



“The man, the administration and the counter-discourse”: An analysis of the sudden turn in Dutch nature conservation policy



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ABSTRACT

The Netherlands were at the forefront of European nature conservation policy until recently. For years, a stable ‘social contract’ around Dutch nature conservation existed. To the surprise of many, this stability suddenly disappeared and Dutch nature policy has taken a dramatic shift with changing discourses on nature conservation, the halting of implementation of several key-policies and budget cuts up to 70%. This paper engages with discursive-institutionalism to understand such abrupt institutional changes through emerging ideas and discourses that reshape and undermine existing institutional arrangements. We show how the institutionalization of policy not only engendered but also restricted the impact of critical discourses in the 1990s and 2000s. However, critical discourses eventually played an important role in the sudden turn in nature conservation policy. The rise of a general populist discourse and the economic crisis contributed to the credibility of critical discourses and their translation into popular frames and storylines. Authoritative actors such as a new State Secretary opened up popular media for the critical discourses and contributed to their resonance among larger audiences. As such, the man and his new administration successfully used already existing counter-discourses to de-legitimise nature policy and break down important institutional arrangements at a pace unseen in Dutch politics. Adding a discursive element to institutionalism provides for analytical tools to understand change from both external as well as internal forces. In turn, enriching discourse theory with insights from neo-institutionalism helps to evaluate which ideas and discourses become materialized in policy and practice.

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A sudden turn in Dutch nature policy

Until recently, the Netherlands was seen by many as one of the leading nations in European nature conservation policy. It has played an important role in the development of a common European nature policy (Van den Top and Van der Zouwen, 2002). The Natura 2000 ecological network was inspired by experiences with the Dutch *National Ecological Network* (NEN) (Keulartz, 2009) and the Netherlands played a pioneering role in the development of the habitat-directive (Van den Top and Van der Zouwen, 2002).

In the Netherlands, the realization of this comprehensive ecological network has been the primary focus of nature policy for 20 years from 1990 onwards. During these years, nature conservation policy has been relatively stable (De Lijster, 2011). Most Dutch societal and political actors agreed upon the importance and shape of nature policy. Substantial public money was invested to develop and connect natural areas in order to implement the NEN and Natura 2000, and nature conservation policy in the Netherlands

became increasingly institutionalized (Arnouts, 2010). Public support was high and nature conservation seemed to be safeguarded in a stable political environment. A robust ‘social contract’ around Dutch nature conservation seemed to exist.

To the surprise of many, this stability suddenly disappeared after national elections in 2010. Since then, Dutch nature conservation policy has taken a dramatic shift. A right wing coalition of Christian Democrats (CDA) and Liberal-conservatives (VVD) with confidence supply from a conservative populist party (PVV) came into power. Many aspects of Dutch nature conservation policy that had been firmly institutionalized on both the national and regional level were suddenly challenged. Policy views on the type of nature worthy of protection changed significantly; budgets for nature conservation were cut up to 70%; a new, much less strict nature protection law was initiated; and the further development of important elements of the Natura 2000 network was postponed or halted. Leading nature conservation organizations and regional politicians were in shock about how such a sudden turn over could have happened (Buijs et al., 2013). The ‘social contract’ – once believed to be stable – became undermined in just a few months.

Guided by a discursive-institutional framework (Arts and Buizer, 2009; Schmidt, 2008), we try to understand the processes behind this sudden turn in Dutch nature policy. This paper is

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based on multi-methods and multi-data. It is based on literature (e.g. Beunen et al., 2013; Buijs et al., 2011; Turnhout and van der Zouwen, 2010; Van Der Windt, 2012), document analyses (Buijs et al., 2013), interviews with employees of nature conservation organizations, informant talks with governmental officials, participation of the authors in several workshops on the topic, consultancy research for the Dutch environmental planning agency (Arnouts et al., 2012), and membership of one of the authors in an official advisory committee for the new Dutch Law and policy on nature conservation (RLI, 2013). The discourses we distinguish are also based on formal discourse analysis of Dutch media and policy documents between 2008 and 2012 (Buijs et al., 2012).

Discursive institutionalism

To analyse the sudden turn in Dutch nature policy, we need a framework that connects and explains institutional stability ('the social contract') as well as abrupt policy change (halting of implementation, severe budget cuts, new ideas about 'appropriate' nature conservation). Discursive-institutionalism exactly promises to do this by analysing institutional crises from an ideational perspective (Schmidt, 2008). Abrupt institutional changes are explained by emerging or undercurrent ideas and discourses that reshape or undermine existing institutional arrangements.

Discursive-institutionalism is a relatively new branch in neo-institutionalism (Arts and Buizer, 2009; Blyth, 2002; Hay, 2006; Philips et al., 2004; Schmidt, 2005, 2008). It tries to overcome some of the 'orthodoxies' in institutional thinking, like path-dependency or institutional breakdown (Peters et al., 2005), and builds upon neo-institutional literature on social change to avoid such crude distinctions of either continuity or change (Treack and Thelen, 2005). For example, it adds the concept of 'path shaping' – that refers to gradual transformation *without* immediate breakdowns – to the one of path-dependency (Hay, 2006). And it wishes to theoretically reflect upon institutional crises and abrupt institutional changes that we observe in the world around us (Schmidt, 2005). Examples are the fall of the Berlin Wall or the current Euro crisis, changes which 'orthodox' institutionalism finds hard to explain and therefore often relates to external shock events. In understanding such (sudden) path formations, discursive institutionalism however emphasizes the role of new, emerging or counter ideas and discourses that – under certain conditions (see below) – can undermine or reshape existing institutional arrangements. In doing so, the approach bridges the gap between institutional theory and discourse theory (Arts and Buizer, 2009). Whereas it brings in new dynamics and discursive understandings in institutional thinking, it helps discourse theory to go beyond mere ideas, concepts and communication and to refocus on their (selective) institutionalization and materialization.

Analytically, though, the approach makes a clear distinction between discourses on the one hand and institutions on the other, whereby both are considered to be mutually constitutive in an empirical sense (Buizer, 2008). To visualize this point of departure, (Den Besten et al., *in press*) introduce the so-called 'discursive-institutional spiral' in which new ideas and actors force discursive responses and institutional changes in subsequent rounds of public deliberation and policy making. Generally, although various authors might differ on details, discourses are seen as shared – and at the same time contested – ideas about the social and material worlds in communicative devices (texts, speeches, narratives, etc.) and institutions as anchored ideas in formal and informal regulatory arrangements and practices (laws, rules, norms, standards, procedures, etc., both on paper and in use) (Cleaver, 2002; Habermas, 1996; North, 1991; Schmidt, 2008). With such 'analytical dualism' (Archer, 1996), discursive institutionalism departs

from post-structuralist discourse theory that emphasizes the unity of 'the ideational' and 'the material' in discursive regimes (Foucault, 1994; Hajer, 1995; Howarth, 2000). It does so because it prefers analytical clarity over holistic description. In addition, it puts much more emphasis on the *interactive* part of discourse formation and hence on the (potential) intervening role of 'discursive agency' in institutional dynamics than post-structuralism generally does (Giddens, 1984). Two agency roles can be distinguished here: a *communicative* role of agencies in public deliberation and a *coordinative* role in policy making (Schmidt, 2008, 2011).

The key question is of course under what conditions institutional change through ideas, discourses and agencies can take place. In the literature (particularly Arts and Buizer, 2009, Philips et al., 2004 and Schmidt, 2008, 2011), the following circumstances are considered most relevant: (a) the new discourses cover 'existential' and 'timely' topics, hence resonate with a larger and concerned (but not necessarily visible) audience; (b) they appear (reasonably) credible and coherent to that audience; (c) they are carried and strongly advocated by authoritative and sentient actors ('discursive agencies'); (d) they take the form of popular *genres* or *story lines* (i.e. transcend the language of specific individuals or organizations); and (e) the legitimacy of the current discourse and related institutional arrangements are under pressure. Under such conditions, the new discourse will become dominant over the preceding one, and force (some) institutional change. Such 'dominance' can be assessed through discourse analysis of policy documents, speeches and media (see Hajer, 1995 for assessing discursive dominance as a general methodology and see (Buijs et al., 2012). for assessing discursive change in Dutch nature policy).

Below, this paper develops an argument in line with the above overview of discursive-institutionalism. It will first describe the 1990 discourse on nature conservation in the Netherlands, and then analyses where it came from and how it became institutionalized and dominant in the years thereafter. Secondly, it will show how critical discourses already emerged during its dominance, but that these could only mature when Dutch socio-political circumstances had changed. Finally, the paper analyses the resulting discursive struggles and the (partial) de-institutionalization of the old consensus and social contract around Dutch nature conservation. In this drama, both structural properties and discursive agencies played their roles (Giddens, 1981): (1) old and new as well as scientific and popular ideas on managing nature; (2) the installation of the administration usually called 'Rutte-1' in 2010 that followed a strict budgetary approach to government; and (3) 'the man' called Bleker – the former Secretary of State of the administration Rutte-1 – who played a coordinative role in translating critical discourses into new nature conservation policy.

The rise of the conservation/development discourse

The founding of the Society for preservation of nature monuments (Natuurmonumenten) in 1905 is often seen as the start of nature protection in the Netherlands. At start, nature protection was mostly a combination of private enterprise and civil society (De Lijster, 2011; Van der Windt, 1995). Although from the 1940s the involvement of the national government started to increase, only from 1970 onwards (Van der Windt, 1995) the national government became dominant and created several policies to safeguard the protection of nature and of natural areas (Arnouts, 2010). These policies and the practice in Dutch nature protection were mostly focused on the preservation of existing 'nature monuments' and were rather 'defensive' in nature (Rientjes, 2002; van der Windt et al., 2007). In short one could say that up to World War II the *preservation* discourse on nature conservation was dominant in the Netherlands, which gradually turned into a discourse on

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