

What Is The Dutch Integration Model, And Has It Failed?

For a long time the Dutch concept of a multicultural society has been seen in Europe, and particularly in Germany, as a model of successful integration of people from different origins and of different religions. The murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a fundamentalist Muslim in November 2004, however, sparked off an active debate in both the Netherlands and Europe more generally about the success or failure of this multicultural model of integration.

What is the "Dutch model"? Why did it serve as an example for Germany? And has this Dutch model of integration failed?

What is the "Dutch model"? Background, development, features

A "Dutch model" exists in multiple areas of politics. In numerous analyses the so-called "Polder Model" has been identified with features including consensus between employers, trade unions and the government, a policy of wage restraint, reduction of state expenditure and deregulation. Within society this has led to the sale of soft drugs in coffee shops, the legalisation of euthanasia and possibility of adoption by homosexual couples. These features represent a specifically Dutch *laissez-faire* way of life.

The relevant aspect of this "Dutch model" here is that of integration policy. A central element of this is what was in 1979 identified as a "Minority Policy", which aimed to support and empower different ethnic communities. Under this policy, the most important ethnic minorities established state-funded advisory bodies, through which they could be represented on a wide range of issues affecting them. The opinions of these bodies had to be taken into consideration by all state bodies. The advisory bodies still exist today, although they are accorded less weight. In addition, the state promoted radio and television production in minority languages and allowed different denominations and religious groups to set up religious schools. It also ensured that students of immigrant families receive mother-tongue lessons on empowerment from their own cultural perspective.

The underlying ideal of state assistance to promote equality of minority groups should not be

understood simply as a reaction to immigration in the 1970s and 1980s. It is based more on the concept of so-called "Verzuiling" (based on "pillars"), which constituted the historical foundation of the Dutch nation-state. Under this concept, the state structure is composed of a number of different cultural, religious or political groups, or "pillars" (Wielenga/Taute, 2004). The different groups are therefore represented in state policy through structured negotiations within the polder system. The participation of ethnic minority groups in society on the same basis was meant to be facilitated in 1985 by granting local voting rights to foreigners, a comparatively easy naturalisation process and comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation introduced in 1994. The approach therefore involved placing an emphasis on consensus and tolerance, and especially the incorporation of ethnic groups into all relevant areas of policy. These were also the features that characterised the "Dutch model" as it was understood abroad. In the international context of the 1990s the Netherlands even put itself forward as "gidsland" – leading country (Böcker/Thränhardt, 2003). Public servants spoke of the "Dutch model" at international conferences.

This comparative self-confidence on the part of the Netherlands is in stark contrast to the situation in Germany. For decades, German migration and integration policy has been characterised as "failed", "deficient", and certainly less effective than that of its European neighbours. Of the now three well known models of integration – assimilation (France), multiculturalism (Netherlands) and "guest worker" (Germany) – the German "anti-integration model" has been seen both in

	1996	2005 (January)	2020 (Forecast)
Alloctonen* - Population in total	2,498,715 (16,1%)	3,112,431 (19.1%)	4,152,415 (24.7%)
Turkish origin	271,514	357,911	451,717
Surinamese origin	280,615	328,312	374,720
Moroccan origin	225,088	314,699	431,957
Dutch Antilles + Aruba origin	86,824	129,721	188,865
EU-24		810,070	
Non-western Foreigners (Turkish, Africa, Latin America, Asia, with exception of Indonesia and Japan)	1,171,113 (7.5%)	1,691,982 (10.4%)	2,425,016 (14.4%)
Total population Netherlands	15,493,889	16,294,847	16,799,820

* In its population figures, the Netherlands distinguishes between "Autochtone" and "Allochtone". According to official Dutch CBS Statistics, a person with at least one parent born overseas is designated as "allochtoon", regardless of the place of their birth (Holland or elsewhere). This is an unusual way of categorising national data on immigration, and implies that Dutch figures on immigration appear as somewhat inflated in international comparisons.

Source: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS).

France and the Netherlands as an example of bad practice. The Dutch model of multicultural and tolerant coexistence of people from different cultures was taken as proof that such a diverse society was possible. The perception of the Netherlands as a model was then reinforced by the xenophobic fire-bombings and attacks on foreigners in Germany at the beginning of the 1990s. Thus the Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration as well as other institutions and even the "Süssmuth Commission"¹ referred to the Netherlands as an example of good practice.

The end of the Dutch integration model?

The assassination of the filmmaker and columnist Theo van Gogh in November 2004 in Amsterdam sparked an Europe-wide debate about the "failure of the Dutch model of integration". Unlike the previous murder of the politician Pim Fortuyn by an animal-rights activist, the murder of Theo van Gogh was motivated by Islamic fundamentalist ideas. As a well-known and provocative public figure, van Gogh had always made much of his right to freedom of speech and had made a short film about the suppression of women in Islam together with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, another critic of Islam and a Member of Parliament for the right-of-centre liberal VVD.² In fact, Hirsi Ali herself had been the intended target of the assassination, which was carried out by a Dutch national of Moroccan descent.

Dutch public opinion saw the murder as an attack on the highly valued principle of freedom of speech – although many also acknowledged that van Gogh had gone too far in his critique. In the days after the assassination there were a series of attacks and counter-attacks on more than a dozen Mosques, Churches and Islamic schools. These events brought into focus the question of whether the Netherlands really was a model of successful integration, and indeed whether or not inter-religious and multicultural coexistence was possible at all. Central to the debate was the question of whether the focus on tolerance had served ultimately to gloss over a number of quite real and pressing social problems.

Religion (in % of the total population)	1998	2003
Roman Catholic	31,0%	30,0%
Protestant (evangelical-lutheran, calvinist)	21,0%	19,0%
Muslim	4,6%	5,7%
None	41,0%	42,0%

Source: CBS (see above).

Intention and reality: Growing criticism within the Netherlands since the 1990s

Although the murder of Theo van Gogh triggered a spate of German commentaries heralding the end of the idea of multicultural society, in the Netherlands there had already been quite high profile criticism of the multicultural policy since the early 1990s.

In 1991 the future EU Commissioner Frits Bolkestein was one of the first sharp critics of Dutch integration policy. He

declared that "my tolerance does not stretch to intolerance", a dictum that Pim Fortuyn took over ten years later. Scholars had also during the 1990s pointed to the high unemployment levels among ethnic minorities, their underachievement at school, and their poor living conditions – and the ensuing problems for integration. The anthropologist Jan Rath (1997) drew attention to the fact that Dutch minority policy identified minority groups as culturally distinct and therefore as unable to fit in with prevalent socio-cultural norms and to adapt to western culture. According to Rath, the idea of supporting for minorities through special programmes had had precisely the opposite effect. The result of the policy was that migrants were perceived as being particularly needy or low-skilled, and seldom viewed as equal partners. The author and commentator Paul Scheffer also emphasised the poor socio-economic situation of immigrants in the Netherlands in his article "Het multiculturele drama" (2000). According to Scheffer the high level of tolerance towards ethnic minorities and their alternative lifestyles created a situation in which the Dutch public overlooked the poor socio-economic situation of immigrants in the Netherlands. The commentator therefore demanded that underlying problems and conflicts be recognised and addressed.

This call for a more honest exposure of the problems emerging from the coexistence between the native population and migrant communities has been characterised by Dutch Philosopher Baukje Prins (2002) as "New Realism". This New Realism aimed to break taboos and positioned itself in opposition to the dominant political correctness. Representatives of the "new realism" view themselves as the mouthpiece of the public, articulating a number of popular concerns. In the short period between Pim Fortuyn's first involvement in local politics in Rotterdam and his murder in 2002 just before the national elections, he had made this New Realism politically acceptable within the Dutch debate. As a professed homosexual opposing the homophobic statements of a radical Imam in Rotterdam, the controversial politician Fortuyn gained a certain legitimacy when he called for "no tolerance towards the intolerant".

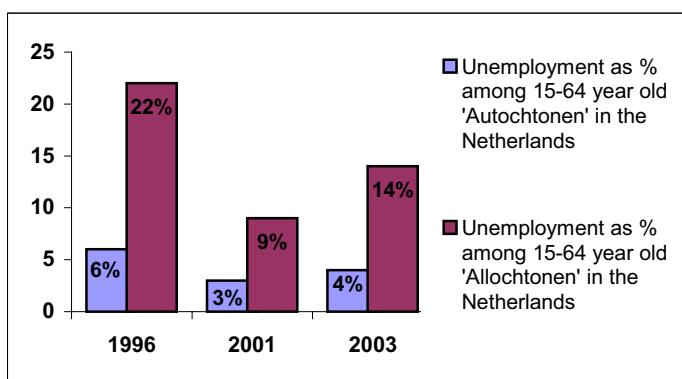
A new view of their German neighbours

The multicultural consensus was therefore already breaking down in the Netherlands in the 1990s. By the beginning of the new century, it led to the appointment of an Investigative Commission by Parliament.³ The Committee was set up to look into the question of why Dutch integration policies of the previous thirty years seemed to have gone wrong.

The common view of the German situation also changed. In particular, comparative research on the integration of migrants into the labour market in Germany and the Netherlands generated debates not just amongst researchers but also in the broader public. The Dutch sociologist Ruud Koopmans (2003) commented on the paradoxical situation whereby the socio-economic integration of migrants in Germany, a country with no special integration policy, was seemingly more successful than that in the Netherlands, a country with a longer tradition of integration policies. With regard to the situation in the labour market, at the beginning of the 21st century the Netherlands had a unemployment rate among so-called "Allochtonen" four

times higher than in the native population: in Germany, by contrast, the unemployment rate is "only" twice as high.

As a possible explanation, it has been suggested that the education and training system in Germany offers comparably good chances for young migrants to start a career. In addition, the representation of migrants in trade unions and staff associations in Germany is better developed than in the Netherlands, a factor that experts have argued is more effective in protection against discrimination than any sophisticated anti-discrimination legislation (Thranhardt/Böcker, 2003).



Source: CBS.

Role models, integration models: where next?

Against this background, Dutch integration policy has adopted some of the features of a more assimilationist approach in recent years. Already by 1998 there was an obligatory integration programme for new immigrants that included 600 hours of language classes, social studies and careers advice. The new system was heavily criticised, among other things, for its assimilationist leanings, but now it is an approach that is generally accepted. Moreover, the government plans to introduce a basic Dutch language test in the country of origin for potential new immigrants who intend to become permanent residents. These immigrants would subsequently have to gain an additional language qualification after arrival in the Netherlands. This tendency for moves towards greater integration requirements can be understood as "post-multicultural" (Michalowski, 2004). The trend in the public debate about these measures also reflects academic discussions about "the return of assimilation" (Brubaker, 2003).

Do these developments imply the unmitigated failure of the Dutch multicultural model? To answer this question, it is useful to take a step back from these particular cases, and reconsider the more general issues at stake in this debate: how can we define integration, and what sorts of indicators help measure its success? And which sorts of policy measures introduced in different countries have been successful, and why? The integration of immigrants into the labour market is one important aspect of integration, which is relatively easy to measure and compare. But other important aspects should not be overlooked. Also crucial is the level of social interaction between immigrants or ethnic minorities and the wider society;

and the degree of identification with various norms and values prevalent in the host country. Such elements are clearly more difficult to measure, but they are nonetheless important aspects of successful integration. In the search for such criteria and measurements of success in integration, it may therefore be worth considering a wider range of indicators. This may also imply adopting a more pragmatic approach, that does not

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Since the year 2002, and in particular following the events surrounding the politician Pim Fortuyn, the integration of immigrants and their children has been the focus of the Dutch policy agenda. However, there have been few efforts to pin down what the term "integration" actually means. It is widely assumed that integration is coterminous with cultural assimilation. In this context, Islam is often singled out as a particularly problematic: it is frequently characterised as incompatible with the Netherlands' liberal values, with little attempt to distinguish between different types of Islam.

The current debate also simply disregards certain aspects of integration. For example, the percentage of the "Allochtonen" in the labour market has increased steadily over the past years, and their access to the labour market has been continually improving. Considerable progress has also been made in the area of education, which seems to have been equally ignored in the debate.

The focus on cultural assimilation is all the more astonishing when one considers that the Netherlands has for many centuries been successful in respecting religious pluralism. This form of intra-societal interaction has applied to both politics and the administration. It would seem, however, that today this can no longer be taken for granted. The current public debate is triggering opposition from the immigrant groups at which it is targeted, thereby bringing about precisely the opposite of what is aimed at – and in the worst case, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. "Multicultural co-existence" has been reinterpreted as "assimilation", and recent immigration policies would be best described by the word "inhospitable".

This all raises the following question: Is what we are witnessing simply a transitional phase for Dutch society, which will precipitate renewed reflection on traditional values of tolerance? Or does it imply a fundamental break with past values?

In this era of globalisation in which people are so mobile, governments are encouraging all forms of international co-operation, as well as student and labour exchanges as a foundation for knowledge-based economies. In this context, countries need to adopt an open and constructive approach towards immigration and integration issues. We can only wait and see how the Netherlands will manage these contradictory objectives.

constantly revert to the classic national integration models of "assimilation" or "multiculturalism". In fact, European countries and the European Commission are now working together to develop precisely such indicators of integration.

Footnotes

- 1 Report of the Independent Commission "Structuring Immigration, Fostering Integration", 4 July 2001.
- 2 Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy).
- 3 The commission was named "Commissie Blok" after its Chairperson.

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Further Reading

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