

The Dutch political system in a nutshell

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Contents

Introduction	4
1. Constitutional monarchy	5
2. Elections	7
3. Political parties	10
4. Forming a government	13
5. The government	17
6. Parliament	20
7. Municipal government	24
8. Provinces	29
9. Addresses	33

Introduction

We frequently receive requests at the **Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek** (Dutch Centre for Political Participation) for information on the Dutch political system in English. We have produced this booklet for foreign visitors and people in other countries who want to know how the Dutch electoral system works, how a government is formed, or how Dutch local governance works. It gives a concise, clear overview of the main elements of the Dutch political system. The emphasis is on the formal aspects. Important elements of the administrative system such as the civil service and the legal system are not covered. Nor do we look at political actors such as organised interests and pressure groups, popular movements, action committees, the mass media, phenomena such as corporatism, voting patterns, or the European context in which Dutch politics operate.

If you wish to find out more about the Dutch political system, we can recommend two books for further reading. One has been written by two political science professors from the University of Leiden—Rudy B. Andeweg and Galen A. Irwin—and is entitled *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002). Another good book has been written by the British political scientist Ken Gladdish and is entitled *Governing from the Centre; Politics and Policy-Making in the Netherlands* (London: C. Hurst & Co. and The Hague: SDU Uitgeverij, 1991).

1. Constitutional monarchy

The Netherlands has had a monarchy since the end of the French occupation in 1813. The monarch is the official head of state. We have had queens since 1890, but the Constitution refers to the King. The Netherlands has never had an absolute monarchy; the power of the monarch is regulated by the Constitution. The first Dutch Constitution dates from 1814 and has been amended many times since then. A major amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1848, marking the beginning of parliamentary democracy. The monarch was obliged to take account of parliamentary majorities. By 1870 it had become clear, following some political conflicts between the Parliament and the monarch, that the Parliament was the highest political body; the monarch is subordinate to the will of the Parliament. The head of state's power is limited. Ministers are accountable to the Parliament for everything the head of state does or says. The head of state has some political influence when it comes to forming a government following a general election. Customary law lays down that the head of state must ask a number of politicians for advice. On the basis of this advice, the head of state then orders a politician to examine how a government can be formed. This procedure gives the head of state some personal influence both in appointing the politician and in formulating his or her instructions. This personal influence is rather limited however.

It was not until 1917 that universal suffrage for men was introduced by means of a constitutional amendment. Women were given the vote in 1919. This amendment also changed the electoral system from a constituency or 'first past the post' system to a system of proportional representation. The general principles of the Dutch political system have not changed since then. The most recent constitutional amendment dates from 1983, when some new fundamental social rights were introduced and the terminology was modernised, to mention only the most important changes.

The Constitution

The general principles of the parliamentary system are regulated by the Dutch Constitution. Various specific acts (such as the Netherlands Citizenship Act, the Elections Act, the Municipalities Act and the Provinces Act) lay down how the machinery of government operates in more detail.

Chapter 1 of the Constitution lays down the fundamental political and social rights. Article 1 reads: 'All persons in the Netherlands shall be treated equally in equal cases. Discrimination on the grounds of religion, philosophy of life, political persuasion, race, sex or any other ground is not permitted.' It goes on to set out the classic civil rights, such as the right to vote and to stand for election, the freedom of the press, the freedom of expression, the freedom of religion, the freedom of association and assembly, the right to privacy, the inviolability of the body, the confidentiality of correspondence and telephone communication, the right to legal assistance, the right to hold property and the right to liberty (though these last two rights can be taken away by an order of a court). In the chapter on Fundamental Rights, the Constitution imposes an obligation on the government to promote full employment and free choice of jobs for all. The government must ensure that anyone who needs it can receive social security benefit.

The Constitution is the basis of the Dutch political system. The nineteenth-century author of the Constitution, the liberal Johan Rudolph Thorbecke (1798-1872), made it very difficult to amend it, to prevent it from being disputed every time there was a change in the political climate. A motion to amend the Constitution must be passed by both Chambers of Parliament twice, first as a normal bill and again after a general election, when it must be passed by a two-thirds majority of both Chambers.

The organisation of the Dutch state is based partly on the principle of the *trias politica*, the separation of powers. The judicial is, of course, independent of the legislative and the executive. Legislative power is shared between the Parliament and the government however. The government is the executive.

2. Elections

The Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy. One of the main features of this system is that Dutch citizens have the right to elect their representatives in freedom and secrecy. Elections are held for the Second Chamber of the Parliament, for the provincial councils and for the municipal councils. The Dutch electorate also elects the Dutch members of the European Parliament, every five years. The First Chamber of the Parliament (or Senate) is not directly elected by the public. Voters elect the members of the provincial council in their province and the members of the provincial councils jointly elect the members of the First Chamber. These elections are normally held every four years. Elections to the Second Chamber only take place at an earlier date, if a government is forced to resign by the Parliament or if it decides to resign itself, for instance because of serious internal disagreement. Such 'snap elections' were for instance held in January 2003, after the early resignation of the Cabinet in October 2002 because of internal conflicts.

The right to vote and to stand for election

Every Dutch citizen aged eighteen or over has the right to vote in elections for the European Parliament, the Second Chamber and the provincial and municipal councils. Non-Dutch and non EU-citizens are also entitled to vote in elections for municipal councils provided they have resided in the country legally for at least five years. EU-citizens living in the Netherlands do not have to wait five years; they are entitled to vote for municipal councils and for the European Parliament right away.

The election procedure is laid down by the Elections Act. Every Dutch citizen aged eighteen or over also has the right to stand for election, and non-Dutch nationals who are entitled to vote in municipal elections can also stand for election there. Most candidates stand on behalf of an established political party. Anyone wishing to stand as an independent candidate in local elections must collect a minimum of ten to thirty signatures (depending on the number of local councillors) from supporters, who must sign at the office of the town clerk in the presence of a civil servant. This is designed to prevent fraud.

Parties

Parties wishing to take part in a national election must register with the Election Council in The Hague by a certain date. The Elections Act lays down that parties must be officially registered as associations. Newly-formed parties or organised interests can also take part in an election. Parties or groups who do not yet have Members in Parliament must pay a deposit of 11,250 Euro. This may be more than a small group can afford. The aim is to prevent people from putting themselves forward as candidates just for the fun of it. The deposit is refunded if the party or group polls at least three-quarters of the number of votes needed to obtain a seat, about 0.5 percent of the total number of valid votes cast.

The Netherlands is divided into nineteen parliamentary constituencies, each covering a province or part of a province. Each parliamentary constituency has a constituency election committee. Furthermore, there is a central election committee for all elections. Thus, the Election Council acts as the central election committee in elections for the Second Chamber. Parties taking part in the elections submit a list of candidates to the central election committee. The first candidate on the list is the party leader for the election campaign.

Before the elections, the parties draw up their campaign manifestos, setting out their views on what they consider to be important political issues—how they think unemployment, euthanasia or improving the environment should be tackled, for instance. A manifesto is usually a detailed, practical document based on the party's political programme.

Voting

Voting is voluntary, not compulsory, in the Netherlands. Everyone who is entitled to vote receives a polling card. On election day, the voter can take his card to the polling station. Voting machines are common nowadays. Voters only have to press a button then to select a candidate of a certain party's list. Voters do not have to select the first name on a party's list. If they vote for a candidate lower down the list this is a 'preferential vote'. Many electors cast preferential votes, for instance because the candidate is well known in the region, or because he or she has clear-cut views on certain topics. Voters can cast a blank vote too. Their vote is then included in the turnout although they have not expressed a preference for a specific candidate.

A polling committee at the polling station ensures that everything is done according to the rules. Anyone wishing to sit on the polling committee can apply to the municipal authority. The committee collects the polling cards and shows the voter the way to the voting machine.

Distribution of seats

The quota—that is the number of votes that entitles a party to one seat—can be established, once it is known how many valid votes have been cast. There are 150 seats in the Second Chamber, so if nine million voters cast valid votes, the quota is nine million divided by 150, or 60,000. The higher the turnout, the higher the quota. As the number of valid votes increases, the number of votes a party needs to obtain a seat increases proportionally.

If the quota is established at 60,000 and a party polls 380,000 votes, it is entitled to six seats in any event, but it has some votes left over too: 20,000 in this case. There are two ways of distributing these remaining votes.

In municipalities with a population of less than 20,000, the 'greatest remainder' method is used. The party with most votes left over (the greatest remainder) is then awarded the first available seat, the party with the second largest remainder is awarded the next available seat, and so on until all the available seats have been awarded.

In elections in larger municipalities and in elections for the Second Chamber and the provincial councils, the 'largest averages' method is used to allocate the available seats. This works as follows. Suppose the quota is 60,000. Party A polls 380,000 votes. It is entitled to six seats in any event ($380,000/60,000 = 6$ plus a remainder). If party A were to be given 7 seats, the average number of votes per seat would be 54,286 ($380,000/7$). If this average is higher than the average of the other parties with votes left over, the first available seat goes to party A; the second available seat goes to the party with the second highest average and so on until all the available seats have been awarded. This method favours the major parties to some extent. For example, suppose party B polls 2,355,000 votes at the same election. It will be awarded 39 seats ($2,355,000/60,000 = 39$ plus a remainder) and still has 15,000 votes left

over, less than party A has. Using the ‘largest average’ method the next seat goes to the biggest party, party B, however, since if party B were to be given 40 seats its average would be $2,355,000/40 = 58,875$ votes per seat.

Electoral alliances

Parties whose political views are close together sometimes enter into electoral pacts so that their leftover votes are counted together, thus increasing their chances of acquiring an available seat in the same way as larger parties. Alliances of this kind enable small parties to obtain seats they could never obtain on their own. Two small Protestant parties (the SGP and ChristenUnie) frequently enter into electoral pacts.

Results of the last elections

for the Second Chamber in 2002 and pre-term elections in 2003, for municipal councils in 2002, the provincial councils in 2003, and the European Parliament in 2004.

	Second Chamber % and seats		Municipal Councils 2002	% Provincial Councils and seats First Chamber 2003		European Parliament % and NL seats 2004	
	2002	2003		2002	2003	2004	2004
Turnout	78.9	79.9	57,7	47.6		39.1	
Christian Democrats (CDA)	27,9 43	28.6 44	20.5	28.0 23		24.4	7
Labour Party (PvdA)	15.1 23	27.3 42	16.7	24.1 19		23.6	7
Liberal Party (VVD)	15,4 24	17.9 28	16	18.5 15		13.3	4
Social Liberals (D66)	5.1 7	4.1 6	4.3	4.6 3		4.3	1
Green Left (GroenLinks)	7.0 10	5.1 8	6.4	6.9 5		7.4	2
Protestant established-church parties (SGP, ChristenUnie)	4.2 6	3.7 5	6.1	6.4 4		5.9	2
Socialist Party (SP)	5.9 9	6.3 9	2.8	5.6 4		7.0	2
Lijst Pim Fortuyn	17.0 26	5.7 8	6.0	2.9 2		2.5	
Regional parties	-- --	-- --	--	2.5 --		--	
Local parties	-- --	-- --	20.3	--		--	
Others	2.3 2	1.3 --	0.8	3.0 --		11.7	2

3. Political parties

What is a political party?

A political party is a group of people who organise themselves and agree on an agenda, based on shared political principles, with the aim of participating in government. Parties try to win seats in Parliament, municipal councils or provincial councils in elections so that they can influence government policies. A political party is therefore first and foremost an electoral association which enables its members to take part in the elections. Under the Dutch Constitution an electoral association is permitted to submit lists of candidates for an election (the term 'political party' does not occur in the Constitution).

A political party differs from a pressure group or campaign group in that it is willing to share responsibility for the governance of the country, province or municipality, since it puts up candidates for democratic bodies. This means that political parties cannot be concerned with only one or two political issues; they must have answers to a wide range of political questions. Pressure groups and campaign groups can confine themselves to a small number of demands and usually promote one particular interest.

Political parties came into being during the second half of the nineteenth century to represent the interests of particular sections of the population politically. The first true political party in the Netherlands was the Protestant Anti-Revolutionary Party, which was founded in 1879. It originated in the Dutch Reformed (Calvinist) community. Later on, the labour movement, the liberal bourgeoisie and the Catholic community produced political parties of their own.

The role of parties

Political parties serve various functions in our parliamentary democracy:

1. They put up candidates in elections for democratic bodies (the European Parliament, the Chambers of the national Parliament, provincial and municipal councils). By drawing up lists of candidates for these elections they give the general public the opportunity to influence government policy; electors can make choices. Parties also select candidates for appointments to public posts such as ministers, mayors, provincial governors and members of the Council of State, the government's highest advisory body.
2. By drawing up party programmes the political parties select a variety of wishes and demands, which they present to the political authorities on behalf of the community. One party will be concerned particularly with the wishes of one section of society, another party with those of another section. Members of the public can join a political party and thus influence the content of its programme. In elections, voters can choose between the programmes and thus influence government policy.
3. Another function of political parties is to encourage citizens to become politically active. They offer opportunities for people to do something political or even make a career in politics. They provide education to their members and to people who are interested in politics. Political parties provide courses and other support for members who have been elected to democratic bodies. At elections, they do their utmost to interest electors in politics (and above all in themselves as parties).

Types of parties

Although parties differ from pressure groups, as we have seen, there are parties that focus particularly on the interests of a specific section of the population. We refer to these parties as ‘single-interest parties’. One example is the Union for the Elderly (*Algemeen Ouderen Verbond*, AOV), which gained admission to the Second Chamber in 1994 by drawing particular attention to the problems of the elderly.

Most of the ‘major’ political parties are not based on a single interest but on a general political vision or ideology. They have particular ideas and opinions on how society and the political system should be organised. They have a set of ideas, wishes and demands—a party programme—which sets out the policies they deem necessary for achieving the society and political system they envisage. Their general principles, ideas and opinions are usually set out in their party programmes. At elections they produce detailed manifestos in which they say what policies, based on those principles, should be implemented over the next four years.

Political parties can be classified in various ways. A familiar distinction is between denominational and non-denominational parties. Denominational parties base their programmes and positions on their beliefs or on the Bible. These include the *Christian Democrats* (Christen Democratisch Appèl, CDA) and the parties of the established Protestant churches, the *Christian-reformed Political Party* (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij, SGP) and the *Christian Union* (ChristenUnie). Non-denominational parties—such as the *Liberal Party* (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD), the social-democratic *Labour Party* (Partij van de Arbeid, PvdA), the social-liberal *D66* (Democraten 66), the leftist environmentalist party *Green Left* (GroenLinks) and the radical *Socialist Party* (Socialistische Partij, SP)—base their programmes on non-religious convictions.

Political parties are often classified as left-wing, right-wing and centre parties. To what extent a party aims at greater equality of wealth, knowledge and power in society and to what extent it is willing to use government policies for this purpose determines its position within this classification. This is a question mainly of socio-economic policies, employment, taxation, incomes and benefits, although it also involves educational policies and the democratisation of industry and institutions. Parties very much in favour of state intervention to achieve greater equality are referred to as ‘left-wing’. Those that regard the existing inequalities in incomes and power as reasonable or inevitable are referred to as ‘right-wing’. In this respect the Labour Party, Green Left and the Socialist Party are generally regarded as left-wing. The Protestant party SGP and the Liberal Party are considered to be right-wing. Based on this definition the Christian Democrats (CDA), the Christian Union and the social-liberals (D66) occupy an intermediate position between left-wing and right-wing and are thus referred to as centre parties.

Then again, parties are sometimes described as ‘progressive’ or ‘conservative’. Here the distinction lies in the extent to which they are willing to use the state (government policies) to restrict people’s personal freedom, particularly in moral matters such as homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, censorship and Sunday observance. Parties that believe in maximum personal freedom are known as progressive; they take the view that the state should not interfere with the way people wish to live their lives and should not patronise them. Seen from this point of view, D66, the Liberal Party, GreenLeft and the Labour Party are ‘progressive’.

The denominational parties—the Christian Democrats and the Protestant parties—are conservative. In their view the government has a duty to uphold Christian values.

Party organisation

Like all associations, political parties have members, a conference and an executive. The party organisations comprise local branches; which are in turn grouped into larger regional units. These have different names in different parties. Decision-making procedures—how much influence party members have on the running of the party etc.—also differ from one party to another. Almost all parties have a Conference, Congress or General Meeting, their highest decision-making body, at which the branches or members are represented. They meet once or twice a year and decide on the general principles of party policy. Extraordinary meetings of Conference are held before an election to decide on the manifesto and the list of candidates. Each party has a secretariat staffed by professionals who take charge of organisation, administrative matters, public relations and promotion.

Virtually all the parties have their own research organisations and educational institutions. These are usually separate non-profit organisations. They are subsidised by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The amount of subsidy depends on the number of seats the party has in the Second Chamber. Most parties have an affiliated, but in theory entirely independent, youth organisation. These organisations are also subsidised by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Most of the major political parties have a women's organisation too, and one or more organisations concerned with international relations.

Numbers of members

At the beginning of 2005, the Dutch political parties had a total of about 303,900 members. The CDA was the largest, with 73,000 members; the Labour Party had about 61,100 members, the Liberal Party 41,900, the Socialist Party 44,300, the Christian Union about 24,235, the SGP 25,900, Green Left 20,700, and D66 about 12,800 members. Although the total number of members of political parties has fallen in recent years, one party has shown a marked rise, the radical socialist party SP from 16,000 members in 1995 to about 44,300 at the beginning of 2005. The church-established orthodox protestant parties SGP and Christen Union keep their members very well. They have very strong grass roots support. In comparison to their voters, the membership of these protestant parties is extremely high. Between 12 and 14 percent of their electorate is party member. To compare: for other parties this percentage oscillates between 1.5 and 5.0 percent.

4. Forming a government

As soon as the results of the general elections are known, the process of forming a government begins. A new team of ministers and state secretaries has to be assembled, a government to rule for the next four years. This is not always a simple matter. The election results rarely indicate precisely what kind of government the voters would prefer. No political party in the Netherlands has ever gained an absolute majority in the Second Chamber (at least half the seats plus one: $75 + 1 = 76$, as there are 150 seats). Any government must have the support of a majority in the Second Chamber, so after each election two or more parties have to form a coalition.

Bargaining

During the process of forming a government the major parties negotiate on various questions, in particular:

- Which parties are to form the government?
- How can those parties' programmes be combined to form a single government programme (known as the 'coalition agreement')?
- Which parties are to be assigned which ministerial posts?
- Who is to be appointed to the various ministerial and state secretary posts?

It is often said that it is more important for a political party to win the bargaining process than the elections. Substantial gains in the elections do not automatically result in membership of the government. An example is the 2003 election, when the Labour Party gained nineteen more seats, making it the second largest party, but was excluded from the coalition. The Christian Democrats succeeded in forming a majority with the two liberal parties VVD en D66. Conversely, a party that loses seats in an election is not necessarily forced out of office. In 1994 the Labour Party lost twelve seats but was still the largest party with 37 seats. During the bargaining it was decided not only that the Labour Party should be included in the government but that it should even supply the Prime Minister.

Various coalitions may be feasible after elections. Which parties ultimately form the government depends on what happens during the political bargaining. The party best able to work together with the other major parties has the advantage. For a long time the CDA enjoyed this comfortable position in the Netherlands. It has been in various coalitions with the Labour Party, the Liberal Party and D66, three parties that refused to form a coalition together. After the 1994 elections, they banded together however to exclude the CDA. The negotiations are not just about who is going to govern but also about the policies the new government will pursue. These policies are set down in the coalition agreement. The bargaining period is a busy time for Members of Parliament, party committees, organised interests and pressure groups. It is the time when they can exert an influence on government policies.

Five steps

Although the discussions, the precise procedure and the length of time it takes differ considerably, there are certain steps that recur every time. If something goes wrong and an impasse is reached, the negotiators often take a few steps back. The process then appears to repeat itself.

1. Immediately after the election, the monarch asks the vice-chairman of the Council of State for advice on the political situation. (The Council of State is the government's highest advisory body of which the monarch is formally the chair.) The monarch also asks the Speakers of the Second Chamber and the First Chamber (Senate) and the chairmen of all the parliamentary parties in the Second Chamber for advice. If it is clear from the advice and the election results which parties wish to form the new government, the monarch appoints a *formateur* to take charge of the negotiations, often the leader of the largest party. If it is not clear which parties are to form the government, the monarch appoints an *informateur* to investigate the alternatives—usually a politician who enjoys the respect of many of the parties.

If the *informateur* is able to come up with a majority coalition, a *formateur* (usually the proposed Prime Minister) finishes the job. This is the only time when the monarch, the head of state, has any influence on Dutch politics, since he or she decides who is appointed *informateur* or *formateur* and what this person's remit is. The remit could be, for example, to 'investigate the possibilities of forming a government that can count on the broadest possible support in Parliament', or the requirement could be merely 'a sufficient majority in Parliament'. By the precise wording of the instructions, the head of state guides the *formateur/informateur* in seeking ways of forming a coalition.

2. The *formateur/informateur* ascertains which parties have the best chances of successfully negotiating with one another and which parties are ruled out.

3. These two or three parties start bargaining with the aim of arriving at a coalition agreement. This can be brief and general in nature, but since the seventies coalition agreements have been highly detailed.

4. If the potential coalition parties are broadly in agreement on the government programme, they discuss the allocation of the various ministerial and state secretary posts (state secretaries are essentially under-ministers). Dividing up the posts among the various coalition parties is quite a struggle. Some ministerial posts are much more important than others. Finance, Economic Affairs and Social Affairs & Employment are regarded as the most important ones. Each party tries to obtain as many important posts as possible, especially those it is most keen on having. A party wishing to show how much store it sets by the environment, for instance, will want to supply the Environment Minister. When state secretary posts are being handed out, a minister from one coalition party is often assigned a state secretary from another coalition party.

5. The final phase is finding people to occupy the ministerial and state secretary posts. In practice, steps 3, 4 and 5 overlap. If a party is keen on obtaining a particular portfolio, it will often have a suitable candidate in mind. Posts are sometimes exchanged for items on the programme: 'OK, we're willing to tone down point A in our manifesto for the purposes of the coalition agreement, if you give us portfolio Z.'

Once candidates have been found for all the ministerial posts, the government holds a 'constituent meeting', at which the ministers officially adopt the coalition agreement. Soon afterwards, the new government is sworn in by the monarch. Traditionally, the new team and

the monarch are then photographed on the Palace steps.

Problems

The way governments are formed is a bone of contention in our Constitution. It is objectionable from a democratic point of view that the political composition of the government depends more on post-election bargaining than on the actual election results. Furthermore, the negotiations are secret for the most part and cannot be controlled by the public therefore. The monarch and the *formateur/informateur* are not accountable to the Parliament.

The time it often takes to put a government together is another problem. The record was in 1977, when it took 207 days. The old government can remain in power for months while the process is going on, while it cannot take any controversial decisions since it is on its way out. This does not make for responsive government, of course, and the interminable bargaining does not inspire confidence in the political system. Laborious negotiations are inevitable however, given the complicated party system.

Yet another problem is the detailed coalition agreement that results from the negotiations. In the seventies and eighties, government programmes filled dozens of closely printed pages, but nowadays they are more condense. The criticism was that such detailed coalition agreements made the Parliament powerless. The coalition agreements of 2002 and 2003 sketched only the outlines of the government policies.

Alternatives?

Such criticism on the way governments are formed have led to proposals for constitutional reform since the early sixties. D66 was the only party to set much store by constitutional reform of the political system, and particularly of the way the government is formed. Since the political upheaval of 2002, some other parties opt in one way or another for renewal of political conventions and rules too. The social-liberal D66 suggests that the Dutch electoral system—a system of proportional representation—is appropriate for choosing members of the Second Chamber but absolutely unsuitable for choosing a government. A constituency system like the one in the United Kingdom would be better according to D66, as it is clear immediately after the elections which party has the majority of votes in most constituencies. D66 is willing to accept the fact that the Parliament does not necessarily reflect the voters' wishes under the British system.

Another suggestion is to elect the Prime Minister directly. Each voter would thus have two votes, one for the Prime Minister and one for the Second Chamber. This would move the Dutch system much closer to the system in countries like the United States, France or Israel, where the President (or Prime Minister) and the Parliament are elected separately. The advantage is that the electors have a direct influence on the composition of the government. The drawback is that the government is not dependent on the Parliament's approval, as it has in effect been directly elected by the voters. Serious disagreements between the government and the Parliament can then result in political deadlocks, causing confusion and political paralysis.

It has also been suggested that the *formateur* should be selected by the newly elected Second

Chamber rather than appointed by the head of state. The candidate of the party (or coalition) that wins the most votes would be the leader of the government for the next term. Other suggestions are that the *formateur* should be accountable to the Second Chamber; that an electoral system should be devised that combines proportional representation with a constituency system, or that an electoral threshold should be introduced to reduce the number of parties in the Second Chamber (establishing for instance that a party should have to poll at least 5% of the votes to be admitted to Parliament).

Notwithstanding all the commissions, constitutional experts, political scientists and party experts who have dealt with these problems, no major changes have been implemented to date.

5. The government

Under the Constitution the government consists of the head of state (the monarch) and the ministers. The ministers bear full responsibility, even for things the monarch does and says. The monarch is officially 'inviolable' and has no actual power. The state secretaries also have certain responsibilities. A state secretary is a kind of under-minister and is under the command and supervision of the minister to whom he has been assigned. The minister and the state secretary agree on who is responsible for each particular area of policy. State secretaries are individually accountable to the Parliament for their particular areas of responsibility. The ministers and state secretaries are jointly referred to as the 'Cabinet' (Kabinet).

The Council of Ministers

The Council of Ministers is the body of ministers that make the actual decisions on behalf of the entire government. It meets regularly on Fridays at its regular venue, the Trêves hall in the Binnenhof in The Hague. State secretaries do not form part of the Council of Ministers and have no vote in it. Nor do they deputise for their absent ministers. In this sense they are not real under-ministers. Fellow-ministers always stand in for ministers who are off sick, on holiday or absent for some other reason. Every so often, a state secretary will be invited to attend a meeting of the Council of Ministers when it is discussing a topic that falls within his or her area of responsibility.

The Council of Ministers is chaired by the Prime Minister, also referred to as 'Minister-President' or 'Premier'. How the Council of Ministers operates is laid down in its Standing Orders. It is assisted by a small number of standing committees, such as the Economic Affairs Council (REA) and the European and International Affairs Council (REIA). In addition, special commissions are often set up to propose ways of tackling particular problems. One of the Prime Minister's particular duties is to ensure that the various ministers coordinate their policies. High-ranking officials have access to the standing committees and special commissions so as to advise them. Thus, the President of the Dutch central bank is a member of the Economic Affairs Council for instance.

The government's duties

Under the Constitution, it is the government's task to make laws in collaboration with the two Chambers of Parliament. The government also signs international treaties, lays down foreign policies and defence policies and appoints mayors, provincial governors and members of the judiciary. The government performs the duties laid down in the Constitution under the supervision of the Parliament. Although the Parliament cannot reverse government decisions in these areas, it can let the government know it disapproves. If necessary, the Parliament can force the government to resign by passing a vote of no confidence.

Ministers

A minister heads a ministry and is thus in charge of, in many cases, thousands of civil servants. There are currently thirteen ministries, but the number can change whenever a new government is formed. The names and responsibilities of ministries can also be changed. During the post-election negotiations in 1994, the arts and culture policies were thus moved from the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Culture (which was renamed Health, Welfare and

Sports) to the Ministry of Education and Science (now Education, Culture and Science). There are currently three ministers who do not have a ministry of their own, the minister for International Cooperation and the minister for Immigration and Integration for instance. A minister who does not have a ministry of his own is known as a 'minister without a portfolio'.

Besides being the head of his ministry, a minister is a member of the government. He or she has joint responsibility for government policy as a whole, not only for his or her area of policy. Any minister can be held accountable (by Members of Parliament, fellow party members or members of the public) for the implementation of the coalition agreement.

On top of this, each minister represents his or her party in the government. This means that ministers (and state secretaries) keep in regular contact with their parliamentary party, their party's central office and its branches. The ministers and state secretaries are members of coalition parties. Many of them will have been members of the Second Chamber, but this is not essential.

A minister or state secretary cannot be a Member of Parliament, according to the Constitution. As soon as members of the Second or the First Chamber are appointed as minister or state secretary, they have to give up their seat in the Parliament.

The Prime Minister

The Prime Minister's role is a special one. He not only chairs the Council of Ministers, but he is also particularly responsible for the coordination of government policy. In addition he is the government's spokesman. He presents government policy on a Friday press conference after the Council meeting. He also represents the Netherlands in the European Council. Thus the Prime Minister plays a major role in foreign policies. It is not unusual for this to give rise to friction between him and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The Budget

An important area of government policy is the annual Budget. This reflects the influential position of the Minister of Finance. Every year, negotiations take place from January to July between the Minister of Finance and the Ministers of the big spending ministries. If they cannot agree, the Council of Ministers has to resolve the issue. The Budget must be finalised by August, as it is presented to the Parliament on 'Prinsjesdag', the third Tuesday of September.

Advisory bodies

The highest advisory body to the government is the *Council of State* (Raad van State). Members of the Council are respected former Members of Parliament, ex-ministers and jurists. They are assisted by a body of civil servants. The government must ask the Council of State for advice on every piece of draft legislation. The Council checks the quality of the legal draughtsmanship and whether the draft is compatible with existing laws. Officially, the monarch chairs the Council of State, but the de facto chairman is the vice-chairman. The Council also acts as an appeal body in administrative law cases.

The government is advised on social and economic matters by the *Social and Economic Council* (Sociaal-Economische Raad, SER), whose membership consists of representatives of

the trade unions, representatives of the business world, and experts appointed by the government. The SER has another function besides advising the government. It also heads a system of consultative bodies in various industries that have the power to lay down rules for their respective sectors.

The *Chamber of Audit* (Algemene Rekenkamer) is an independent body which monitors the legitimacy of public spending. It checks whether expenditure by the government is based on sound statutory principles. It also advises on the effectiveness of public spending—have the various items of expenditure achieved the desired effects?

Members of the public who feel they are the victims of improper conduct by a government department can lodge a complaint with the office of the *Ombudsman*. It investigates whether the complaint is justified. If so, the Ombudsman reprimands the civil servants or administrators responsible for the mistake. The Ombudsman presents an annual report to the Parliament giving an overview of the complaints made about ministries and government agencies along with recommendations on how mistakes affecting members of the public can be avoided.

It goes without saying that members of the public who feel they have been unfairly treated by a government body can also appeal to the Second Chamber, the municipal council or the courts, depending on the situation.

6. Parliament

The body that represents the people in a democracy is known as a 'parliament'. The Parliament in the Netherlands is called the *States General* and consists of two bodies, the Second Chamber and the First Chamber. The First Chamber, also referred to as the Senate, is elected by the members of the provincial councils within three months after the elections for the latter. This procedure is referred to as 'indirect' elections. These elections take place every four years. The First Chamber has 75 members (or senators). The Second Chamber has 150 members, who are elected directly by the Dutch electorate. These elections also take place every four years, unless the government falls and a pre-term election is called. The two Chambers sit in a complex of buildings around the Binnenhof in The Hague.

After the summer recess, the head of state presents the government's policy for the coming year by reading the 'King's Speech', in the presence of both Chambers of the States General. This day is called 'Prinsjesdag', the third Tuesday in September. The ceremony takes place in the medieval Ridderzaal (Knights' Hall) at the Binnenhof, not in one of the two assembly halls.

Members of Parliament*

The members of the First Chamber do not work full time in this capacity. They usually have other jobs as well. This Chamber meets once a week, usually on Tuesday. Members are paid an annual allowance of about 21,000 Euro (figures 2004) for their work in the First Chamber. They also have some expense allowances for travelling expenses and accommodation. The Second Chamber meets three times a week, on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Members of the Second Chamber work full time in this capacity. Ordinary members are paid an annual salary of 86,100 Euro gross. As many members live outside The Hague, they incur hefty travelling and accommodation expenses.

Each party in the Second Chamber has a parliamentary party office with a staff to help the members in their work. Members of the larger parties also have personal assistants who screen correspondence and documents for them and perform other secretarial duties.

Parliament's duties

The Parliament has three main duties:

- to make laws in collaboration with the government (we take a more detailed look at the legislative process below);
- to keep an eye on the government on behalf of the Dutch people as regards the implementation of laws and all other government activities;
- to represent the electorate by keeping in contact with the voters and reflecting the 'popular will' in government policy.

The Parliament is able to perform these duties because ministers are accountable to the Parliament under the Constitution. Ministers can only remain in office if they enjoy the confidence of a majority of both the Second and the First Chamber. If a majority of one of the Chambers passes a vote of no confidence in a minister (or the government as a whole), that

* Unlike in Great Britain, the term 'Member of Parliament' can refer to a member of either the Second or the First Chamber in the Netherlands.

minister or the government must resign.

Parliament's powers

To enable them to perform their legislative and supervisory duties properly the two Chambers have certain powers or rights. The Second Chamber has more powers than the Senate.

The right to amend legislation and the right to initiate legislation

As part of the legislature, the Second Chamber approves bills put forward by the government. It has the right to amend them. Members of the Second Chamber can also put forward bills themselves. The First Chamber has neither of these rights. It re-examines bills once they have been passed by the Second Chamber, but it can really only accept or reject them in their entirety; it cannot amend them. We say 'really', because in recent years there has been a growing tendency for a majority of the First Chamber to say to a minister or state secretary defending a bill, 'We shall reject your bill unless you change it in such and such a way...' In some cases, the minister changes his mind and resubmits the bill to the First Chamber with an amendment. This is referred to as an 'amending act'. The Second Chamber must also approve this 'amending act'.

The right to approve or reject the Budget

To enable them to perform their legislative and supervisory duties the two Chambers have the right to approve or reject the Budget. This is an important means of exerting influence, since without an approved budget a minister is unable to implement his policies. On 'Prinsjesdag', the government has to announce what it intends to spend money on in the coming year and how it intends to obtain that money. It does this in the Budget and in the explanatory notes, the Budget Memorandum. The Budget is debated in the Parliament as a normal bill after 'Prinsjesdag'. The ministerial budgets are debated in the two Chambers, and amended if necessary, starting in October. This process can sometimes take until well into the next spring. Both Chambers have the right to file motions urging the government to do something or to refrain from doing something.

The right to question ministers and the right to call emergency debates

Every Member of Parliament has the right to ask questions to ministers. This can be done by letter, if there is no hurry; it can take three weeks to obtain a written answer. Or the member can ask the question in the Chamber; 'question time' takes place every Tuesday in the Second Chamber and is broadcast live on television. Members often avail themselves of the right to ask questions. Both Chambers also have the right to summon a minister or state secretary to take part in an emergency debate. To call an emergency debate a member must have the approval of a majority of the Chamber, but this is almost always forthcoming. The minister or state secretary cannot refuse to attend the debate.

The right of inquiry

The right of inquiry (the right to investigate a matter fully) is a far-reaching power. The Chamber appoints a parliamentary committee of inquiry from among its members. The committee can summon anyone it wishes to interrogate for the purpose of the investigation—politicians, civil servants and members of the public. They are required to appear before the committee and answer questions on oath. The committee of inquiry makes a detailed report of its findings to the Chamber. It can draw conclusions and make recommendations but it cannot

impose penalties. Various parliamentary inquiries have been held in recent years: into the grants to the ship-builders RSV, into the bungling that went on when a new passport was introduced, into the methods of investigation used by the police and judicial authorities, into the way the plane crash at Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam was handled and more recently into massive fraud and illegal cartel agreements by construction companies.

Procedures

How the Second Chamber operates is laid down in its *Standing Orders*. The members who belong to a particular party make up its parliamentary party, which has its own leader or chair. Each parliamentary party decides on its own procedures. Members of the larger parties (the Labour Party, the Christian Democrats, the Liberal Party, Green Left and D66) often specialise more or less exclusively in a particular area of responsibility, such as foreign affairs, education or agriculture policies. Large parliamentary parties have separate committees for each area of responsibility, where their specialists in that particular area formulate the party's position and decide how it will act. Members of smaller parties cannot afford to specialise so much of course. They have to be familiar with more than one field. Plenary sittings of the Second Chamber are often attended by only a limited number of Members of Parliament. As many debates are about highly specialised topics, only the parties' specialists take part as a rule. Other meetings—of committees for instance—will be taking place at the same time. The Second Chamber is always much fuller when important matters are being debated, and often when voting is about to take place, especially on important issues. The Chamber usually votes on Tuesday afternoon. It can only vote if enough members are present, 76 to be precise (half plus one): this is known as a 'quorum'. Members sign the attendance list whenever they go into the Chamber, so this shows who is present. All sittings of the two Chambers are public, as are all documents. Anyone who wishes to do so can buy them, or you can download them for free on the Internet.

You can also watch the proceedings in person. Secretaries sitting in the middle of the Chamber keep shorthand minutes of all sittings. These are known as the Proceedings of the Second Chamber and are kept in bulky tomes.

Committees

Most of the work of the Parliament is done by parliamentary committees. There are various kinds, the most important being the standing committees. There are more than twenty standing committees for most ministers and state secretaries' areas of responsibility: Education, Finance, Justice and so on. They discuss bills and question ministers or state secretaries on how they are tackling particular matters.

The progress of a bill

A bill is a draft law or Act of Parliament. It is not referred to as an Act until it has been passed by the Parliament (first the Second Chamber, then the First Chamber). It can often take years from the introduction of the first draft of a bill to the passing of the Act, as it has to pass through a complicated process on the way. Below we set out the steps by which a bill becomes an Act. If a minister or state secretary wishes to bring in a law, he or she asks his or her civil servants to draft a text (the bill). This is then—accompanied by an 'explanatory memorandum'—discussed by the Council of Ministers. Then it is sent to the Council of State (the government's highest advisory body), which returns it, with recommendations, to the

Council of Ministers. It is then sent to the monarch. The bill is then submitted to the Second Chamber with the recommendations and a note from the monarch (the 'Royal Message'). A committee discusses the bill, draws up a report of its discussions and returns it to the minister. The minister writes a response to the report, known as the 'memorandum of reply'. The committee then draws up a final report and the bill is debated in the Second Chamber and voted upon. If the bill is passed by the Second Chamber, it goes to the First Chamber. Here it is again discussed in a committee, a report is drawn up, a memorandum of reply is written and the final report goes to the First Chamber to be debated and voted upon. If the bill is again passed there, it goes to the monarch, who signs it. The minister involved countersigns it. It then goes to the Minister of Justice, who arranges for it to be announced in the *Staatsblad* (Bulletin of Acts and Decrees). Only then does it become law.

7. Municipal government

Three tiers of government

The Netherlands is administered politically on three levels:

1. nationally, by the central government (the government and Parliament);
2. regionally, by the provincial authorities (the provincial councils and provincial executives);
3. locally, by the municipal authorities (the municipal council and the municipal executive).

Each of the three tiers of government has its own functions. This chapter deals with the municipal administration. There are 467 municipalities in the Netherlands (figure: January 1, 2005). The number is constantly diminishing as small municipalities merge into larger ones. In 1960, for instance, there still were about 1,000 municipalities.

Duties of the municipal authority

It is the municipal authority's duty to deal with matters that affect its residents directly and exclusively. This involves providing certain services and amenities. Thus the municipal authorities are responsible for streets and local roads, for housing, for the fire service, for dealing with emergencies, for collecting and disposing of domestic refuse, for markets, for abattoirs, for docks and waterways, for sewers and water treatment, for welfare facilities, for recreational and sports facilities, for the arts and for education. The municipal authorities are responsible for laying down regulations (known as bye-laws) on acceptable living conditions and public order within its area of jurisdiction. It also issues licences and permits to companies and catering establishments. Another municipal duty is laying down local plans, which regulate how the land in each particular area of the municipality may be used and what may be built there.

The dependency of municipalities

Municipalities take a lot of decisions, but they are very dependent on the central and the provincial government. Most of the money they have at their disposal for these duties comes from the central government, and The Hague tells them how they are to use it in many cases. In recent years, the central government have delegated a number of tasks to the municipal authorities however, for example in social security benefits, education, and nurseries. The main guidelines emanate from the central government, but the municipality has some freedom to implement policies in these fields.

The central government can annul or suspend decisions by a municipality if it considers them against the law or not in the public interest. A local plan cannot be implemented without the agreement of the provincial authorities. Another example of supervision is the fact that each municipality's budget must be approved by the provincial executive.

Municipal finance

Most of the money municipalities need to carry out these duties comes from the central government (about 80 percent). A part of it is accounted for by specific grants, money that is earmarked by the central government for particular purposes such as social security benefits, urban renewal or education. Municipal authorities also receive money from the Municipalities Fund. How much each municipality receives from the Fund depends on various factors—

population, area of land, area of water, number of dwellings and so on. In theory, municipalities can decide for themselves how to use the money from the Fund, but in practice there are some guidelines to adhere to. In addition to the income they receive from The Hague, municipalities obtain money from their residents in the form of local taxes (property tax and dog tax, for example). Municipal authorities also make residents pay for the services they provide in the form of charges and fees (e.g. sewerage and cleansing charges and fees for passports and driving licences). This income 'of their own' accounts for about twenty percent of the total funds that municipalities have at their disposal.

Municipal administration

The municipal council is elected directly by the municipal electorate. The council has representative, controlling and policy-making functions. Only the municipal council can lay down bye-laws, municipal taxes or amendments to the budget. Those duties that are explicitly entrusted by law to the mayor or the municipal executive are outside the competence of the local councillors. The organisation of municipalities is laid down by the Municipalities Act. The size of the municipality determines how many councillors sit on the municipal council. The smallest municipalities have only 9 councillors, while towns and cities with a population of over 200,000 have 45. The municipal executive, which consists of the mayor and the aldermen, is responsible for the day-to-day running of the municipality. The number of aldermen depends on the size of the municipality too. The minimum is two aldermen, while the cities have a maximum of nine. The municipal executive does the groundwork for council meetings and implements council decisions. The work of the municipality is actually done by civil servants, of course, but the municipal executive is accountable to the council for this.

Municipal councillors

Throughout the country, the members of the municipal councils are all elected at the same time every four years. Councillors are amateurs. They usually do their work in municipal politics alongside their normal jobs. They are not salaried but they do receive an allowance and an expense allowance. Membership of the municipal council costs a lot of time and effort, especially in large municipalities. Considerable expertise in various fields of municipal responsibility is also required, which is why the larger municipalities have councils consisting almost entirely of highly qualified people. You can become a municipal councillor by being put forward by a political party on its list of candidates. The higher up the list you are, the more chance you have of getting on the council. You can also form a party yourself and submit a list. The councillors of a particular party make up its municipal party, which elects a chair from among its members.

Aldermen

After the elections, the biggest parties thrash out the municipal policies for the next four years. A particularly important issue is which parties will supply one or more of the aldermen, and thus what the make-up of the municipal executive will be. To run the municipality, its executive must have the confidence of a majority in the council. As there are few municipalities where a single party has the majority, it is almost always necessary for two or more parties to form a coalition. The aldermen are selected by the parties who have formed a majority in this way and have agreed on a programme. Aldermen can be selected either from inside or outside the municipal council, but once appointed they cannot simultaneously be councillors. These aldermen form a majority executive with the mayor as their chair. The

parties that supply aldermen are the ruling parties; the others are the opposition parties. Each alderman has one or more areas of responsibility, known as his or her 'portfolio'. Thus, there will often be a Sports, Welfare and Culture Alderman, a Transport, Housing and Planning Alderman, an Economic Affairs (employment!) Alderman and a Financial Affairs Alderman. Being an alderman is a full-time job (and an onerous one) in the larger municipalities, and they are fully paid.

The mayor

Mayors in the Netherlands are not elected but appointed by the government, in effect by the Minister of Home Affairs. They are appointed for a six year renewable term. The municipal council and the provincial governor play an important role in putting forward candidates to the government. The municipal council presents a list with at least two names of candidates on it to the Minister of Home Affairs. The minister usually appoints the first person on the list, but he or she can make another choice in which case there is a conflict between the minister and the council. This actually happens sometimes, because one of the factors in the appointment of mayors is the party the candidate belongs to. In the larger towns and cities in particular there is often a tug-of-war among the parties for the right to supply the mayor. National politicians are often parachuted as mayor in bigger municipalities, but generally mayors are recruited for their managerial skills and experience in local government, often as alderman or senior civil servant in another municipality.

For a long time, there has been an ongoing fierce political debate about the way mayors are appointed. A lot of people and several political parties, think it is an undemocratic procedure. Some are in favour of a more outspoken political position of mayors, who should be elected directly by the citizens of the municipality. Others would rather have mayors elected by the municipal council.

The mayor chairs the municipal council and the municipal executive. At council meetings, he or she has the right to express his or her opinion but not to vote—unlike on the municipal executive, where the mayor has the casting vote in the event of a tie. The mayor represents the municipality on official occasions. The law lays down that the mayor is responsible for law and order and safety in the municipality (police and fire services). He or she can, for instance, ban a football match or demonstration if disturbances are expected. In small and medium-sized municipalities he or she also has a portfolio. He or she is then responsible, just like an alderman, for formulating and implementing policies in certain areas.

Meetings

Municipal councils meet once a month, and more frequently in the case of some large municipalities. Council meetings are public. The agenda is published well in advance, often in the local newspaper. Most of the topics debated at council meetings have already been discussed in committees. Municipalities have various types of committees. 'Standing committees' are made up entirely of councillors and discuss matters on certain fields of policy. Then there are committees made up of experts and/or interested residents. These committees are given a remit by the municipal executive, for instance to make recommendations on arts policies or sports policies. The council can also appoint committees and authorise them to help administer part of the municipality, a district or housing estate; this is referred to as 'devolution'. Devolution entails transferring powers from a higher to a lower

level. Thus, the central government can devolve responsibilities to provincial or municipal authorities. Municipalities can devolve responsibilities internally by setting up committees to take over powers from the council. The most far-reaching example is the setting up of district councils in the municipality of Amsterdam. The municipality has given them almost as many powers and resources as 'real' municipalities have.

Public participation

To involve the public more in decision-making, the municipal executive often organises hearings or public participation meetings at which the alderman concerned explains the municipality's plans. Residents can ask questions or give their responses. Members of the public are also entitled to speak at committee meetings.

Municipal referendums have become a more common occurrence in recent times. These enable the population to approve or reject a decision by the council. Legally, the council always has the last word, so the result of a referendum is really no more than a recommendation to the council at present. If residents are unhappy with a particular decision by the municipality, they can appeal to the council's Appeals Committee. In recent years, many municipal authorities have been involving local residents, companies and organisations directly in the formulation of policy in certain areas. Thus, if a decision is needed on the refurbishment of a square or the renewal of a district, the municipality might organise meetings at which residents can contribute ideas in the initial stages of policy formulation. This is referred to as *interactive policy-making*. In this way, members of the public can help to draw up plans themselves, rather than merely responding to ready-made plans. The council takes the final decision. Another possibility for citizens to influence policy is the citizens' initiative. They have the right to place a topic on the council agenda.

8. Provinces

There is a third tier of administration between the municipal government and the national government: the provincial government. The directly elected body is the provincial council, and the executive body, responsible for day-to-day running, is the provincial executive. This chapter deals with the provincial administration. The Netherlands has twelve provinces, most of which have been in existence since the late Middle Ages. The newest province, which came into being in 1986, is Flevoland.

Duties of the provincial authorities

Few Dutch citizens know precisely what the provincial government does. Here is an overview of the principal duties.

1. Planning and housing

Town and country planning is the most important responsibility of the province. Planning involves allocating the space available in the province for the various uses. The provincial authorities decide where to put roads, railway lines, waterways, residential and industrial areas, agricultural areas and nature reserves and recreational facilities. This is all set out in *structure plans*. A structure plan determines how the municipalities involved are allowed to draw up their own plans. In this way the plans of the various municipalities are coordinated. Because of their importance, provinces take their time when drawing up structure plans. First the situation is thoroughly examined. Only when the municipalities involved, various campaign groups and interested citizens have had an opportunity to express their opinions does the provincial council debate the structure plan. It often takes years before the final decision is taken.

2. Environmental management

The provincial authorities enforce the environmental laws on air, soil and water through by-laws and licensing systems. They deal with pollution, for instance by means of soil decontamination programmes and water treatment plants. They also regulate where building rubble, scrap, industrial waste and other harmful waste are to be stored. Nature conservation and protection of the countryside are also part of environmental management.

3. Welfare

The provincial authorities plan a wide range of welfare facilities such as old people's homes, hospitals, public libraries, schools, facilities for the mentally and physically handicapped and youth clubs.

4. Water management

The provincial authorities are responsible for water management in the province. They supervise the work of the water control corporations, the bodies responsible for areas smaller than a province, with administrations elected by residents and property owners, which ensure that the water level does not get too high or too low and that water quality is good. The province is also responsible for public works, that is for the construction and maintenance of provincial highways, bridges and viaducts.

5. Economic and agricultural matters

The province is responsible for land consolidation and for promoting employment. All provincial authorities encourage businesses, which create jobs, to locate there. This sometimes calls for a difficult balancing act, balancing jobs against environmental protection. Another important responsibility is managing the provincial electricity, water and gas companies.

6. Supervising the municipal authorities

An important task is supervising the work of the municipal authorities. All decisions by municipalities which have financial repercussions must be approved by the provincial authorities. Consequently a municipality must have its annual budget approved by the provincial executive.

7. Administration of justice

Lastly, anyone who has come into conflict with a municipal authority and considers that it is acting unreasonably can appeal to the provincial executive—for example if someone is unhappy with a municipal decision on social security benefit or has an objection to a local plan.

Provincial finance

To fulfil these duties a province needs a lot of money, which it gets mainly from the central government by way of the Provinces Fund. It also has some sources of income of its own, the principal one being the surcharge on road tax, the percentage of which can differ from one province to another.

Electing the First Chamber

The members of provincial councils have one duty which has nothing to do with their particular provinces, the duty to elect the members of the First Chamber (also known as the senators). These are elected indirectly. The provincial electorates elect the members of the provincial councils, who elect the members of this Chamber. In practice, provincial council members almost always elect senators from their own parties, so the composition of the First Chamber can be calculated fairly accurately from the results of the provincial council elections.

Provincial administration

The provincial council (Provinciale Staten) is a directly elected body. The number of councillors depends on the size of the province. Zeeland, for instance, being the one with the smallest population, has 47. The provinces of North Holland and South Holland, which have the largest populations, have 83 each. The members of the provincial council elect the members of the provincial executive (Gedeputeerde Staten) from inside or outside the council. Members of this executive may not be simultaneously member of the provincial council. The provincial executive consists of six to eight members plus the provincial governor and is responsible for the day-to-day running of the province and the execution of policies, laid down by the council. It ensures that the work of the province is carried out by provincial civil servants and does the groundwork for provincial council meetings. Decisions on budget, policy plans and provincial bye-laws are made by the provincial council.

Provincial councillors and members of the provincial executive

Being a member of a provincial council is not a full-time job. The councillors usually have another job alongside their administrative work, so they are not employees of the province. They receive an allowance rather than a salary. Unlike membership of the provincial council, membership of the provincial executive is a full-time job, for which members receive a salary. Provincial councillors are comparable to municipal councillors, and members of the provincial executive to aldermen.

The provincial governor

Like mayors, provincial governors (commissarissen van de koningin) are not elected but appointed by the government. The major political parties play an important role here. A party may claim a post because it feels it is underrepresented, or it may exchange one for another coveted post. Some politicians who have been ministers or party chairs are keen to become provincial governor, since they regard this as a quiet job where they can while away their time until retirement. The salary is an incentive. Provincial governors are among the best paid officials. Many provincial governors have jobs on the side for which they are often paid. The provincial governor chairs the provincial executive and the provincial council. He or she is legally responsible for maintaining public order in the province, reporting directly to the Minister of Home Affairs. He or she also represents the province in certain contexts and plays a role in the appointment of mayors in his or her province.

Elections

The Constitution lays down that the members of the provincial council (provincial councillors) are elected by provincial residents aged 18 and over. Elections take place every four years. Any party wishing to take part in an election must submit a list of candidates to the central election committee in the province a few months in advance. As in general elections, the candidates and their parties campaign to put across their political objectives to the voters. After the elections, the provincial councillors belonging to a particular party make up the provincial party. As for the composition of the provincial executive, it often contains members from all the major parties in the provincial council.

Meetings

The provincial council meets once a month and the meetings are chaired by the provincial governor. Only the councillors have the right to vote in these meetings. The members of the provincial executive and the governor do not. The governor does have the right to vote at meetings of the provincial executive, where he or she has the casting vote in the event of a tie. The provincial council has a lot of matters to debate, so to expedite its meetings the various topics are first discussed in committee. The committees consist of party specialists, members who specialise in that particular topic on behalf of their parties. Each committee is chaired by a member, elected by and among members of this committee.

Public participation

Educational activities are organised to encourage members of the public to become involved. Each province has a department which is specifically responsible for providing information on provincial policy and answering questions from members of the public. To ensure the provincial authorities do not make decisions from an ivory tower, plans are often the subject of public participation. Hearings are organised to give all interested parties the chance to

express their opinions, which the provincial executive and provincial council can take into account when reaching their decisions. Meetings of the provincial council and its committees are public. They take place in the provincial government building, which is situated in the provincial capital.

9. Addresses

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Some acronyms and abbreviations

B&W	Burgemeester en Wethouders [mayer and aldermen, or municipal executive]
CDA	Christen Democratisch Appèl [Christian Democrats]
D66	Democraten 66 [social Liberals]
DG	Director General or Directorate General [(head of) of main department of a ministry]
GS	Gedeputeerde Staten [provincial executive]
LPF	Lijst Pim Fortuyn (Party founded in the beginning of 2002 by Pim Fortuyn, a populist politician murdered May 6, 2002)
PvdA	Partij van de Arbeid [Labour Party]
REA	Raad voor Economische Aangelegenheden [Economic Affairs Council] (standing committee of the Council of Ministers)
REZ	Raad voor Europese Zaken [European Affairs Council] (standing committee of the Council of Ministers)
RRO	Raad voor Ruimtelijke Ordening [Planning Council] (standing committee of the Council of Ministers)
SER	Sociaal Economische Raad (Social and Economic Council, advisory body to the government)
SG	Secretary General (highest ranking civil servant of a ministry)
SGP	Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (Protestant-Reformed Political party)
SP	Socialistische Partij [Socialist Party]
VROM	Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer [Ministry of) Housing, Planning and Environment]
VVD	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie [Liberal Party]
VWS	Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport [(Ministry of) Health, Welfare and Sports]