

**REFRAMING A NATIONAL NARRATIVE
OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION:**

**THE SHIFTING CONTOURS
OF THE DUTCH EUROPEAN DEBATE**

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Reframing a National Narrative of European Integration:

The Shifting Contours of the Dutch European Debate

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Abstract

This paper examines the principal contributions to debates surrounding European integration which have appeared in the Netherlands since the country's rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in June 2005. Party programmatic statements, the results of public consultation exercises, the principal governmental advisory reports, and the policy statements of the recently formed Balkenende IV government are all surveyed. A picture emerges of a clearly defined national discourse on Europe, informed by what is presently termed a 'limits of Europe' approach. Strongly emphasising the principle of subsidiarity, this approach is primarily concerned with delimiting both the substantive and the geographical reach of the European Union, though recognising that selective expansion may be desirable. This distinctive, national framing of European issues is then further placed in comparative perspective, suggesting the particular difficulties which may have to be faced by Dutch political elites as they embark upon a new round of treaty reform negotiations.

Introduction

The decisive 'No' delivered by Dutch voters to the European Constitutional Treaty on 1 June 2005 may be ascribed to a complex amalgam of factors. Certainly, the mishandling of the campaign by the principal governmental and opposition parties aligned on the 'Yes' side played an important role. So too may the referendum result be read as at least partially a sign of a deeper political malaise, variously reflecting both a narrow rejection of the government of the day and a wider vote of non-confidence in national elites. Nevertheless, it is clear from exit polling that attitudes towards 'Europe', if less perhaps judgments about the Constitutional Treaty itself, played a central role in structuring the outcome of the vote.¹ Both tangible grievances such as the size of the net Dutch budget contribution and less tangible anxieties concerned with a loss national identity emerge as having motivated Dutch 'No' voters. Although in no sense a rejection of European integration, the Dutch vote may thus be seen as expressing an underlying 'Euroscepticism', to the extent that it drew on an ambient climate of criticism which had come to surround the European Union in Dutch political debate. Indeed, the success of the 'No' campaign in the Netherlands may significantly be read in terms of the relatively skilful exploitation of this climate by the Treaty's opponents, who were able to make use of a wider arsenal of mainstream criticisms of the EU in mounting their more specific attack on the text (cf. Rood 2005).

¹ See Aarts and van der Kolk (2005, 2006) and Harmsen (2005) for overviews of the referendum.

The ‘critical turn’ in Dutch European debate preceding the referendum may in part be understood in terms of the re-emergence of a traditional discourse of ‘national interest’ – and, still more, a sense that the Netherlands was being uniquely disadvantaged in the realisation of this interest within the European arena.² This renewed discourse of national interest may be traced back to the early 1990s. At the time, Liberal (VVD) leader Frits Bolkestein controversially argued that the country must not be hamstrung by its elite’s internationalist instincts, and must more resolutely ‘fight its corner’ in European negotiations. Bolkestein’s position found further support in the public stances of his party colleague, long-serving Finance Minister Gerrit Zalm. Notably, it was Zalm who made something of a *cause célèbre* of the size of the Dutch budget contribution, as well as adopting a sharply critical public stance concerning what he regarded as the laxity with which the Eurozone budget deficit requirements were applied in the cases of Germany and France. All of this found rather evocative expression in the popular image of the country as the ‘*Gekke Henkie*’ of the EU – in effect, the ‘dupe’ whose gullibility or good intentions were being systematically exploited by its more guileful or powerful partners (cf. Petter and Griffiths 2005).

At the same time as this renewed discourse of national interest was gaining ground, a growing perception of a ‘misfit’ between the Dutch political system and its EU counterpart was also taking hold. The Netherlands had long had a very comfortable position within the EU. It had very much, to use a more general epithet, experienced European integration as a ‘warm bath’ rather than a ‘cold shower’. Historically, there had appeared to be a natural ‘goodness of fit’ between the Dutch political model and its emerging EU counterpart, both based on predominately inclusive, consensual styles of policy-making. Similarly, the broad development of the European integration project appeared to correspond almost ‘naturally’ to Dutch foreign policy goals, providing a highly institutionalised, multilateral framework within which to manage its key political and commercial relationships. It was, indeed, against this background that the perception took hold, both in the country and abroad, of the Netherlands as a staunch supporter of a European ‘federalist’ project – although this was always something of a thinly rooted ‘*faux fédéralisme*’ (cf. Koch 2001).

This cosy consensus, which tended to accept ‘more Europe’ relatively unquestioningly as a ‘Good Thing’, has progressively eroded since the early 1990s. It has been replaced by what might be termed a ‘limits of Europe’ discursive framework.³ Essentially, as suggested by this label, the centre of gravity of Dutch political discourse is now one which continues to provide broad support for national participation in the project of European integration, but which has principally come to be concerned with defining the substantive and geographical limits of that project. Substantively, a range of concerns have grown and found expression across the political spectrum as to the manner

² See Harmsen (2004) and Vollaard and Boer (2005, 2006) for overviews of the longer term rise of Dutch Euroscepticism.

³ I have borrowed the term ‘limits of Europe’ from the title of a 2004 book by Frits Bolkestein published in both Dutch and English (Bolkestein 2004a; 2004b). The book itself, essentially a collection of interviews with MEPs who had previously prominent national political careers, has not been particularly influential – but does, in its introduction, set out a vision of the dual substantive and geographical limits of the European Union which is illustrative of the wider discursive frame presently examined.

in which 'Europe' may be unduly interfering with distinctive national policy choices. At the same time, the continued geographical enlargement of the Union has also become a subject of political discussion – both as regards objections to particular enlargements and with respect to the more general implications of this expansion for the Netherlands' place as a comparatively small player in a much larger entity. In many respects, this discursive evolution may be seen as reflecting both a normal 'politicisation' of European debate and as a consequent response to the country's changed geopolitical situation. Yet, it also has tended to entrench a (literally) negative image of European integration in domestic debate, with discussion of the European Union essentially coming to be focused on the necessity of its limitation. The consequences of this discursive framing have been nicely captured by (then) Labour Party chair Ruud Koole (2005), who spoke of a 'European monster' as having inadvertently arisen in Dutch pro-European discourse – with the Constitutional Treaty having correspondingly come to be portrayed not as a positive institutional project, but rather primarily as a means to tame the beast.

Against this background, the challenge of the post-referendum period for the Dutch political elite could consequently be seen as that of reframing a national narrative of European integration. In part, this challenge may be conceived as one of institutional reform and renewal, providing more effective channels of representation as regards European issues in the national political process. In part, the challenge is also that of representation in a wider discursive or cultural sense, demanding the provision of a more positively articulated vision of the nation's place and purpose within the European Union.

The question thus remains as to whether, in the two years now passed since the 2005 referendum, these challenges have been met. The present paper, to that end, provides a detailed survey of the evolution of Dutch party positions on European integration in the intervening period, of the successes and failures of wider processes of public consultation, of the contributions of the specialist policy community, and finally of the European policy of the newly installed Balkenende IV government. The portrait which emerges is, as will be seen, essentially one in which the broad contours of Dutch European debate have not shifted. The 'limits of Europe' discursive paradigm outlined above continues to define the parameters of discussion, albeit in a progressively more consolidated and elaborated form. The implications of this discursive continuity are finally discussed in the conclusion, which also places the Dutch case in comparative perspective.

Political Parties

Consistent with previous Dutch elections and experience elsewhere, European issues did not figure with any prominence in the campaign for the November 2006 national parliamentary election. Indeed, the virtual absence of such discussion drew criticism both from academic commentators (van Grinsven et al. 2006; *de Volkskrant*, 10 November 2006) and from the government's own Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV 2006).

Yet, though there has not been a competitive politicisation of European issues, those issues did not completely disappear off the radar screens of the main Dutch political

parties. Most notably, all five of the principal parties which had campaigned on the losing 'Yes' side in the referendum issued some form of report or note reviewing their European policy in the year after the vote. That all five should have engaged in an exercise of this type is a telling indication of the extent of the shock which the vote represented to much of the Dutch political establishment. Yet, the limits of these exercises also rapidly become apparent. In no case did the reviews produce a major shift in party policy. Rather, these documents for the most part served to confirm existing party positions on European integration, at best providing for a somewhat more detailed articulation of specific policy choices. The broad contours of party-based European debate in the Netherlands have thus remained essentially unchanged, defined both before and after the referendum principally with reference to an overarching 'limits of Europe' discourse.

Strikingly, given the *'faux fédéraliste'* consensus which had once marked the Dutch debate, it is now only the small (and declining) left-liberal Democrats '66 who espouse an explicitly federal vision of European integration. The party, indeed, presents itself as maintaining this 'pro-European' position in a situation where 'the wind is blowing the other way and many parties are choosing on the basis of opinion polls to opt for a more cautious position as regards Europe' (Democraten '66 2005: 3). The detailed document published by the party's parliamentary party in December 2005 resolutely nails its colours to the mast, calling for the abolition of all national vetoes and progressive moves towards the establishment of a 'United States of Europe'. Much the same message is also found in the party's 2006 electoral manifesto, which again reaffirms its commitment to a 'federal Europe' (Democraten '66 2006: 63-64), while also making the case for clearer, unencumbered grants of power to the European level, including the formation of a European army.

The 'Euro-enthusiasm' of the Democrats '66 finds a more limited echo in the position of the other comparatively small party which had formed part of the 2005 'Yes' camp – GreenLeft. Although still accurately classifiable as a 'soft Eurosceptic' party in the late 1990s, the party has in recent years moved in a resolutely, though not electorally unproblematic 'pro-European' direction. GreenLeft has maintained its earlier criticisms of both the democratic shortcomings of European institutions and the environmental failings of EU policies, but has broadly come to see the remedy for these problems to lie in the further development of European integration. It is this earlier shift in policy which finds continued expression in the May 2006 position document, 'Freely European', jointly produced by the party's national and European parliamentary groups (GroenLinks 2006). The document, reflecting the more general national climate of opinion, calls for 'less Europe' in some areas, including the removal of any threat of European-level 'interference' (*bemoeienis*) in such sensitive areas of national policy as abortion, euthanasia, and soft drugs. It also, more generally, proposes the adoption of a 'Charter of National Competences', intended to allay fears of a creeping infringement by 'Brussels' on national life. At the same time, however, there is an advocacy of 'more Europe' in a relatively wide range of policy areas, most prominently extending to those concerned with transborder environmental and social problems. The GreenLeft policy document also, alone amongst the recent position statements of the principal Dutch parties, displays

an appetite for a further round of constitutional debate – supporting the establishment of a new Convention, which would include a proportion of directly elected members and whose handiwork would be subject to subsequent ratification by a Europe-wide referendum.

A comparable ‘check listing’ approach, identifying areas in which either ‘more’ or ‘less’ ‘Europe’ is deemed desirable, was adopted in the discussion documents produced by the three large parties which had formed the core of the 2005 ‘Yes’ camp. These documents, though of varying length and detail, display a striking similarity of both content and tone. The position papers produced by the Christian Democrats (CDA), the Labour Party (PvdA), and the Liberals (VVD) are all careful to stress the manifold historical and contemporary benefits of European integration for the Netherlands, sounding variations on a well-established, if decreasingly resonant discourse linking the integration project to post-war ‘peace and prosperity’. From this basis, all three party documents also identify areas in which the further development of European co-operation appears either desirable or necessary – and, in so doing, all specify much the same range of current, high-profile issue areas (encompassing sustainable development, immigration and asylum policy, cross-border crime, and terrorism). The three parties further uniformly show themselves to be supporters of the continued development of European foreign policy co-operation. Yet, though recognising the benefits of past and (selected) future European co-operation, all three documents conversely also stress the need for clearer limits to be placed on the European integration project, viewing subsidiarity and proportionality (though not always by name) as the guiding principles for the future development of the Union. The specific areas of concern highlighted by the individual parties in this vein do, nonetheless, predictably somewhat differ in light of their differing ideological positions and electoral constituencies. Finally, all three party documents devote significant attention to the question of the geographical limits of the EU, with the need for a strict(er) adherence to the Copenhagen criteria in relation to future enlargement(s) emerging as a shared concern. The CDA, however, shows a particular concern with firmly - and restrictively - fixing the ultimate boundaries of the Union.

Amongst the bigger parties, the most extensive internal consultation process was undertaken by the Labour Party. The party leadership was concerned that the referendum not be allowed to open a more enduring breach between itself and the party grassroots, insofar as all polling showed a clear majority of PvdA supporters to have opted for a ‘No’ vote. That this was a driving motivation for the exercise can perhaps be no better illustrated than with reference to the title of the final working group report, ‘Europe: Winning Back Trust’ (PvdA 2005). Substantively, the final report set out a comparatively detailed and cohesive blueprint for the future direction of policy, strongly anchored in a principle of subsidiarity (though never directly using the term). This broadly may be seen to rest on two axes. First, the document was concerned to limit the reach of internal market regulation. In this vein, it argues that greater scope should be left for regional and local variations in areas without direct cross-border consequences, as well as for the maintenance and development of existing forms of public/private partnerships (particularly important, in the Dutch case, in areas such as public housing). Second, taking the opposite tack to that of some of its sister parties (most prominently,

the French Socialist Party), the document argues forcefully *against* the further development of a ‘social Europe’. This rejection partly stems from a stated desire to maintain higher national standards, though the case is also more generally made that the existing differences of provision reflect deeply embedded national practices which could not beneficially be harmonised. Rather, the document suggests a less intrusive approach, in which a possible ‘rat race to the bottom’ would be prevented by a requirement that member states be held accountable for the maintenance of their own self-declared standards (with additional reference to agreed EU minimum norms). An underlying concern with the application of a strict subsidiarity rule is further manifest in the report’s relatively novel call for a greater self-discipline, arguing that the party should not opportunistically seek to realise policy goals at the European level, if blocked at the national level, when there is not an overriding case for European-level regulation.

The report, accepted as a ‘basis for discussion’ at the Labour Party’s December 2005 congress, generated significant internal criticism – both from those wishing a return to a more strongly ‘pro-European’ line, and those who wished a more ‘Euro-critical’ (if not ‘Eurosceptic’) turn. The broad outlines of the report may, nonetheless, be seen to have left an imprint on the European section of the party’s 2006 electoral manifesto. Here, amplifying the self-described ‘Euro-realism’ which had already marked the 2002 programme, emphasis is evenly balanced between stressing the benefits of the integration project and its necessary limits – with those limits again explicitly tied to the preservation of distinctive national models of welfare provision and public services (PvdA 2006). Beyond the manifesto itself, it is further noteworthy that party leader Wouter Bos continued to sound a relatively critical note as regards European integration. As he described his position in a brief book issued during the election campaign: ‘Yes, I see Europe as unavoidable. I’m not really a Europe fan. Critical member, you might say. Not a Eurosceptic, for that I am too aware of Europe’s achievements’ (Bos 2006: 48-49)

Probably the most prominent post-referendum discussions in the Liberal Party have surrounded the VVD’s strategic choices. In September 2005, MP and foreign affairs spokesman Hans van Baalen gave public voice to wider doubts when he openly lamented the party’s choice to have campaigned in favour of the Constitutional Treaty (*Het Parool*, 29 September 2005). In effect, though the party leadership had remained united (if on occasion demonstrably unenthusiastic) in its support for the Treaty during the campaign itself, it had consistently adopted a markedly more critical tone throughout the negotiating phase – with party spokespeople having regularly hammered home the message that ‘no Treaty’ would ultimately be preferable to a ‘bad Treaty’ (citing, in this latter respect, a number of provisions ultimately included in the final text). At the least, this sent a decidedly mixed message to its electorate – and, in this, reflected a longer-term dilemma whereby the party’s adoption of an increasingly critical discourse on European integration had repeatedly appeared divorced from practical consequences when key policy choices had to be made. Such strategic questions apart, the party’s substantive policy line has not seriously been called into question. Both of the principal candidates for the party leadership in 2006, though clearly representing distinct (‘populist’ and ‘establishment’) wings of the party, explicitly situated themselves in terms of a continuity with the relatively critical stance on European integration first staked out by Frits

Bolkestein (*NRC Handelsblad*, 9 May 2006). Emphasis thus continued to be placed on a self-styled pragmatic approach to European co-operation, centred on the full realisation of the internal market and more generally defined with reference to a strict adherence to a principle of subsidiarity. The party's five-point European agenda adopted in June 2006 (VVD 2006a), as well as the passage dealing with the European Union in its brief electoral programme (VVD 2006b), also followed much the same line. In keeping with the general tenor of the national European debate, these documents expressed selective support for increased European co-operation in areas such as energy and foreign policy, while at the same time calling for the rolling back of 'unnecessary' European regulation and insisting that more effective national control should be exercised over European decision-making.

The Christian Democrats were somewhat less shaken by the referendum result than their Liberal and Labour counterparts. Most polling data showed that self-declared CDA voters were, relatively, among the more supportive segments of the electorate as regards the Constitutional Treaty in the 2005 vote. The party is also somewhat less directly exposed to challenges from proximate 'Eurosceptic' parties, insofar as the growth potential of the smaller Christian parties remains restricted by traditional confessional and other boundaries. The CDA, nonetheless, also felt obliged to undertake an internal review of its European policy, and did so in terms which joined with the more general national refrain. Its March 2006 discussion note (CDA 2006a) reflected the prevailing concern to provide a clearer demarcation of the boundaries of the European integration project, ultimately striking much the same balance between demands for 'more' and 'less' 'Europe' to those previously discussed. As noted above, the CDA document, however, particularly stood out for its strong concern to fix the geographical boundaries of the Union. In a section evocatively titled 'Bringing Europe to Order', the report set out a comparatively restrictive view as regards future enlargements. Most notably, it argued that, for the foreseeable future, no further enlargements should be envisaged or promised to any country beyond the three candidate states already in the queue – and that the accession of those states should be subject to very tight controls on fulfillment of the relevant criteria (including that of the Union's own absorption capacity). Forms of partnership, not (necessarily) leading to membership, were conversely stressed as desirable alternatives – both for the three candidates for full membership and for those countries (notably in the Western Balkans) which would be excluded *a priori* from such membership by this policy line. The formal party position, as enunciated in its 2006 electoral manifesto, did not go as far as the (quasi-)final demarcation of the geographical limits of the EU advocated by the discussion note, but did lay comparable emphasis on the desirability of finding intermediate forms of association with the EU, in preference to the continued extension of full membership (CDA 2006b).

Moving beyond the parties in the 2005 'Yes' camp, there is also a noteworthy similarity of approaches to questions surrounding European integration across the referendum divide. Most of the parties which had campaigned for a 'No' to the Constitutional Treaty may, nonetheless, be seen as broadly situating themselves relative to much the same 'limits of Europe' discourse which has come to permeate the Dutch

debate over the course of the past decade. In doing so, they evidently drew different conclusions as to where that boundary should lie in terms of the broad question of the constitutional character of the Union – but do not necessarily do so on more specific policy questions.

The 2006 election manifesto of the most prominent party in the ‘No’ camp, the Socialist Party, is illustrative of this more general pattern. The party’s discussion of European integration continues to be characterised by a studied ‘Eurosceptic’ tone – both strongly criticising the ‘neoliberal’ direction taken by the process and brandishing the threat of a putative ‘European superstate’. More substantively, however, the party position is one which stresses that ‘European co-operation within the framework of the EU should limit itself to the internal market and cross-border questions, such as the fight against terrorism, the environment, energy, and asylum policy’ (Socialistische Partij 2006: 68). As such, on questions of traditional domestic policy, there is relatively little difference between the boundaries which the SP seeks to impose on the European project and those advocated by the mainstream parties which it had opposed during the referendum campaign – and this all the more so as the SP has, despite its continued critique of ‘neoliberalism’, moved towards an explicit acceptance of the foundations of the internal market. It is now principally the party’s marked reticence as regards the further development of an EU foreign policy that substantively places it outside of the mainstream consensus on the desirable demarcation of national and European areas of competence.

The smaller Christian parties which had campaigned on the ‘No’ side during the referendum may also be situated within this discursive mould. This is consistent with a longer-term transition since the 1980s, which has seen the Christian Union (CU) and the Political Reform Party (SGP) move from a fundamental (and, indeed, fundamentalist) opposition to European integration towards a more limited, critical stance (Vollaard 2005; 2006). More specifically, in the case of the Christian Union, its 2006 electoral manifesto sets out a relatively detailed blueprint of the division of competence between the European and national levels, with the core areas of European competence in this vision being defined as the internal market, agriculture, environment, and immigration and asylum policy (ChristenUnie 2006: 49). The smaller and more conservative SGP does not delve into European questions in comparable depth in its 2006 electoral programme, but strikes much the same note as its counterpart – calling for a ‘practical’ and ‘problem-solving’ Europe operating within clearly demarcated set of powers (SGP 2006: 55). Again, the broad approach to the question thus readily fits within a ‘limits of Europe’ logic, with the two parties significantly distinguishing themselves from the mainstream consensus only by their opposition on principle to Turkish EU membership (a position shared by none of the bigger parties, although it had been a source of considerable controversy within the CDA).

It is only – and perhaps ominously – Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom (PvV) which may be seen to hold to a relatively ‘hard’ Eurosceptic line (Groep Wilders/ PvV 2006). In contrast to the careful balancing of areas of ‘more’ and ‘less’ ‘Europe’ seen in the case of the other parties on both sides of the referendum question, the Wilders group

simply advocates a blanket ban on the transfer of any further powers to Brussels, while also demanding the renationalisation of substantial (though undefined) swaths of powers already delegated (beyond those strictly necessary for economic co-operation). The group further calls for the abolition of the European Parliament (echoing a position taken by the late Pim Fortuyn), as well as a ‘strong limitation’ of the European Commission. To this may finally be added the abolition of the Schengen visa, the (unilateral) reduction of the net Dutch budget contribution, and – perhaps most prominently – opposition to Turkish EU membership (‘Turkey in; the Netherlands out’).

The overall picture to emerge from this brief survey of Dutch party positions is thus one, as graphically illustrated below, with a clear centre of gravity. **[Diagram 1 about here]** Seven of the nine parties currently represented in the Dutch parliament which have expressed a clear policy line on European integration have done so in terms which may be readily situated within the ‘limits of Europe’ discursive paradigm presently suggested.⁴ All express broad support for the European integration project, while at the same time seeking selectively to define both areas for its further development and core areas of national sovereignty on which it must not be allowed to tread. Moreover, the demarcation of these two spheres of competence, insofar as they are clearly spelled out, also appears to be a subject of relatively wide consensus – crossing traditional boundaries between the left and right, as well as encompassing both governmental and ‘protest’ parties. Only the Democrats’66, maintaining their traditional ‘federalist’ legacy, and Geert Wilders, professing a strong Euroscepticism as part of a broader right-wing populism, emerge as outliers. This picture, as suggested by Van Grinsven et al. (2006: 21), is perhaps one of a typically Dutch process of *‘platpolderen’* – a flattening or accommodation of diverse political positions into a broad, if potentially unworkable consensus. It is also, in this context, the evidence of a ‘Europe debate’ whose basic contours, at least in its party political dimension, have not significantly shifted since the 2005 vote.

Public Consultation

The ‘reflection period’ in the Netherlands has further seen broader public consultations, although the first attempt at establishing such an exercise ended in a noteworthy and very public failure. In the immediate aftermath of the June 2005 vote, all parties, with the exception of the VVD, had thrown their support behind the holding of a ‘Broad Societal Discussion’ (*‘Brede maatschappelijke discussie’*) or ‘National Europe Debate’. The intention was to provide a structured forum for a national dialogue on Europe, under the joint auspices of the government and the parliament. The initial consensus around the project, however, rapidly broke down. Differences arose both between the government and the opposition, and as between the principal ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ parties, concerning the structure and balance of the exercise (*NRC Handelsblad*, 30 September 2005). As a consequence, by October 2005, the plug was definitively pulled on holding a public consultation of this sort.

⁴ This survey excludes the Animal Rights’ Party (*Partij voor de Dieren*) which won (two) seats in the Dutch parliament for the first time in 2006, in the absence of a specifically articulated party position relative to the questions of European institutional/political development presently discussed.

After this initial failure, the government opted instead to rely principally on a ‘virtual’ consultation of public opinion, in the form of a widely advertised internet questionnaire. Under the banner of ‘*Nederland in Europa*’, the population was invited to fill out the on-line survey over the course a five-week period in March and April 2006. According to the final published figures, over 128,000 individuals took part in the survey, with over 97,000 filling in the full questionnaire. The internet survey was further supplemented by both a national opinion poll and focus groups.

The overall findings of this exercise (Anker Solutions 2006) generally reflected – and found a reflection in – the ‘limits of Europe’ discursive frame already delineated. Confirming the consistent findings of Eurobarometer surveys, support for Dutch EU membership itself remained at a comparatively high level – with 65% of respondents finding it a ‘good thing’, as opposed to only 15% who found it a ‘bad thing’. The assessment of the contribution of EU membership to national welfare was, however, perhaps rather less resolute than one might have expected. Only a plurality of respondents (46%) saw the EU as having contributed positively to national welfare, with a substantial minority (28%) taking the opposite view. The discursive anchoring of the European integration project as a necessary component in the maintenance of national well-being would thus seem to have at least partially slipped its moorings. The broad support for membership is further qualified by a feeling (underscored during the referendum campaign) that the integration process is proceeding at too fast a pace - 53% of respondents finding this to be the case, in contrast to only 15% who found European integration to be moving too slowly.

A relatively predictable portrait emerges as regards the more specific delineation of the geographical and substantive limits of the European project. Considerable reticence is displayed towards the continued geographical enlargement of the Union. Presented with a list of ten possible future EU members, respondents expressed clear (and, indeed, overwhelming) support only in the case of the lone West European country in the sample, Norway (at 87%). Conversely, figures for the other listed countries ranged from a 51% opposition in the case of Croatia to a 68% opposition in the case of Turkey. The substantive extension of EU competences did, however, enjoy significant backing, in terms largely consistent with those seen in the preceding survey of party programmes. Notably, strong support emerged for a greater EU role in the fight against terrorism and in the area of environmental policy, while respondents also favoured moves towards a common EU asylum policy and the further development of police co-operation, including (under strict control) the facilitation of cross-border information exchange.

The results of the survey figured prominently in the cabinet’s published analysis of developments during the ‘reflection period’ (Regering 2006), with the government principally viewing the exercise as confirmation of its established policy choices. It was in this vein that Foreign Minister Ben Bot, when presenting the survey results, highlighted the government’s commitment to push for further European co-operation in the areas of justice, energy, employment, and foreign policy (*NRC Handelsblad*, 20 May 2006). More expansively, European Affairs Minister Atzo Nicolai drew on the survey to put forward his own – and by implicit extension the government’s – vision of the future

direction of the European project.⁵ His analysis took as its starting point the deep-seated concerns to which the survey pointed as regards the Netherlands' place in the EU. As he put it, 'It is striking how many Dutch people are afraid that their country will be swallowed up in a bigger and bigger EU. To them the EU is like a snowball that has gradually turned into an avalanche' (Nicolai 2006: 10). The response demanded was consequently one which sought to (re-) legitimate the European project by means of its clear delimitation, with the further delegation of powers to the European level permitted only where strictly necessary. To this end, 'Europe-wide cooperation should be a calculated choice, not the standard response to every problem that arises' (Nicolai 2006: 26). More specifically, touching on a number of issues which had proved particularly sensitive in the 2005 referendum, Nicolai (2006: 26-27) went on to add:

Again and again, the Netherlands must decide whether the EU is the proper forum for resolving a given problem. In some cases we have no desire whatsoever to surrender out authority. We will continue to make our own laws about euthanasia, abortion and gay marriage. Other EU countries may have very different views about these issues, but since they have no transnational implications, the Netherlands will continue to pursue its own course. The same applies for those aspects of our drugs policy which are purely domestic in nature. Education, social policy and health care are also primarily national responsibilities and will remain so. And of course, the EU has no authority to deploy Dutch troops to crisis zones; that is and will remain the prerogative of the national government.

Beyond the confirmation of substantive policy choices, the government also saw the internet consultation exercise as a promising procedural innovation. According to the cabinet's analysis, an internet survey of this type allowed for a much higher level of citizen involvement than classic opinion polling, insofar as greater possibilities exist for two-way communication and ongoing discussion. In keeping with this analysis, the cabinet therefore undertook 'to build up the internet site www.nederlandineuropa.nl to become a central platform where citizens can find information and discussion about topics of contemporary interest' (Regering 2006: 18).

Yet, one may well question the extent to which an exercise of this type allows for the meaningful discussion of issues. Although potentially touching on broader questions to do with 'e-democracy' well beyond the scope of the present paper, it might nonetheless be specifically highlighted that the survey exercise itself allowed little scope for discussion or deliberation. Participants in the web survey were essentially presented with a series of discrete questions asking for their opinion, allowing for little beyond a 'tick box' response to often complex questions. Little or no contextualisation of the issues was provided, nor was the exercise structured so as to provide a genuine forum within which to consider how these discrete choices might relate to one another in the overall structuring of a European policy.

⁵ The book – rapidly dubbed 'the little orange book' – was published under the imprimatur of the Foreign Ministry and given a wide, free distribution. Over 20,000 copies were produced of the Dutch version, together with 2,000 copies of an English translation for foreign distribution.

This may, in turn, be linked to the more general absence of a meaningful *deliberative* process. While 'public opinion' was in some sense solicited, no accompanying effort was made to engage in a structured 'debate' – i.e. presenting and discussing alternative policy choices and their consequences. The main political parties essentially appeared unwilling to perform their central institutional role as representative mediators, while the nature of the process was also such as to sideline other major associational actors. The process, though vaunted by the government, thus appears markedly less satisfactory than the more conventional – and institutionalised – model of consultation initially envisaged by way of the 'National Europe Debate'. There is also, on a wider comparative plane, a noteworthy contrast in this regard between the Dutch experience and that of the Irish Republic after the first 'No' vote rejecting the Nice Treaty. In the Irish case, commentators have highlighted the success of the National Forum on Europe, which proceeded by a series of meetings across the country, in more actively engaging a broader range of societal actors with the European policy process (O'Brennan 2004) – and this, it might be added, in the context of a significantly lower overall degree of institutionalisation of the '*maatschappelijk middenveld*' (intermediary organisations rooted in civil society) than in the Dutch case.

The Policy Community

A further major strand of post-referendum discussion in the Netherlands concerns the specialist European and foreign policy communities, presently examined with particular reference to the relevant governmental advisory bodies. Here too, the broad contours of pre-referendum Dutch European debate have not been challenged; certainly, there has been no serious consideration of any significant shift in the overall direction of policy. Indeed, as forcefully argued by van Keulen (2006), the major specialist contributions to date have tended to privilege 'form' at the expense of 'contents', centring on the mechanics of policy-making rather than on the key policy choices facing the country. This focus on the policy-making process may, in part, be explained with reference to the specific briefs of many of the agencies concerned. It remains, however, that the overall picture appears strikingly incomplete – ultimately, on its own terms, not presenting a compelling strategic vision of either the shaping or the shape of Dutch European policy.

One of the first major reports to be produced after the 2005 vote was that of the Council of State, published in September 2005 (Raad van State 2005). This advisory opinion was principally concerned to examine the institutional relationships between the domestic political system and the European level, though also with a broader remit to consider ways in which citizen involvement with European affairs might be enhanced. The Council's main recommendations stressed the need for European affairs to become more fully integrated into the domestic system of policy-making and, by extension, more firmly embedded within domestic political debate. To this end, it advocated a series of more specific institutional reforms, including such measures as the systematic application of a subsidiarity test to new European legislation by the national parliament (with a commensurate increase in institutional resources) and the strengthening of the mechanisms for the domestic co-ordination of European policy (with particular emphasis

placed on both the collective role of the cabinet and the individual role of the prime minister). As such, the report provides a reasonably comprehensive blueprint for the reform of the EU policy-making process in the Netherlands, whose realisation would likely increase both the efficiency of decision-making and the accountability of decision-makers. Nonetheless, it is difficult to see how the Council's proposals, essentially restricted to the mechanics of governance, might in themselves further serve to remedy the deeper problems of citizen disengagement from an inevitably complex, multi-level political process which they also sought to address.

Much the same assessment may be made of the report of the government's Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV), issued in December 2005. The AIV report addresses itself to 'the gap that has arisen between the general public and the national policymakers who concern themselves with European affairs' (AIV 2005: 8). The measures proposed to close this gap extend to both the national and the European levels, with the AIV's domestic recommendations largely echoing those of the Council of State. In particular, emphasis was again placed on the need for a greater degree of national parliamentary involvement with European affairs, as well as on the necessity of devoting greater institutional resources to support this process. The AIV was also keen that national politicians should begin more squarely to address European issues as part of domestic political debates – airing more openly such differences as might exist between them on questions of Dutch priorities in Europe, future enlargements of the Union, or more specific policy choices. There is, however, no clear indication in the Advisory Council's analysis of the institutional dynamics which would prompt this 'true politicisation of the EU' (AIV 2005: 18), beyond something of a *volontariste* engagement on the part of the political class itself.

Finally, to complete this limited survey of the major official reports in the post-referendum period, mention should be made of the European aspect of the work of the National Convention. The Convention, established under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior, was a broad consultative exercise on the reform of the Dutch state, established with an express mandate to examine the means for a restoration of the relationship of trust between citizens and public authorities. Although much of the Convention's work thus focused on domestic issues, a significant strand in its deliberations concerned the relationship of the national and the European political systems. The group's final recommendations, published in September 2006 (Nationale Conventie 2006a: 51-56), partly reflected institutional concerns similar to those seen in the earlier reports of the Council of State and the AIV. The improvement of parliamentary scrutiny was again very much to the fore, with the Convention advocating the establishment in Dutch practice of both a sifting committee and a scrutiny reserve for European legislation on the Westminster model. On the institutional plane, the final report further made the case for the selection of the Dutch member of the European College of Commissioners by way of a parliamentary vote, as well as for the abolition of the current prohibition in the Netherlands on the simultaneous holding of a national and a European parliamentary mandate (on the premise that such a *cumul des mandats* might serve to restore better practical conduits of information between Strasbourg/Brussels and The Hague).

In contrast to the other two reports, the final report of the Convention, however, further sought to strike out beyond such procedural questions, and to engage with a more substantive vision of the future direction of Dutch European policy. Here, it centrally put forward the idea of a '*statenverbond*' as an appropriate starting point and organising device for a national discussion on the political 'finality' of the Union.⁶ '*Statenverbond*' is a direct Dutch translation of the term '*Statenverbund*', used by the German Constitutional Court in its landmark 1993 decision on the Maastricht Treaty to define the distinctive political reality of the European political system – placing it in a novel, but definable category of political entity between more classic federal and confederal political forms. In the present context, the term was similarly intended to capture the reality of a supranational political system which had acquired a significant autonomous existence, but which remained dependent upon – and in no way subsumed – its constituent member states. Underlying the somewhat inelegant phraseology is therefore a core concept which seeks to allay fears that the progress of European integration is eroding national democracy and threatening national identity. As the argument was phrased in the final report of the Convention's European working group, it was by way of introducing a 'clarity over the core and limitations of European co-operation', that an effective response could be found to the 'manifest aversion' which had grown up towards the 'creeping delegation of powers to Europe and the uncontrolled disappearance of national control' (Nationale Conventie 2006b: 35). Perhaps tellingly, however, attempts to engage a wider public or political debate around the concept of the '*statenverbond*' (*NRC Handelsblad*, 11 May 2006) – or more generally surrounding competing visions of the '*finalité politique*' of the Union – failed to find a significant resonance.

Consistent with Vivien Schmidt's (2006b) argument, the Dutch case thus presents strong evidence of the prevalence of a 'co-ordinative' over a 'communicative' discourse in the case of a 'compound polity'. Indeed, this co-ordinative predominance assumes an almost literal quality in the present instance, insofar as the perceived need for a better 'communication' of European issues has essentially resolved itself in terms of a discussion of the improvement of co-ordinative mechanisms both within the state and as between the state and the citizen. The frequency and the nature of the use of the term 'politicisation' (*politisering*) in the Dutch debate is particularly revealing in this regard. Both governmental documents and academic commentators have argued strongly for a greater 'politicisation' of European issues at the domestic level (see van Grinsven et al. 2005 for an overview; see also *de Volkskrant*, 1 June 2006), but have done so essentially in *procedural* rather than *substantive* terms – i.e. somewhat paradoxically as a goal in itself to be pursued by political actors, rather than as the consequence of mobilisations around competing policy choices.

⁶ The final report, in this vein, also clearly reflected the concerns of its European *rapporteur*, Alfred Pijpers, who had written generally of the need to break the apparent '*finaliteitstaboe*' ('finality taboo') in Dutch European debate. This was intended to foster a more open and explicit political dialogue surrounding the major, competing visions of the European integration project, and the implications of these differing future directions for the Dutch position within the EU. See Pijpers 2006.

This absence of more substantive discussion extends to the rather surprising recent dearth of traditional foreign policy debates concerned with national place and strategy. Clearly, the ‘No’ in the 2005 referendum and the more general shift in the tenor of Dutch European policy over the past decade raises important questions as to the country’s place in the enlarged European Union. Most prominently, a national discourse principally preoccupied with ‘limiting’ the integration project no longer neatly corresponds with the country’s traditional self-image as a central player in that process. Such developments should not be over dramatised, but there is nonetheless a clear need to engage in a critical discussion of the manner in which specific policy choices relate to wider coalitional possibilities and dynamics within the Union, not least in terms of the relationships with traditional partners such as Germany and the other Benelux countries. Yet, there is little evidence of such discussions seriously being undertaken. While there is a pronounced skittishness in The Hague at any suggestion that the Netherlands may no longer have an unquestioned place in any ‘core group’ of EU member states,⁷ this has not been accompanied by any sustained effort to tackle the question of how such changing external perceptions may relate to the more specific policy positions which the country has assumed.

The Balkenende IV Government

The political centre of gravity described in the preceding sections finally finds faithful expression in the European policy of the three-party coalition government formed in February 2007 (bringing together the new combination of Christian Democrats, the Labour Party, and the Christian Union, under the continuing leadership of Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende). To judge by the media reports, European questions played only a relatively minor role in the protracted coalition negotiations, with the most contentious issue being that of the holding of a further referendum on any subsequent EU Treaty reform. Here, faced with the need to paper over the divide between the CDA’s long established opposition to referenda and Labour’s manifesto commitment to a second vote, the Coalition Agreement awkwardly circumvented the issue, making no mention of a referendum per se and suggesting only that the opinion of the Council of State would be sought.⁸

⁷ This sensitivity was perhaps most tellingly revealed by the strong and quick reaction in Dutch official circles to newly elected Italian Premier Romano Prodi’s reported remarks in a 16 April 2006 interview with the British *Sunday Times*, to the effect that: ‘We need a strong relationship not just with France and Germany, but also with the so-called group of six, countries like Belgium and Luxembourg – but not the Netherlands’. Prodi, in a subsequent and hastily arranged interview with the *NRC Handelsblad* (19 April 2006), affirmed that he had been mistranslated, and had actually stressed the Netherlands’ place in a European ‘core group’. Nevertheless, whether misinterpreted or not, the initial report of his remarks had clearly struck a nerve. A similar reaction was also elicited by the meeting of the so-called ‘group of 18’ in January 2007, when the Spanish government brought together the eighteen countries which had ratified the Constitutional Treaty, to the pointed exclusion of both the Netherlands and France (*NRC Handelsblad*, 27 January 2007).

⁸ It is unclear, however, on what basis the Council of State would deliver such a opinion. There is no obligation under Dutch constitutional law to hold a referendum, nor conversely is there a constitutional impediment to an advisory referendum if parliament should so decide and provide the appropriate legislative framework. This leaves only the *political* question of the desirability of holding such a vote – the decision which the coalition partners ducked, and which the high administrative court is unlikely to take in their stead. It might, however, be noted that the Council had delivered a markedly supportive opinion in

More substantively, the parties had little apparent difficulty in coming to an agreement on a policy line including both the rejection of any attempt to resuscitate the Constitutional Treaty in its present form and a future development of the Union consistent with the 'limits of Europe' discourse defined above. Again, subsidiarity figures prominently, as the Coalition Agreement sets out in broad terms that: 'The Netherlands commits itself to effective co-operation in the European context with a clearer division of tasks between the member states and the Union on the basis of the subsidiarity principle' (Coalitieakkoord 2007: 13). Specifically, the catalogue of areas seen as both ripe for further co-operation and as off limits for any European incursions reflects those consistently cited across the main party manifestos. Competition policy, transborder environmental problems, energy policy, asylum and migration policy, foreign policy and anti-terrorism measures all figure in the 'more Europe' column, while such sensitive areas as pensions, social insurance, taxation, education, and health care are explicitly identified as 'no go' areas for European co-operation. On the geographical 'limits' of the EU, the Coalition Agreement further demands a strict(er) application of the Copenhagen criteria as regards any future enlargement, with an implied criticism of recent practice in its insistence that an accession date henceforth be announced only after a candidate state has fulfilled all criteria.

Conclusion

Overall, the terms of post-referendum debate on European integration in the Netherlands have not departed significantly from the previously predominant discursive framework. Party-based debate has continued largely to be situated within what has presently been termed a 'limits of Europe' discourse – concerned to delineate both the substantive and the geographical limits of the European integration project and, in so doing, to provide a renewed legitimation for that project. The details of where those precise 'limits' might lie has to some extent been filled in, but the broad contours of the debate have not shifted. Indeed, if anything, the period since the June 2005 referendum has seen a further convergence of party positions, with virtually all major players in the Dutch political system subscribing to much the same checklist of areas where both 'more' and 'less' 'Europe' is deemed desirable. Beyond the party political arena, the major public consultation exercise undertaken during this period provided further support for a 'limits of Europe' approach, albeit, as highlighted earlier, with a notable reservation as regards the deliberative quality of the process itself. This broad policy frame also has not been challenged by the specialist European and foreign policy communities, who have largely focused their attention on the reform of the mechanics of domestic EU policy-making, to the relative exclusion of strategic visions of the desirable overall direction of Dutch European policy. The policy line of the current Dutch government, as it heads into the next round of European treaty negotiations, may similarly be situated squarely within this discursive frame.

These national developments do, of course, correspond to wider patterns. The Dutch proclivity for a ‘pick and choose’ model of future European co-operation parallels moves elsewhere to define a ‘*Europe des projets*’ or, expressed less elegantly, to concentrate attention on an ‘output legitimacy’. Yet, though part of a wider shift, the strong and recurring emphasis in Dutch political discourse on the principle of subsidiarity nonetheless bears underlining. It is clear that the prevalence of this discursive referent in recent debates has much deeper roots in the national political culture – reflecting underlying fears that the continued progress of European integration threatens not only the autonomy of the national state (vertical subsidiarity), but also (and perhaps more centrally) the autonomy which that state has historically accorded to groups and individuals to organise their own affairs (horizontal subsidiarity). It is unclear, however, that the invocation and delineation of the principle of subsidiarity itself will serve effectively to quell such deep-seated doubts as may have emerged. In effect, a principle of the division of powers seems unlikely, over the longer term, to assume the place of a compelling, wider discourse of legitimation – returning us to the spectre of Koole’s ‘monster’, whereby an entity defined principally in relation to its limits cannot help but provoke ongoing anxieties.

Equally, the underlying preoccupation with a sense of disconnection between the elite and wider public opinion over European issues seen in the present case corresponds to a wider perception of a ‘crisis of representation’. Yet, here again, the specific national variation on the wider theme merits examination. Dutch commentators have tended to highlight the particular severity of the disconnection between the political class (*‘de regenten’*) and national society, seeing the current malaise as reflecting a rejection of ‘The Hague’ as much as, if not more than ‘Brussels’ (Binnema and Crum 2007 forthcoming; Koch 2005). This pronounced sense of disconnection derives from a deeper structural dynamic, in which, consistent with Vivien Schmidt’s (2006b) analysis of ‘compound polities’, Dutch elites have found it particularly – and, on occasion, painfully – difficult to engage in the forms of strong ‘communicative discourse’ required to explain and ultimately to legitimate the adaptations demanded of the domestic system. Indeed, one may speak of a ‘compounding’ of problems in the Dutch case, insofar as both a national ‘accommodationist’ model of politics (the *‘plattpolderen’* discussed above) and the relatively ‘depoliticised’ character of EU governance both appear to obviate the presentation of clear, alternative political choices. It is not difficult, in this light, to see the medium to longer term possibility of an embedded ‘mass-elite’ division on the Danish pattern (Flockhart 2005; Sørensen 2004) taking root in the Netherlands. Most obviously, the mishandling of a second referendum – with respect either to the terms on which it is *not* held or to the conduct of the campaign if one does take place – could significantly move Dutch debates in this direction, albeit with a necessarily different construction of ‘the people’ than that distinctively shaped by the Danish politico-cultural tradition (Hansen 2002).

The overall picture which emerges in the Dutch case is consequently one in which the political class has, in the post-referendum period as before it, failed to find an entirely convincing national narrative of European integration. The ‘story’ which the country wishes to tell both itself and others as to its sense of place and purpose in the enlarged

European Union remains, at best, unclear. Nevertheless, here too, the Netherlands is evidently not alone in facing such problems, and it is as well to contextualise its experience relative to that of comparator countries.

Most prominently, it should perhaps be stressed that, despite the critical turn in national European debate, the Netherlands is 'not Britain'. The levels of public scepticism and press hostility to the European project seen in the British case do not find an echo in the Netherlands. Similarly, though there are strong Atlanticist and internationalist referents in Dutch political culture, these have not, in sharp contrast to the British case, been constructed in terms of providing a global (in both senses of the word) alternative to participation in the European integration project. The discourse of 'limits' highlighted in the present paper, if lacking a strong positive vision of the European integration project, is nonetheless, by definition, firmly situated *within* that project, in opposition to a British debate still often marked by a more fundamental questioning of the project itself (cf. Schmidt 2006a; Harmsen 2007 forthcoming).

Rather, the most obvious parallels to the evolution of the Dutch debate are, unsurprisingly, to be found in the case of other founding member states. There are evident similarities with the case of Germany, where commentators have likewise spoken of the rise of a limited Euroscepticism and the (re)discovery of an explicit discourse of national interest (Busch and Knelangen 2004; Jeffrey and Paterson 2003). The discursive shift in the German case does, nonetheless, appear somewhat less pronounced. Notably, unlike the Netherlands, a 'constitutional federalist' position continues to enjoy considerable mainstream support, as evidenced in both Joscha Fischer's 2000 Humboldt University speech and the broad policy line of the current Merkel government.

The evolution of French debates concerning the European Union also offers interesting parallels to developments in the Netherlands, with both countries appearing to suffer from comparable senses of 'dislocation' within the enlarged Union. Both France and the Netherlands readily appear as '*pays délocalisés*' – countries which have not (as yet) been able to frame a convincing discourse as to their place within a much enlarged Union, where they no longer may see themselves as a central player or as part of the 'chosen few'. There is, in this vein, a striking symmetry between the Dutch discourse of 'limits' and a French European discourse focused equally pervasively on the question of 'influence' (Dulphy and Manigand 2006; Drake 2005). Comparably strong leitmotifs emerge in the two cases, as the larger country seeks to regain lost influence and to project its policy choices on to the wider stage, while the smaller country seeks to delimit a project where it accepts, *a priori*, that its influence will be modest.

The challenges facing Dutch European policy are thus ultimately those facing member states more generally. The Dutch government, like its counterparts elsewhere, must learn to navigate in a situation where the 'permissive consensus' for European integration has definitively eroded, without however having given rise to more conventionally defined lines of political cleavage or to other forms of significant mobilisation around European issues. The dual focus, in the post-referendum period, on the potentially competing demands of '*Nederland in Europa*' and '*Europa in Nederland*'

is suggestive of at least an awareness of the novel context within which European policy must now be made. Having started to pose the appropriate questions, it remains, however, very much to be seen if the Dutch political class will prove to be more successful in finding compelling 'answers'. Certainly, heading into a new round of (limited) Treaty negotiations, a clearer image continues to appear of the Europe which the Netherlands does *not* want, than of a more positive agenda.

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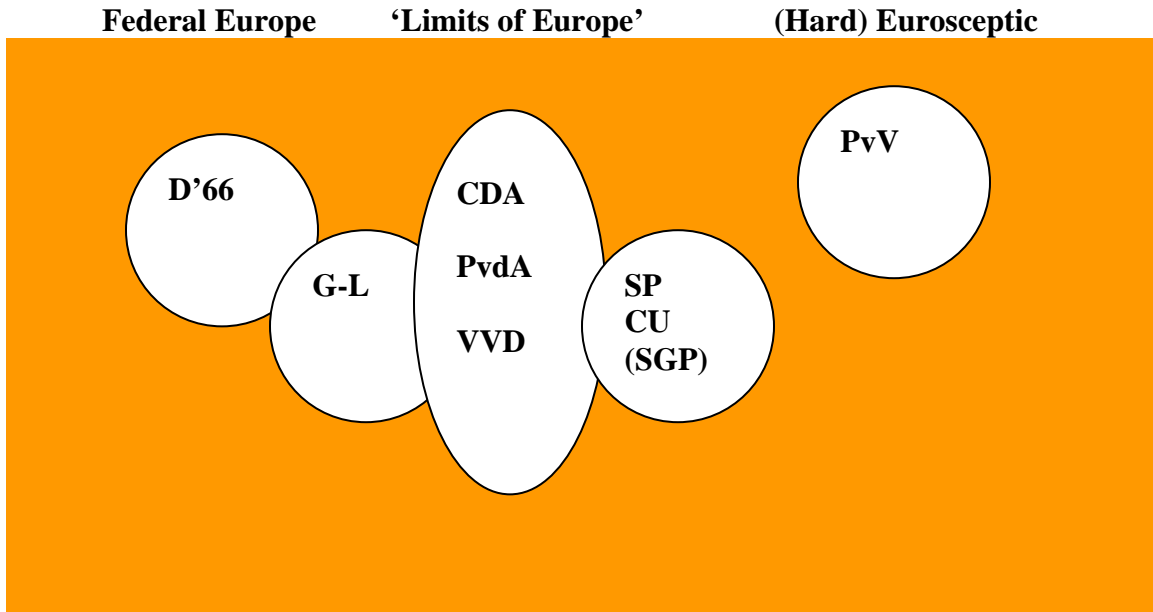
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Diagram I: Dutch Party Positions on European Integration



- D'66** Democrats 66
- G-L** Green-Left
- CDA** Christian Democratic Appeal
- PvdA** Labour Party
- VVD** People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Liberals)
- SP** Socialist Party
- CU** Christian Union
- SGP** Political Reformed Party
- PvV** Party for Freedom (Geert Wilders Group)