions that Roger van Boxtel, the social-liberal Minister for Urban Problems in the purple coalition government, started implementing a civic enculturation program that became the centre piece of the integration project. As has been exhaustively shown (Schinkel 2007; Scholten 2011; Uitermark 2012; Duyvendak et al. 2013), the crux of these new governmental efforts was a complicated shift from an emphasis on group-based categorisations and provisions towards the integration of individuals (see also Contourennota 1994; De Zwart 2012). This shift is complex, because – as the quote from Pinto illustrates – the emphasis on individualised responsibility does not end or contradict the emphasis on the cultural distances between collectivities of newcomers and natives. In fact, the move towards individual responsibility and the ostensive departure of a minority groups approach itself comes out of a specific understanding of how and why newcomers are culturally different from natives and why integration will only take place through a process called inburgeren (see also Schinkel 2013).

This is indicated, most of all, from the importance that is attached to the difference between western and non-western allochthones. Far from a limited geographical meaning, these terms and their differentiation involve a host of different connotations of which territorial descent is only one and from which racialised differences are hardly lacking (Schinkel 2013; Yanow & Van der Haar 2013). The vocabulary of autochthony comes to provide an overarching language for talking about a whole host of different differences (Geschiere 2009). Whether dealing with regional, religious, national, civilisational or racial categorisations, the allochthonous difference is mainly articulated as a matter of moral-dispositional distance to Dutch life and ethnic occlusion from it (see also Rath 1991). Thus, the move towards individual responsibility does not in any way usher in a non-racial, colour-blind, group-less, strictly republican or culturally agnostic mode of citizenship politics.
The product of minister Van Boxtel’s efforts can be found in the *Wet Inburgering Nieuwkomers* (1998; coming into effect on April 1 2003), stipulating that all newcomers should undergo a test – *inburgeringsonderzoek* – to determine the extent to which they are dependent on others, able to gain full employment and speak Dutch (Van Oers et al. 2010). On the basis of the outcomes, applicants would be demanded to take a course suited to their circumstances, taking into account an intricate string of possible exceptions. The consideration of such exceptions – sometimes stemming from international law and supra-national agreements – demonstrate unequivocally that the courses were always already understood to be disciplining checks on the access to citizenship and meant to evoke effort on the part of newcomers. If the courses were not deemed to be restrictive and instead conceived to be group-specific rights or accommodations for newcomers, legal exceptions would have been far less significant.

Civic enculturation is conceived in terms of responsibility and effort on the part of the newcomer from the start. The idea that *inburgering* can only take place when individual newcomers take up responsibility cannot be attributed to an assimilationist turn after 2002. The question how such responsibilisation worked out and what its contradictions might be, was also already articulated in this same period. For instance, J. H. Sampiemon, renowned journalist and public commentator, concluded in a critical op-ed on migration policy:

> But with that deterring policy the emphasis on the undesirability of the stranger became all too strong. The associated civic enculturation policy subsequently laid the responsibility for success rather strongly with the foreigner, without making clear that successful enculturation is an effort of both sides and that a reward is in order. (September 26 1997, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#110)

The program developed from the early 1990’s has been explicitly justified as a break with a welfarist and all-too-caring past and an attempt to usher in a more demanding and conditional incorporation of others into Dutch civic life. It is the question of this break that inflects much of the subsequent contention over *inburgering*.

**Making assimilation new**

The coalition government of CDA, VVD and LPF and, more specifically, the Minister of Alien Affairs and Integration Rita Verdonk were keen on demonstrating that they would introduce a more demanding, more restrictive, less accommodating and less multiculturalist policy approach. They would be able to make a break with the past. This meant that the implementation of the *WIN* – the new program of civic enculturation – was accompanied by conspicuously monoculturalist justifications.
indicating what that break might entail. The goals of *inburgering* were no longer merely being expressed in the language of labour market flexibility and individualised responsibility that were deemed central to success in Dutch society. Instead, justifications were predicated by concerns of societal cohesion, national identity and cultural assimilation (Sleegers 2007; Driouichi 2007). The already established discourse of achievement and dynamism became embellished by an explicitly cultural supplement of national commonality and unity. ‘National culture’ and the need to instrumentalise it in civic enculturation courses would come to figure as the *extra* that was needed after it was – yet again – concluded that integration has failed. This *extra* presented a need for enforced and closely scrutinised inculcation of norms, values and customs that merited the emblem of ‘national’, ‘core’, or ‘Dutch’ (Spijkerboer 2007). As Spijkerboer demonstrates (2007), parliamentary debates over the new policy plans hardly included any prolonged or significant disagreement over what actually constituted the Dutchness of Dutch citizenship. The suggestion that certain norms, values and customs marked out Dutch life passed more or less self-evidently. Their place in the enculturation program was justified in a more explicitly monoculturalist fashion and in light of a surprisingly non-individualised, non-demonstrable, supplementary goal: restoring and protecting national unity (Driouichi 2007; Vermeulen 2007; Groenendijk 2005; Spijkerboer 2007).

Minister Verdonk became the main protagonist of a more extensive, restrictive and demanding program of civic enculturation, the *Wet Inburgering*, that would come into effect as of 2007. I’ll focus here on the persona of Verdonk, because so much of the policy redirection was discussed as part of her broader political mission of radically changing the access to Dutch citizenship. Breaking with the past was not merely a matter of instrumentalising Dutchness, but also of specific personas who, in lieu of Fortuyn, would be able to break through the inertia of policy development. Whether civic enculturation could be considered to have changed was not merely a matter of the kinds of measures introduced but also invested in the persona of Verdonk. Of course, Verdonk did not author the new legislation single-handedly – that is not the reason for focusing on her role as protagonist. Rather, the significance that was attached to her persona demands that we take serious the extent to which the policy became identified with the person (Oudenampsen 2010).

A number of features of the legislation should be noted in particular. The new law sought to extend the mandatory program to so-called ‘oldcomers’ – people that have been indefinitely residing in the Netherlands but whose integration is nonetheless questioned. Moreover, the mandatory enculturation program would
now have to be concluded by taking and passing an integration exam. The obligation to not only participate but also pass an exam can be understood as an extension of the already established practice of naturalisation tests, which were formalised and far more strictly enforced with the *Wet Inburgering Nieuwkomers* in 2003 (Van Oers 2008). The obligation to pass an integration exam also pertained to Dutch citizens of the Caribbean territories, which underscores the way in which the policy changes have been centred on the presence of others on the European territory. Aspirant-residents would have to pass the integration exam abroad with the introduction of the *Wet Inburgering Buitenland*, thereby preventing that immigrants, most notably aspiring spouses of Dutch residents, would already be residing in the Netherlands before having demonstrated sufficient integration. Naturalisation was to be affirmed through a naturalisation ceremony, in which loyalty to and identification with the Dutch nation should be expressed (Verkaaik 2009).

In the main, the changes and extension first introduced under Minister Verdonk have made the enculturation program far more demanding and exclusionary (Van Oers et al. 2010). Naturalisation rates have decreased rather dramatically. The program has also begun to function more directly as a selection mechanism for immigration as both access to Dutch citizenship and legal residence have become much harder to obtain. Civic enculturation has effectively become an extension of border control and international management of populations. Strikingly, both access to citizenship and legal residence have become more similar as both become articulated in a discourse of national-cum-cultural protection. Under the stress of new assimilationism, the difference between the status of citizenship and legal residence blurs. Under the tenure of Verdonk, reasons for granting Dutch citizenship and reasons for allowing one to reside on the European territories of the Kingdom begin to resemble each other more closely: what matters for both is whether someone is deemed capable of individually and independently managing one’s existence within a national environment that is typified as a cultural apex of individual autonomy and self-regulation. Thus, the mere territorial presence of culturalised others becomes the root problem and granting such others rights before integration has taken place is deemed to exasperate that problem.

Following this reasoning, it can be better understood how formal Dutch citizenship was presented by Verdonk and other protagonists of new assimilationism as the eventual reward for the non-integrated individual’s efforts to demonstrate her capacity to learn, her willingness to redirect her way of life, her aptitude for change under instruction, and her active participation in a ceremony of incorporation. Therein lies the gradual but crucial shift in the policy program from...
the late 1980’s onwards: integration policy develops from a set of measures conceived to assist, hasten and direct the process of assimilation – whatever that is deemed to be – to a set of measures conceived to demand, test and ascertain the contractual privilege to reside on Euro-Dutch soil and partake in the dynamism of its economy and public sphere. The initial program of contractual citizenship becomes deepened by withdrawing more and more rights as they come to be presented as undue interference, assistance and aid. Real integration, then, is only achieved and demonstrated if the aspirant-native is capable of passing achievement tests in a situation devoid of rights-cum-assistance. The ‘grand prize’ at the end of this assessment is access to Dutch citizenship (Van Oers 2012; Hurenkamp et al. 2011: Van Houdt et al. 2011). The rights associated with legal residence and full citizenship should only be made available to those who have demonstrated that they could also succeed without them.

Seen in this way, it would be a mistake to understand the gradual but definite deepening of contractual citizenship in migration and citizenship policy as a reversal or revolution of political rationale (cf. Vasta 2007; Van Oers et al. 2010; Vermeulen 2007; Entzinger 2006). Of course, the neo-nationalist turn in the civic enculturation program is relevant and cannot be understood without taking into account the watershed of the Fortuyn revolt. Without it, the protagonists of post-Fortuyn governments, such as Verdonk, would not have been able to articulate how their politics differed from the past. Monocultural justification help to do just that: to articulate a deepening contractualism in terms of a policy redirection. Introducing explicit concerns over national unity, loyalty and cultural assimilation into citizenship politics does not represent a qualitatively different mode of governance. In fact, the extension and changes made under Verdonk rely directly on a contractual logic and cultural particularities that typify Dutchness in accordance with that logic: achievement, self-reliance, malleability, dynamism, individual autonomy (Van Huis & De Regt 2005; Fermin 2006; Spijkerboer 2007; Van Reekum & Van den Berg forthcoming; Suvarierol 2012). The introduction of monoculturalist concerns over national commonality has helped to justify why contractualism should be further deepened, not why the established rationale of the program should be qualitatively changed. Nonetheless, the rhetorical trope of such change is, indeed, highly significant for those who have sought to take in the position of new assimilationism. It is therefore all the more significant how the public debates in response to Verdonk’s new plans performatively affirm (1) the suggestion of such qualitative change; and qualify (2) the status of the nationalist elements associated with her political mission.
Contesting Verdonk’s mission

In response to the new plans, there emerged a variety of reasons to be pessimistic about Verdonk’s efforts. Such pessimism may be associated with support as well as criticism of the neo-nationalist turn associated with Verdonk. Such arguments for pessimism repeatedly deal with the question if it will be practically possible to impose, teach and test sufficient cultural integration. Reasons for pessimism extend from abstract questions of what it means to demand cultural adaptation to a whole series of bureaucratic, administrative and governmental strictures being put forth. The latter often have to do with the ways in which Verdonk’s plans extend to very different people in very different circumstances that nonetheless needed to be dealt with equitably. The actual implementation of the new policy plans quickly ran into trouble as it became almost impossible for those responsible, particularly municipalities and school administrators, to oversee all the different categories and exceptions. Also, the ambitions to oblige the so-called ‘oldcomers’ and certain Dutch citizens to partake in the program ran into legal troubles as questions of discrimination and contradictions with other laws and regulations were raised (Vermeulen 2007). Take, for instance, these concluding statements of a critical editorial commentary in the NRC Handelsblad:

Strangers can be denied entry if they do not pass the new test. And that in itself will be quite a bit of work. For legal residents [ingesetenen] there can only be a sanction if they receive welfare payments. Let’s keep it to this for the time being and not rummage over everything. The trouble with Verdonk is that she wants to do too much at once. Her focused effort on civic enculturation isn’t wrong at all. Her insight is all the more lacking. (December 8 2004, NRC Handelsblad) (#111)

It was the vague category of ‘oldcomers’ that was particularly discussed in these kinds of interventions as it turned out to be rather complicated to single out the correct target population (and not introducing discriminatory regulations). Various selection criteria were floated in the period leading up to the new legislation, but many were criticised because they would include the ‘wrong’ kind of people of whom it was unreasonable or inappropriate to demand enculturation. So, not only is the demanding and impeding character of the new policy clearly articulated – it continuously appears as an invasion into people’s lives only deemed justified if people can be presumed to lack integration –, critical interventions also help to raise the non-accommodative profile of the new assimilationism. One idea was to select ‘oldcomers’ on the basis of ‘years of schooling in the Netherlands’, an idea

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16 The Council of State repeatedly obstructed the passage of new legislation due to its discriminatory consequences.
which eventually ended up in legislation. An editor at Trouw, Esther Bijlo, wrote sarcastically:

Many Dutch people worryingly delved into their closets last week. How many years has one attended school? And can one still prove that by finding a piece of paper? If not, Rita Verdonk will be at your doorstep to make you integrate [inburgeren]. This is the absurd conclusion of the fact that Verdonk lacks the legal means to demand of certain allochthonous oldcomers that they partake in an integration exam. Let’s take everyone who has less than eight years of schooling instead. In the meantime, the Minister has declared that the autochthonous toilet attendant with only primary education [six years] will not be forced to partake in an exam. (December 9 2004, Trouw) (#112)

The enforcing character of the program is the central issue in the debates surrounding Verdonk’s tenure. The problems of implementation, bureaucracy, legal limits, discrimination and practical consequences recurrently bring up the wider problem of demanding, evoking and, in the end, instilling an individualised sense of loyalty. Some of the interventions explicitly seek to emphasise the importance of inburgering as a process of emancipation and empowerment, thereby upholding, despite all the challenges of implementation, the overriding goal: becoming autonomous. An example:

When immigrants emancipate, they become vocally assertive citizens [mondige burgers] who have come to the Netherlands from another culture and function well here as citizens. Who decide for themselves what they want to adopt from Dutch culture, what they want to maintain of their prior culture, and to what extent they want to combine those two cultures. With exactly the same legal obligations as autochthones. (June 18 2004, Trouw) (#113)

In more outspokenly defiant styles of intervention, such optimism-despite-challenges would celebrate the fact that inburgering is made to be tough, demanding and confrontational. In a piece entitled ‘Thanks for the tough integration in the Netherlands’ Nausicaa Marbe, a writer and columnist, recounted her own process of settlement and enculturation and presented the following conclusion:

My benefactors [people that were tough] were exceptions, because this country has long cherished the misconception that allochthones were endangered flowers, being crushed by the Dutch clog. The multicultural doctrine says that Dutch people from whatever background should adapt to any idiot who comes here and declares that our culture is no good. Nobody dares to require that the newcomer becomes multicultural himself and finds a balance between old and new loyalties. Or to shave the edge of his culture in order to make it fit with what exist here.

Integration should be an individual, not a societal problem. A matter of courtesy, which today is indefensible. This is the culture that we gladly cherish, while we loudly shout that Dutch culture doesn’t exist. But this is what we offer to newcomers: a maze of ambiguities and contradictions, enveloped by ignorance. Disintegration, while maintaining the politically correct putty. (October 20 2003, NRC Handelsblad) (#114)
Only sporadically does the issue of Dutchness itself come up as problematic in the development of a new enculturation policy (see also Spijkerboer 2007). What it means to become Dutch is itself rarely contested. This is not to say that it is irrelevant. In fact, when Dutchness is problematised we can see that it is very relevant for understanding the more pronounced concerns with enforcement and obligation. It is, in this respect, once more important to point out that a problematisation of Dutchness is not connected to the post-Fortuyn policy efforts. Already with respect to Roger van Boxtel’s plans for enculturation courses and naturalisation ceremonies questions of Dutchness were articulated:

In my view, they [the aspirant-citizens] will be confused. Firstly, they will surely have learned in one of those enculturation courses that it is antithetic to Dutch culture to set up such ceremonies around flag and anthem. Dutch people hardly know their anthem. Secondly, Van Boxtel was inspired by a Canadian ceremony. There they have already recognised that they are an immigration country for years, in the Netherlands this had yet to be accepted. Here, access to the Dutch nationality is a very convoluted issue. And, when it has all been accomplished, Van Boxtel wants to drag out such a travesty, this seems to me ill-fitting with the painstakingly endured process nor with Dutch culture. (November 24 2000, Trouw) (#115)

A central problem of new assimilationism is that in order to instrument Dutchness it introduces forms of dealing with nationhood that appear to be strikingly atypical and at odds with established notions of Dutchness: it demands a form of national loyalty that seems to contradict what it means to be Dutch. As Pieter Dronkers, a student of theology and ethics, argues in relation to the national naturalisation day introduced under Verdonk:

The Naturalisation Day was a bit uncomfortable, in part because of the lack of symbols. But this awkwardness is typically Dutch, and rather charming.

Not everyone is at ease with the first National Naturalisation Day, held last week. The American tradition was borrowed from to add some panache; apparently, the Dutch stock didn’t include any symbols. In the polder [meaning ‘in Dutch politics’], there is a diligent search for a new symbolic language for the rite-de-passage that is, in fact, non-Dutch [on-Nederlands]. In the US, people sing about the American flag that unites the nation at occasions such as these. In the Netherlands, we hear the call to arms of a recalcitrant prince who hold his belief in justice in higher regards than his deference to worldly authority [referring to the Wilhemus, the Dutch national anthem]. This gave the first edition a certain clumsiness that was very fitting. If Dutchness [Nederlanderschap] has substance at all, than it is a kind of independent priggishness, that is averse to unnecessary nationalism. (September 1 2006, Trouw) (#116)

Interestingly, the tension between a demanding assimilationism and the idea of an anti-nationalistic Dutchness needn’t undermine the new enculturation policies. In Dronkers’ articulation, it is the clumsiness of naturalisation ceremonies that
actually save their credibility. According to Dronkers, such ceremonies work precisely because they are somewhat awkward. Oskar Verkaaik has shown in ethnographic detail how this logic plays out in naturalisation ceremonies (Verkaaik 2009). A potentially undermining critique of new assimilationism can actually come to save it from critique: if it can be shown that a demanding policy program is more flexible in practice, this need not lead to a critique of instrumentalised Dutchness. Verdonk’s neo-nationalism need not become caught in performative contradictions. In fact, it may relativize such critique as it appears that it is still very Dutch to be ‘averse to unnecessary nationalism’.

This effect comes out even more strongly in the sarcastic assessment by Jacques van Doorn in his column in Trouw. It had become known that Minister Verdonk had decided to censor sexually explicit parts of the film Naar Nederland (see also Poelmans & Tijssen 2006) as part of the curriculum presented to aspiring immigrants doing enculturation courses abroad. Possession of such material or even just viewing it could incriminate aspiring immigrant due to prevailing laws in their country of residence. Van Doorn reports:

Verdonk has therefore decided to scrap three scenes, without repercussions for the examinants, who would skip a couple of questions in their exams but would nonetheless be eligible for access to the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The reader will agree that this is a shameful capitulation for the narrow-mindedness ruling the Muslim world and which we in the Netherlands want to combat. From a press release I have understood that it was particularly the PvdA-faction in parliament which was ‘astonished’. The ‘typical Dutchness’ is hereby vanished from the film, according to member of parliament Dijsselbloem. “What remains then of our intention to inform people about our culture, which is often so alien [wezensvreemd] to them?” (March 26 2005, Trouw) (#117)

Van Doorn goes on to implicate the political background of the new policy program into the contents of the film itself. Is not the politics behind the film the very hallmark of contemporary Dutchness?

The enculturation film has not yet been shown here and the contents are unknown, but what has been said in parliament makes one fear for the worst. I take it that Pim Fortuyn, the most Celebrated Dutchman of All Time, will be one of the main protagonists in the film, complete with doggies 17 and his view that Islam is a backward culture. This might seem a little harsh to pious Muslims, but the politician that was able to mobilize one and half million voters and was set to become prime minister cannot possible be swept under the carpet.

The examinants, by the way, could be comforted if the film would also show Dutch attempts of protecting Muslims under threat. A fragment about Srebrenica would help. Alas, our well-intentioned intervention has not been completely successful, but the fact that Dutch military have set

17 Pim Fortuyn’s dogs – two Cavalier King Charles Spaniëls – became a staple of his mediatized image during his political rise.
up a safe haven for Bosnian Muslims, can be seen as a precedent for the safe haven that the Netherlands currently is for tens of thousands of asylum seekers. (March 26 2005, Trouw) (#118)

Van Doorn concludes his iconoclastic treatment by relativizing:

The leader of the independence movement, Geert Wilders, cannot be left out of this film, even though a small explanation will have to be added to his proposition that islam and democracy are incommensurable. There could be a reference to our judaeo-christian culture, which has been at odds with the islamic world for fourteen centuries and has evoked some apprehension against the recent invasion of Muslims, perhaps a bit too strongly articulated by our well-known Venlonaar [a reference to Geert Wilder’s regional, Limburg’s descent].

Reading back now, I realize how hard it must be to make plain the subtleties of our modern civilization to simple folk from a backward culture. The question of laying out at the beach with or without a top on may still be fathomable, but what to do with the recent statements by minister De Geus that for women looking for employment an opening in prostitution is considered an employment opportunity? Can we explain that women are sometimes rejected for a job because they wear a head scarf but other women receive an obligating offer to go and sit half naked behind a window in the red light district?

Admittedly, this is an absurd story. But the absurdities from which it is built, are drawn from real life. Those strangers who have to ‘integrate’ are confronted with it. Poor strangers. (March 26 2005, Trouw) (#119)

On the one hand, the possibility of projecting an image of Dutch culture through a classroom course is ridiculed harshly. Yet on the other hand, the suggestion that those ridiculed images of Dutchness do in fact represent particularly Dutch culture is not questioned at all. Over the years, Van Doorn had become a sceptical critic of the post-Fortuyn political developments and remained so up the end of his life (see Van Doorn 2009). For Van Doorn, his self-ascribed conservatism compelled him to doubt in a principled manner all those attempts by state authorities to present a conclusive answer to the question of Dutchness. This led him to ridicule the ambitions and grand plans of the new assimilationists. He sought to put up a relativizing mirror against their overblown goal of social engineering. The critique, then, is not of Dutchness or culturalism per se, but of the way in which Dutch culture had become implicated in all-too-grandiose ambitions of state craft. What ends up being questioned – in this case from the particular sceptical engagement of Van Doorn – is whether something so complex as Dutch culture may function in an all-too-simplistic attempt to patronise newcomers. Nowhere does such a diagnosis of social complexity – the core Van Doorn’s conservatism – need to enter into a questioning of culturalism itself. Rather, the problem becomes whether the new assimilationist, like Verdonk, Dijsselbloem, Wilders, Sterk and others, aren’t becoming blind to the limits of what states can do in matters of culture and civilisation.
Such overbearing ambition is once again at the heart of the problem when the integration of Verdonk herself is mockingly questioned. For instance, in this example by historian Joost Rosendaal:

Introducing a new tradition, that’s what minister for Aliens and Integration Rita Verdonk strives for with the Naturalisation Day. Historiography calls this the invention of tradition. Particularly from the 19th century onward, those in authority use this method to cultivate a nationalistic sense of community. A tinge of historicity is attached to the new ‘tradition’. (August 29 2006, De Volkskrant)

Rosendaal goes on to question the historical facticity of multiple statements made by Verdonk in the context of policy proposals for naturalisation ceremonies. He concludes:

In short: when taking into account the knowledge of history and the constitution the minister has failed the exam for Dutch citizenship. However, what is really shocking and shameful, is to introduce a ‘tradition’ on the basis of incorrect statements. In this way, politicians lack credibility for our new co-patriots.

The minister had better be well-informed before he or she wants to introduce a new ceremony promoting love of country. Luckily, thanks to descent historical knowledge such made-up traditions can be relativized. When they are badly grounded, they will have little longevity. (August 29 2006, De Volkskrant)

Again, we see in this example how quite scathingly critical interventions directly engaging with the emergence of new assimilationism reiterate that the problem is governmental ambition, not monoculturalism. Such interventions suggest that there may be limits to what can be done with culture and tradition; that the invention of tradition is no small feat and should not be engaged in brazenly. Strikingly, even a critique that employs the presumably deconstructive notion of Hobsbawm’s ‘invention’ ends up questioning Verdonk’s historical expertise and, thereby, the inclusion of herself and her politics into Dutchness. Indeed, this critique is put forth to problematise the fact that natives employ standards to which they themselves cannot rise. The point of critique is to question governmental overreach, not the notion of Dutch culture itself.

Only rarely does criticism of new assimilationism go a step further. Bas Heijne, for instance, follows the wider scepticism about the government’s ability to govern loyalties:

This is the true turn-around that has taken place in the last couple of years: that sentimental multicultural romanticism of a few decades back could flourish through, in fact, a deeply engrained, robust feeling of certainty about the Dutch [Hollandse] identity; today, the uncertainty about that same identity – due to immigration, globalisation – has become so extensive that enforced affirmation...
from the outside is deemed necessary. Newcomers not only need to abide by the law, but shall celebrate their Dutchness under governmental guidance. Love us. (August 26 2006, NRC Handelsblad) (#122)

The policy efforts of Verdonk – here referring to naturalisation ceremonies – are presented as an attempt to regain certainty. It is precisely this overly anxious push for new certainty in the face of multiculturalism’s failure that is presented as the core problem: the anxiety and imposing demand of the push – ‘love us’ – is what prevents the whole effort from succeeding. Again, the overreach of ambition is at the forefront. Nonetheless, Heijne goes somewhat further in his criticism:

The price that will inevitably be paid: as the Dutch [Hollandse] identity is more and more deliberately sought and described, the more Dutch history is compulsively made into nationalistic [vaderlandse] history, the more folkloristic and artificial Dutch culture will appear to be – like a Dutch Pasar Salam. The futile hope that the Netherlands and Dutch culture will be able to enduringly retract from the amalgamating effect of globalisation and immigration, is just as naïve as the futile hope of an effortless mixing while maintaining one’s own culture, which was cherished in the old multiculturalism. (August 26 2006, NRC Handelsblad) (#123)

Indeed, the very problem of the Dutchness of culture is raised here. In Heijne’s assessment the problem of overreaching ambition do in fact relate to an unrealistic notion of Dutch culture. In fact, in Heijne’s presentation the overzealous will to impose only hastens the dwindling veracity of that notion. Nonetheless, the break with a frivolous, multicultural past is part of that same critique.

One last example is given by Arnout Brouwers’ fierce critique of Verdonk’s politics and its ‘provincial extremism’:

This country can’t keep an even keel. Before Fortuyn, there ruled a doctrinal, intolerant multiculturalism. Nobody was allowed to talk about immigration problems, for fear of excommunication. Fortuyn was right to oppose it. Now, integrationism rules among politicians and opinion makers, developed to the extreme, excommunicating all dissent. And thus, nobody says anything. (January 23 2006, De Volkskrant) (#124)

The notion that citizenship may come to be something rather different from its current national containment is hardly ever discussed. One such alternative horizon is articulated in an intervention by Vincent de Jong:

For a long time the idea was that a strong legal position would help people integrate in society. That idea has been replaced in recent years for a viewpoint in which that legal position has to be earned, as a demonstration of integration. The excessive emphasis in politics on the problems of the multicultural society – migration as cost – is one-sided and completely overdone.
This vision entails that cultural assimilation is seen as the solution and European culture as superior. The consequence is crumbling trust between migrants and Dutch people, instead of rapprochement.

The declaration of a national day of celebration [referring to the Naturalisation Day] is a longing for the past, and not geared to the future. The Netherlands closes itself off from developments that go in another direction. A form of global or universal citizenship whereby participation in a community is central without necessarily being bounded by territory, that is the real challenge of this time. (August 29 2006, NRC Handelsblad) (#125)

It is in this way that the many problems of implementation and the ridiculed role of nationalistic elements come to affirm that the new assimilationism is a project of individualised responsibilisation, raising demands on newcomers in exchange for rights. Despite much scepticism over government’s ability to enforce adaptation to Dutch life, it is only rarely that the existence of Dutch culture is itself questioned or that an alternative notion of citizenship is presented. What new assimilationism set out to achieve was often deemed impossible, unpractical, clumsy, and at odds with what it actually meant to be Dutch. Yet, such interventions also thereby affirm the distinctive liberality of Dutch life. Again and again, enculturation appears hard to achieve because Dutch life is so remarkably liberal and varied. In the accounts of critics, the neonationalist politics of Verdonk and others may be mistaken and wrong. However, such accounts leave intact the notion that Dutch life demands particularly little loyalty on the part of individually autonomous citizens. Such accounts still enact Dutch life as one of individualised autonomy. So while the instrumentalisation of Dutchness may have been ridiculed, Dutch liberality remains. The crucial question in debates on access to citizenship becomes how to best imbue it and which political actors are best equipped to do so. It is in this respect that Verdonk’s persona became so strongly presented as ‘ambitious’, ‘impatient’ (D’Oliveira, February 1 2005), ‘stubborn’ (Koch, August 12 2005), ‘stoic’, ‘callous’, ‘tough’ (De Jong, February 10 2004), ‘fanatic’ and ‘strict’ (De Volkskrant, August 11 2005) and her obduracy was at times compared to that other Iron Lady, Margret Thatcher.

From tough Verdonk to brittle Vogelaar
These metaphors of toughness did not pertain only to Verdonk’s policy ambitions in the field of enculturation. They were related at least as much to her profile with regards to asylum seekers and immigration control more broadly. It was finally her political investment in the formalistic enforcement of immigration rules that would become the context of her ministerial demise. Questions concerning the legality of Ayaan Hirsh Ali’s application for asylum – she had not given her full name during interrogation by the IND – would bring Verdonk in direct confrontation with her
own record of unrepentant rigorousness. The matter eventually led to a fall of government. Having gained a prominent public profile, Verdonk tried and nearly succeeded in taking on the leadership of the conservative liberals. After having lost this battle to Mark Rutte, she formed her own political party – Proud of the Netherlands – in line with her already established profile of right-wing populism and nationalist revanchism. Verdonk was briefly considered to be a viable candidate to capture the electorate mobilised by Pim Fortuyn. The great expectations could not be fulfilled as it seems other political parties, particularly Wilder’s PVV, were much more effective in assembling a significant constituency. As such, Verdonk’s political presence slowly petered out.

Although the symbolism, discussions and political campaigning of Verdonk and her one-woman party merit a close analysis in their own respect (Vossen 2009; Pels 2011), the importance of Verdonk’s persona in this context is the way in which a set of policies and political ideals concerning Dutch citizenship became personified by a political figure. As we have seen, this meant that problems, contradictions and limitations of these policies and ideals were discussed in a particular way: as the (possibly overzealous) ambitions of a self-conscious and determined political actor that sought to redirect the way in which Dutchness could be governed. As we have seen, it is rather questionable if the policy changes discussed and introduced under Verdonk ever constituted a qualitative transformation of that governance. However, the personification of such redirection into the persona of Verdonk was nonetheless performative of a political watershed between a nationalistic resurgence after a supposedly non-nationalistic lapse. It branded the post-2002 governance of immigration and integration as one of resurgent nationalism and a forceful protection of national culture in the appraisals of opponents and proponents alike (see for instance Pels 2011; Heijne 2011; Van Baalen et al. 2007; Bosma 2010; Bolkestein 2012).

The fact that both the personification of forceful ambition and the watershed of new nationalism had become hugely significant in the narration of Dutch citizenship can be further demonstrated by the tenure of Verdonk’s successor Ella Vogelaar. In the newly formed cabinet of Balkenende IV (22 February 2007), Ella Vogelaar, a social-democrat, became Minister for Integration and Housing. She thanked her appointment largely to her work within the field of civic enculturation. She had headed a task-force for civic enculturation that had been intensely involved in identifying and resolving the many bureaucratic and organisational strictures of the program. The differences between Verdonk’s ambitions and those of Vogelaar were already evident from their very different ministerial responsibilities. Where Verdonk’s tenure had brought issues of enculturation in line
with those of immigration, border control and public safety, Vogelaar had received the post of Minister for Integration and Housing. In a sense, this brought the problem of integration back to where it came from: the governance of urban problems, liveability and social welfare. Moreover, it brought the program under the control of the social-democrats. Being the main defendant in the debate over failing integration, any PvdA-administrator would have been under close scrutiny when it came to integration policy.

Vogelaar’s walk in Verdonk’s shoes was quickly tripped up when it was revealed that she had hired a spin-doctor to improve the image of her policies and an interview about the news with a reporter from the blog Geenstijl.nl went badly. Once again, it seemed the PvdA tried to obscure the realities of cultural diversity by spinning the image of its policies. Vogelaar’s inability to present herself and her policies to the public became a major news story. Her media performance became a topic in and of itself. Matters became even worse for her after a statement in an interview with the broadsheet Trouw. She was quoted saying that:

Centuries ago Jews came to the Netherlands and today we say: the Netherlands have been shaped by Jewish-Christian traditions. I can imagine that we will see a similar process with regards to Islam. (June 3 2008, Trouw) (#126)

These statements were repeatedly criticised as a sign of undue tolerance and cultural relativism. One of the most significant responses came from the leader of the VVD, Mark Rutte, when he wrote that:

In Trouw she [Vogelaar] predicts that the Netherlands will become a country with a ‘judeo-christian-islamic tradition’ (Front page, 16 June). She says: ‘Centuries ago Jews came to the Netherlands and today we say: the Netherlands have been shaped by Jewish-Christian traditions.’ However, we speak of a judeo-christian tradition because of the historically inherited influence of the Jewish and Christian faith on the core values of our country. Not because a few centuries ago a modestly small Jewish community came to our country. The development of our core values is completely disconnected from the presence of certain groups [bevolkingsgroepen]. The Netherlands just doesn’t have an islamic tradition – and will not have one if the VVD can do anything about it.

The PvdA-minister doesn’t see a problem with subsidizing religious organisations. In my opinion, the state should be very hesitant in this respect, else we’ll create huge problems. And then Vogelaar confirms a hardly noticed agreement within the coalition accord: a ‘charter for responsible citizenship’ will be created. Now that it has become clear how the minister will develop that charter, we should be very wary. It shall be ‘a process’ in which ‘a considerable amount of groups will participate’; and the result should ‘have the support of the community’. Thus, our core values are negotiable [bespreekbaar], because the result will have to have broad communal support. This can lead to a ‘process’ in which those core values are questioned and weakened. (July 17 2007, Trouw) (#127)

18 The interview was posted on the blog ‘Geenstijl.nl’ on 17 April 2008. See for video and blog: http://www.geenstijl.tv/2008/04/rutger_en_de_mediasilte_van_e.html (accessed 06-18-2011)
A host of other concerns over Vogelaar’s leadership and policies followed, focusing in particular on the effectiveness of her more ‘pragmatic’ and ‘soft’ approach to integration as compared to her iron-clad predecessor. Eventually her own party withdrew its confidence in her as minister. At the moment of her resignation – the evening of 13 November 2008 – Vogelaar gave an impromptu speech in which she relates her own demise to the failure of her party to deal with the issue of integration:

With regard to integration I have to conclude that after the period of Fortuyn the PvdA has not been able to give a clear direction that is supported by the entire party. As a reaction to what the PvdA didn’t see in the years before, namely the negative effects of the settlement of large numbers of migrants, some of whom have caused nuisance, degradation and crime, the focus is, to my mind, too much on the tough approach only. I’m personally very much convinced that the approach should be two-sided. Setting boundaries and offering perspectives. These two need to go hand in hand. Indeed, they belong to the roots and the core values of social democracy. Enforcement when necessary, but also demonstrating that it is possible to build a future here in the Netherlands.¹⁹ (Press-conference speech by Ella Vogelaar, November 13 2008) (#128)

Vogelaar reiterates here the basic divisions that had become so strongly conjoined to the issue of enculturation: hard-soft; demanding-accommodative; assimilationist-tolerant; outspoken-politically correct. Again, we see how self-evident it had become to speak of cultural assimilation to Dutch society in a contractual logic that demands of newcomers and outsiders the willingness to change, testing and judging their malleability, effort and propensity to become autonomous citizens. Figures such as Vogelaar, seeking to soften, lower or relativize contractual demands, had to explain why this would be warranted, thereby affirming that others were – in contrast to them – prepared to be strict and uncompromising.

**A community of individuals**

What happened with the arrival of Rita Verdonk as the minister responsible for civic enculturation is hardly the sudden introduction of cultural concerns in the governance and debate over integration and civic enculturation. Such concerns were never not present, nor was integration into Dutch society ever not a concern surrounding access to Dutch citizenship. What was introduced under minister Verdonk was an extension of policies that has been put in place by the purple coalition governments. Aspirant-citizens needed to demonstrate language skills,

¹⁹ A brief reportage about Vogelaar’s demise and the entire speech can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9lXX1243HQ (accessed 07-02-2014).
familiarity with and affective connection to Dutch society and, above all, an aptitude for achievement and dynamism. None of this is new or qualitatively different from what had been proposed all along. Nor do we need to understand the introduction of permissive, liberal ‘norms and values’ as a sudden shift towards ‘cultural’ or ‘nationalist’ demands. Of course, their introduction and their explicit protection against newcomers matter greatly both for the people involved in the policy program and the subsequent debates, but they continue and deepen the demand of learning to be dynamic, economically mobile and morally autonomous into a more restrictive mode. Supposedly Dutch ‘norms and values’ of autonomy, expressiveness, liberalism and individualism matter in the instructional goals of the enculturation courses as they aim to teach and test the aspirant-citizens’ willingness to adapt to the demands of a community for which achievement, dynamism and self-reliance are considered prerequisite moral equipment.

What mattered is not the replacement of socioeconomic goals and justifications for cultural ones. What did matter is a tightly interwoven problematic of socioeconomic and ethnocultural concerns. Are newcomers able to change their way of life through state pedagogy? What needs to be avoided is the dependence upon others, both in terms of welfare dependence on the public at large and in terms of ethnic and/or religious dependence on community. Paradoxically, the courses and tests are introduced to effectively demonstrate whether newcomers are willing and able to share the Dutch aptitude to share as little as possible with their new co-patriots. What needs to be shared is the individual ability to not be dependent on sharing. Demands to adapt to Dutch culture work all the more effectively because Dutchness almost always appears as the pinnacle of liberality and individual autonomy. Consequently, participants in debates, whether parliamentary or public, rarely seek to spell out what Dutch culture may actually be. It is almost always indicated by what the newcomer lacks. The question at hand is whether the Dutch way of life should or should not be protected by a more demanding, less accommodating program.

The cultural turn in the civic enculturation program constitutes ‘cultural nationalism’ only in a very specific sense: the extension and further restriction of access to citizenship on the basis of overtly socioeconomic concerns is being justified by associating those concerns with particular typifications of Dutchness. Thus, a break is performed with the supposedly weak and procedural nationalism of the preceding policy regime. Dutchness matters here not because new assimilationists want newcomers to acquire a liking for what they consider to be true Dutch culture – whatever that may be –, but because certain typifications of Dutchness help them explain why specific categories of others – most generally
those that are subsumed under ‘non-western’ – have yet to learn the necessary self-discipline demanded by the civic life of a polity in which citizens should no longer rely on others for assistance, collectivist morality and guidance and have supposedly acquired the civilised disposition not to impose themselves on others. The crux is a nationalisation of liberal values (Lægaard 2007) and a project of inculcating specific dispositional characteristics, deemed modern, western, civilised and emancipated. It is here particularly that sexual permissiveness and an embrace of homosexuality in particular have come to serve as indicators for individual autonomy as such (Mepschen et al. 2010; Dudink 2011).

The ensuing debate over the new assimilationism personified by Verdonk enacts a break in time and politics. This break is the central trope through which new assimilationist voices actually take up Dutchness: they present a cultural supplement added to the already established program of enculturation and contractual citizenship. Critical responses to Verdonk’s policies more often than not reiterate this break, thereby strengthening the suggestion that (1) there was a time in which Dutch citizenship was not or only weakly protected from cultural encroachment; and (2) there still is, today, an audible, contentious dissensus over what it takes to become Dutch.

Of course, it is correct that the introduction of new, supposedly ‘cultural’ elements make the entire process of inburgering more demanding and humiliating (Van Oers 2006; 2010) – memorising often illogical and ambivalent factoids about what are supposed to be Dutch norms, values and customs will make a test harder to pass, especially when subtle language skills are needed – but the reiterated recognition that there is no consensus over Dutchness has done little to undermine the new politics of assimilation personified by minister Verdonk. Subsequent governments have not changed course. The Dutchness of the cultural demands are routinely questioned, ridiculed, contested and thrown into doubt in political and public debate. Ethnographic research has shown that doubt, irony and non-seriousness concerning those elements extends all the way through the actual policy practices (Van Huis & De Regt 2005; Bjornson 2012; Van den Berg 2013) and the naturalisation ceremonies to which they grant access (Verkaaik 2009).

What matters most within the debates is not whether these elements are really and essentially part of the cultural life of the Dutch people. It is not as if participants in these debates are working with an anachronistically ethnological conception of their object. Verdonk would not have changed her demands for cultural assimilation if she would have been convinced by an ethnological expert on Dutch society that those demands, in fact, weren’t Dutch. What matters is whether newcomers demonstrate to be able, willing and eager enough to go through an
arduous process of instruction, effort and testing in order to gain access to full inclusion, even if and all the more effectively when the test demands acceptance and knowledge of matters that are constantly contested in public and about which the natives themselves constantly express doubt and disbelief. The fact that the natives are willing and able to disagree further affirms the particularity of their cultural life and the possible need to protect it.

Thus, the on-going disagreements over the merits of civic enculturation courses come to performatively affirm the exceptionally autonomous individuals that compose the Dutch nation. The new, ‘cultural’ demands may appear quite ambivalent, archaic and even arbitrary in many responses to the new program, but that has done little to undermine their suitability for a more restrictive regulation of access to Dutch citizenship: will newcomers submit even if it is transparent that the test does not apply consistently to the natives themselves? By critiquing the new assimilationist policies for imposing empty and unpractical demands onto aspirant-citizens, demands that many card-carrying Dutch citizens would not be able nor willing to meet, the opponents of new assimilationism and its policies effectively affirm that the new assimilationists are – in apparent contrast to themselves – willing and able to make such demands, even if it is transparent that no consensus over Dutch culture is in reach.

The discursive situation in these debates shows a pattern that must be taken into account in order to better understand why the rhetoric of new assimilationists was and is quite hard to undermine: while cultural demands of assimilation can be imposed on aspirant-residents – note that the difference between residence and citizenship becomes nebulous – as a way to test their willingness to change and their aptitude for independent achievement, those same criteria of cultural integration and belonging pertinently do not apply to natives, nor does the very audible and politically salient dissensus over Dutchness detract from such deepening responsibilisation. With regard to civic enculturation, a native public forms the audience of policy, not an example or participant. It remains at a distance and unaddressed. That is, the demands of cultural integration have no bearing on this native public, nor does their shared, public dissensus over Dutchness effectively undermine the force of demands imposed on others. In fact, that public dissensus performs a break with an all-too-multicultural past: celebrated by some, accepted by many, criticised as ‘neonationalism’ by others. This means that the mandatory enculturation courses do not necessarily draw aspirant-citizens any closer to national inclusion as the native public is composed precisely by those for whom demands of cultural assimilation are irrelevant. Even if formal-legal citizenship is attained, the integrated allochthon remains at a distance for being so
included. When the question of belonging and national identity is actually posed with respect to the native public the rules of the game change radically. It is to this problematic that we now turn.