



"Erasmusbrug", Rotterdam – photo Lidian Neeleman/Fotolia

BENELUX 2: WHEN THE JUDGMENT IS NOT SO EASY

_Paradoxes and surprises

_The Netherlands: "Why I would not live there anymore"

by John Loughlin

The Netherlands are a country full of paradoxes and surprises. On the surface, it is a friendly, open and liberal society where almost everyone speaks English. This is particularly the impression one has when visiting cities such as Amsterdam or the Hague. When I was appointed to a lectureship at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, therefore, I welcomed the opportunity to explore what seemed to be a very attractive European country. I duly arrived in 1991 with my wife and one-year old daughter. My wife was also appointed to an academic lectureship in the same university. Although it is possible to live in the Netherlands for twenty years without learning Dutch, it was written into our contracts that we would have to be able 'work in' (but not necessarily teach) in Dutch after two years. We would have done in any case but the University kindly provided intensive lessons in Dutch. After about four weeks of lessons, it was already possible to speak some Dutch and, after the statutory two years, we were reasonably fluent and even doing some teaching. This also allowed us access to Dutch society and culture.

The first paradox to strike me, however, was the disconnection between the surface image of openness and welcome and the everyday realities of Dutch society. In practice, this proved to much more inaccessible than we had imagined. Over the period of three years that we spent there before returning to Britain, we were invited to dinner

about three times and only one of these invitations was offered out of friendship, and not out a sense of duty on the part of the head of department. The Dutch, it turned out, were in fact very private people and tended to stay within their own families. Symbolic of this was the curious fact that the Dutch rarely draw the curtains of their houses so that it is possible to look in and observe their everyday lives. From our apartment above shops on Rotterdam's Kleiweg, I could look across at similar apartments and see into the lives of my neighbours on a daily basis. It was a little like the scenes in Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 movie *Rear Window*. One could observe my neighbours' daily pattern of breakfasting, watching early morning TV, getting the kids ready for school, taking the dog for a walk, etc. But never once did I enter one of these houses nor speak to their inhabitants.

I became very curious about this and wondered what lay behind it. There are probably several factors. First, the Dutch, although today one of the most secularized peoples in the world, have retained a kind of scrubbed-clean Calvinistic 'sincerity' (familiar to me from growing up as a Catholic in Protestant Belfast) and their open blinds were a sign they have nothing to hide from the outside world. Indeed, this Protestant ethic wished to show their houses as spic and span and well-polished. But another, more material, factor may be that the Netherlands are an extremely densely populated country – you simply cannot escape from other Dutch people crowded together on a their tiny country part of which has been wrenched from the North Sea. So the open blinds give a sense of space and openness but, at the same time, the inhabitants retain their privacy and family intimacy. In fact, the Dutch are masters at creating space on a very inhospitable soil and this can also be seen from the tiny gardens they manage to maintain in small plots outside their houses.



Amsterdam – photo Paolo Tedeschi

Another striking paradox is the peculiar combination of liberalism and tolerance with a kind of social conservatism. The Dutch have carried Rawlsian liberalism and individualism to an extreme and almost any form of behaviour is acceptable if it does not interfere with the freedom of others. The Dutch have long accepted homosexuality and were one of the first countries to permit homosexual 'marriage' and adoption of children. They are also famous for their liberal attitudes to both drugs and prostitution both of which are legal and available in the famous coffee shops (for drugs) and red light districts (for prostitutes). A more worrying development has been the banalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide both widely practised in the Netherlands. When I lived there in the 1990s, euthanasia was practised by doctors despite being illegal although doctors were not punished. The next step was to legalize it under specified circumstances – the patient had to have a terminal illness and be in intolerable physical suffering. The conditions were subsequently liberalized to include mental suffering and handicapped children. Then children could be euthanized with the consent of their parents. Then children above the age of 16 without the consent of their parents. Personally, I found these developments morally repugnant and they were among the factors that persuaded me to leave the Netherlands after three years. Rather than respecting the dignity of the human person, they degraded the value of human life and created conditions of insecurity for elderly and frail people. It is also doubtful whether many of those killed by doctors really consented to this but were often pressurized by relatives or doctors to sign the consent forms. Furthermore, a UK House of Lords Select Committee who visited the Netherlands to examine this issue discovered that each year about 1,000 people are put to death by doctors without having consented to this. The evidence for this came from doctors themselves. But alongside this social liberalism co-exists a quite traditional family life where women, once they have children, tend to stay at home to raise them.



Amsterdam – photo Paolo Tedeschi



photo Lidian Neeleman/Fotolia

Today, in fact, there has been a reaction against the ultra-liberal approaches which some Dutch people at least think have gone too far. Thus, the City of Amsterdam has begun imposing restrictions on the coffee shops and red light district. Behind the façade of liberalism, they recognize, lies a world of crime, with widespread trafficking and exploitation of vulnerable human beings, some of whom are extremely young. Unfortunately, there does not yet seem to be a willingness to adopt more restrictive approaches to euthanasia. The famous Dutch tolerance has also been tested by the presence of large Muslim minorities from Morocco and Turkey who do not share these liberal values. This has led to incidents such as the murder of Pim Fortuyn, a right-wing and xenophobic homosexual, who felt that Islam's illiberalism was a threat to Dutch society and who had founded a political movement to oppose it. Similarly, Theo Van

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Gogh, an anti-Muslim film-maker, was also assassinated. These events have called into question not only Dutch tolerance but also the project of multiculturalism which has underlain Dutch approaches to immigration and assimilation of migrants.

These reflections might seem to be unduly pessimistic and the question I ask myself is whether I would go back to live in the Netherlands. I recognize that there are many positive features of Dutch society. It has an excellent set of public services including hospitals, schools and public transport. Furthermore, one can cycle almost anywhere. Towns such as Amsterdam, Gouda and Delft are among the most beautiful in Europe. It possesses touching windmill-covered landscapes such as at the Kinderdijk. But overall I think my answer would be no because of the stultifying political correctness and smugness that characterizes important sections of Dutch society. I would also worry about the underlying selfishness and utilitarianism that leads to practices such as euthanasia, drug-taking and prostitution all of which seem to me to betray a narrow and superficial interpretation of what it means to be a human being. No, I think I would prefer Florence, Aix-en-Provence or Paris.

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