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Willem Drees

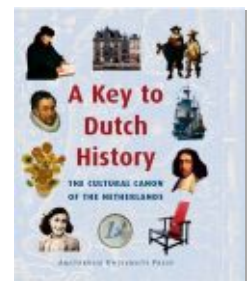
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1886 - 1988

Willem Drees

The welfare state

Willem Drees was one of the most popular Prime Ministers in Dutch history. He was known as “Vadertje” (Father Drees) a nickname that shows the socialist Prime Minister was a father figure not only for his own party but for the entire population of the Netherlands. His enormous popularity was largely due to the emergency law on state old-age pensions he implemented in 1947.

At an early age, Drees joined the Social Democratic Workers’ party (SDAP), the predecessor of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA). He experienced the crisis years of the 1930s as an alderman in The Hague and tried to alleviate the effects for

municipal employees. After the war, Drees entered the cabinet as Minister of Social Affairs. From 1948 to 1958 he was Prime Minister of the Christian Democrat and Social Democrat coalition (*rooms-rode coalitie*).

Stories about Willem Drees always mention his thriftiness and simplicity. The most important politician in the Netherlands went to work every morning either on foot or by bicycle – he did not need a chauffeur-driven car. At the time, most politicians enjoyed cigars and drinking, but Drees refrained. And when an American diplomat visited Drees at home to discuss American financial support for

the Dutch economy, Mrs Drees apparently served him a cup of tea and a biscuit. The American supposedly said that a country with such a thrifty Prime Minister was undoubtedly greatly in need of assistance through the Marshall Plan.

Drees was closely tied to the years in which the Netherlands was recovering from World War II. The economy had to be kick-started and everyone had to lend a hand. The emphasis was placed on cooperation rather than conflict. Employees agreed to low wages to achieve a competitive position for the Netherlands in respect of other countries. This meant that most people had to postpone buying a car or a television set. In politics, cooperation was the top priority, even though pillarisation was ingrained in Dutch society during those

years and most of the Dutch lived their lives within their own small social circle. Catholic boys joined a Catholic football club, socialists joined a socialist hiking association.

The Drees cabinets were broad-based, with Catholics and socialists having the most sway. Together, they built the Dutch welfare state. The best-known measure from that time is the state Old-age Pension Act (AOW) of 1956, which Drees initiated in 1947 with his emergency law for the elderly. Every elderly person over the age of 65 received a pension from the state. Pensioners at the time talked about “drawing money from Drees” as if he were paying them out of his own pocket. When Willem Drees died in 1988, he was 101 years old, so he certainly had time to enjoy his old-age pension.

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Sub-topics

Primary education sector

The reconstruction of the Netherlands after World War II; economic boom at the end of the 1950s
The building of the welfare state (what did this actually mean for large groups of people?)
Drees and later Dutch Prime Ministers

Secondary education sector

The 1950s as the start of de-pillarisation
Economic growth and the standard of living in the Netherlands in the 1950s and 1960s compared to other European countries
The influence of American culture in the Netherlands (from the Marshall Plan to McDonald's)

Past and Present

Where does the income of today's grandparents come from?
What does “ageing” mean and what problems will an ageing population create in the future?
The politics and legacy of Drees

In the Treasure Chest

A bank statement with a state old-age pension payment

References

Places to Go

Arnhem: Open-air museum (interior furnishings in the twentieth century)
Once it reopens, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam will display Drees's study

Background literature

Hendrik Henrichs, “Vadertje Drees (1886-1988)”, in Els Kloek (ed.), *Verzameld verleden: Veertig gedenkwaardige momenten en figuren uit de vaderlandse geschiedenis*. (Verloren Verleden 24), Hilversum 2004
Henk te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap: Persoon en politiek van Thorbecke tot Den Uyl*, Amsterdam 2002 (pp. 155-190, “Gewone Nederlanders, De tijd van Drees”)

Websites

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