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Thinking of **the Netherlands**

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Foreword

Professor Kim Putters
Director, Netherlands Institute for Social Research

An ever more fierce debate is raging in Europe and elsewhere in the world about concepts such as 'national identity' and 'feeling at home'. The Netherlands is no exception to this. The debate takes place for through channels such as television series, exhibitions, social media, the newspapers, but also in Parliament and in the various political party broadcasts. Discussions about the role of the European Union, the influx of migrants, ongoing individualisation and globalisation raise the emotional temperature of the debate, sometimes to boiling point. In this heated debate, it sometimes seems as if we have become a nation that consists only of oppositions and conflicts.

But what is that identity exactly? What typifies the Netherlands and the Dutch? What are the things to which the Dutch feel attached, and to which they don't? And are we all agreed on what those things are, or are there different views in different sections of the population? These are questions to which the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) has sought answers. To do this, SCP conducted a large-scale and detailed public survey, mapping out the views of a representative sample of the Dutch population. The aim is not to define once and for all what 'the' Dutch identity is, but rather to paint a picture of how Dutch citizens in all layers of the population think and feel about Dutch identity.

By providing a rational analysis of the collected research data, SCP is contributing to unravelling this debate, which often appears to be conducted over the heads of Dutch citizens or to be based entirely on emotions. This report offers an empirical basis for a well-founded dialogue about identity and attachment between people in our society today and in the future.

Thinking of the Netherlands: key conclusions

From the perspective of the Dutch citizen, it is possible to discern and describe a Dutch identity. Key elements in that identity are the Dutch language, as well as symbols and traditions. There are strikingly few differences between Dutch people based on gender, age, education level or origin. While there is essentially a consensus about what makes the Netherlands the Netherlands, there are some differences of view. Freedom is the major common denominator for many Dutch people, though how that concept is interpreted can vary and is sometimes contradictory. There is a tension between people who feel attachment to the Netherlands based on symbols and traditions, and people whose affective ties with the Netherlands derive from civic freedoms. These groups clash because they think differently about what constitutes the Dutch identity. Exacerbated by the magnifying lens of social media, this – despite the major common denominator – creates an impression of a polarised country. This edition of the *Social and Cultural Report (Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport)* analyses and describes what people think of as a Dutch identity and what binds and divides the Dutch nation.

The national consciousness appears to be undergoing a revival, with lots of attention being devoted to the Dutch national identity in documentaries about the Netherlands and in TV programmes such as 'Ik hou van Holland' ('I love Holland'). There is a lively debate about what should constitute the historical canon; and a highly polarised debate about the appropriateness of St Nicholas' (Sinterklaas) assistant, Black Pete. The discussion about national identity is tied up with trends such as globalisation, Europeanisation and immigration. National identity is a matter of (societal) importance.

It is no coincidence that virtually all Dutch political parties referred to national identity in their manifestos for the most recent General Election. This revival of national consciousness is not unique to the Netherlands: we see the same trend internationally, for example in the election of Donald Trump ('America first') and Brexit ('I want my country back'). Dutch newspapers devote column space to the concerns of ordinary people about the perceived threat to established values and traditions. Social media is awash with reports of external threats and the dilution or loss of national identity or culture.

When we talk about national consciousness and Dutch identity, what picture does this actually conjure up in people's minds? What do they think of when they think about The Netherlands? What do they see as 'typically Dutch'? Do they feel a sense of attachment? And if so, is that feeling the same for everyone? What makes up that sense of attachment?

Strange as it may seem, we do not know the answer to that. Many studies have of course been carried out on Dutch culture and history, but never before has such a large-scale survey been carried out to ask Dutch citizens what they consider important for their sense of attachment to their country. Plenty of opinions have been expressed by columnists, essayists and politicians, but what do the Dutch themselves think? There is a striking absence of representative national research in which Dutch citizens are given an opportunity to express their own views.

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) took the foregoing questions as a starting point for a study of what the Dutch think about The Netherlands and what opinions about national identity prevail in Dutch society. For the first time, Dutch citizens themselves were asked what they consider typically Dutch and what they think about The Netherlands and being Dutch. In other words, what constitutes the Dutch national identity?

The aim is explicitly not to determine once and for all what 'the' Dutch identity 'is'. There are numerous visions of national identity in circulation, and the position people take on this issue is also generally formed relative to another person, an event or a particular period. When thinking about identity, it is important to be aware that people have a number of layered identities: a person can feel Dutch but can also (and perhaps primarily) identify themselves with the region they come from, or as a shopkeeper, a father, a footballer, and so on. In other words, identity is in part dependent on context. At the same time, human beings have a need for permanence: we want to belong somewhere and we want a narrative that binds us together. The relationship that people feel with the country where they live is a core element of the national consciousness.

The primary ambition of *Thinking of The Netherlands* is to describe what the Dutch feel makes The Netherlands The Netherlands, and what Dutch people today identify with and feel a sense of attachment to. This means that we do not answer questions such as whether the national anthem should be sung in schools, whether The Netherlands should leave the EU or what Black Pete should look like. What we will do is present information from the perspective of the public which can enrich those and similar debates.

‘The Netherlands isn’t the Netherlands any more’

The statement ‘the Netherlands isn’t the Netherlands any more’ is one which came up frequently in the series of Citizens’ Outlook Barometer studies (*Continu Onderzoek Burgerperspectieven*) compiled by SCP. This statement nicely encapsulates the concerns felt by some Dutch citizens about what they see as the loss of familiar characteristics that make up the national identity. So what are those characteristics? What does that Netherlands look like which is purportedly changing? That is the focus of *Thinking of the Netherlands*.

What is national identity?

About the study

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) conducted a large-scale study to explore in depth and describe what the Dutch themselves consider important in their attachment to The Netherlands and what they consider typical of The Netherlands (and what they do not). To do this, SCP engaged in dialogue with citizens throughout the country. The main source of information was a large-scale survey carried out in 2018 among 5,000 Dutch respondents. Focus groups were also organised and interviews conducted. Each of the 18 chapters in this *Social and Cultural Report* (*Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport*) is written from a different perspective and handles different themes, with a view to obtaining as complete a picture as possible of what constitutes Dutch identity. All of this is brought together in *Thinking of The Netherlands*: a collection of analyses, thematic studies and essays.

Do the Dutch think there is such a thing as a Dutch identity?

When Dutch people are asked whether there is such a thing as a Dutch identity, 41% unhesitatingly answer 'yes'; 42% think it exists in some respects, and 6% absolutely reject the idea of a Dutch identity. A large proportion of the Dutch population is thus convinced that there is such a thing as a Dutch identity.

There are several divergent visions of national identity in circulation. It is not about holding a passport or endorsing the Constitution, but about a collection of ideas and perceptions about what characterises a country, which can be associated with particular emotions such as pride, fervour, irritation or concern. And it is precisely here that differences emerge. People identify with The Netherlands to a greater or lesser degree, would like to see some things disappear and retain others; they feel a greater or lesser degree of attachment or responsibility. What one person would like to see eradicated represents a core value for someone else.

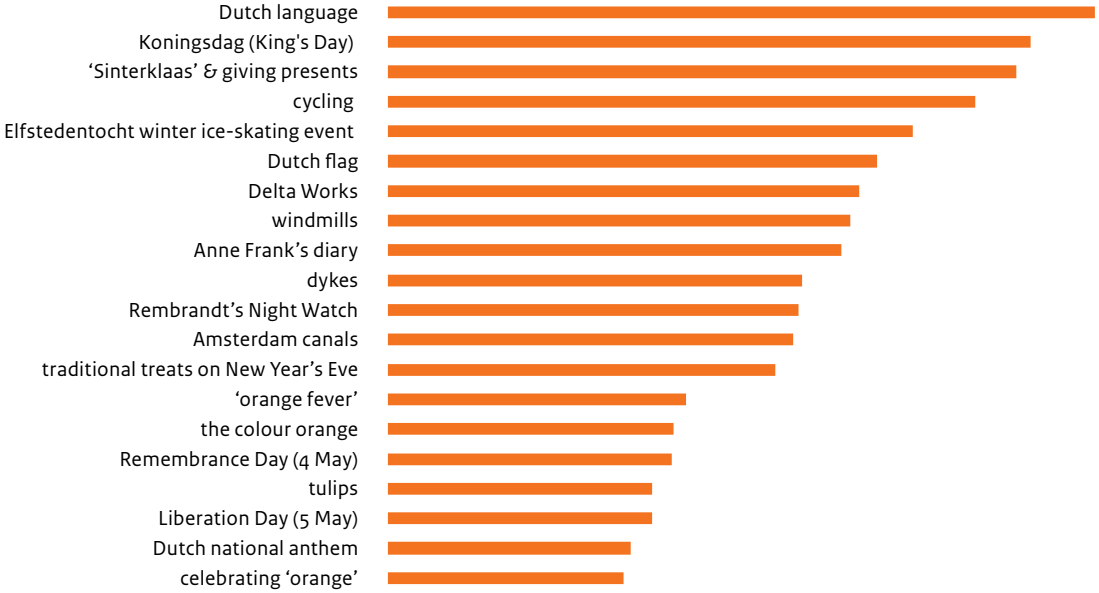
What philosophers say about identity

Nearly 140 years ago the French philosopher Ernest Renan delivered a lecture about national identity which has come to be regarded as a classic. Contrary to what had been the prevailing view up to then, he portrayed the nation not as an entity derived from race, religion or geographical location, but as a collective desire to be united. For Renan, a nation is an emotional community. That same sense of a common fate plays a role to this day in thinking about the meaning of national identity. In his most recent book, *Identity* (2018), for example, Francis Fukuyama puts forward a number of reasons why an inclusive sense of national identity is so important for the functioning of a modern democratic and pluralistic society. According to Fukuyama, national identity is important for the quality of governance and democracy; a shared sense of national identity has a positive impact on both the economy and the functioning of democracy.

Cultural elements and freedoms characterise and bind The Netherlands

There are striking correspondences in what people regard as typically Dutch and what binds the Dutch together. The figure below shows the top 20 characteristics which the Dutch consider to be characteristic of The Netherlands. They are primarily cultural characteristics: first and foremost the Dutch language, but also national holidays, traditions and customs, symbols and icons. As well as these elements, people also consider the landscape and physical environment (such as water) to be typical of The Netherlands. The elements that people regard as the least typically Dutch are dominated by references to religions (Buddhism, Islam, Judaism). Aspects relating to the Dutch political system, civic freedoms and the legal system do not appear in the top 20. Democracy and civic freedoms are not specifically *characteristic* of The Netherlands (because they are also found in other countries), but are of great importance for the sense of *attachment* to The Netherlands (see figure below). Social provisions, norms and values and a high level of prosperity are aspects which people hope will still be recognisably Dutch characteristics 50 years from now. Intolerance and discrimination are things that people would prefer to see disappear from Dutch society right now.

Typically Dutch – Top twenty*
(individuals 16 years and older, results corrected for sample characteristics)



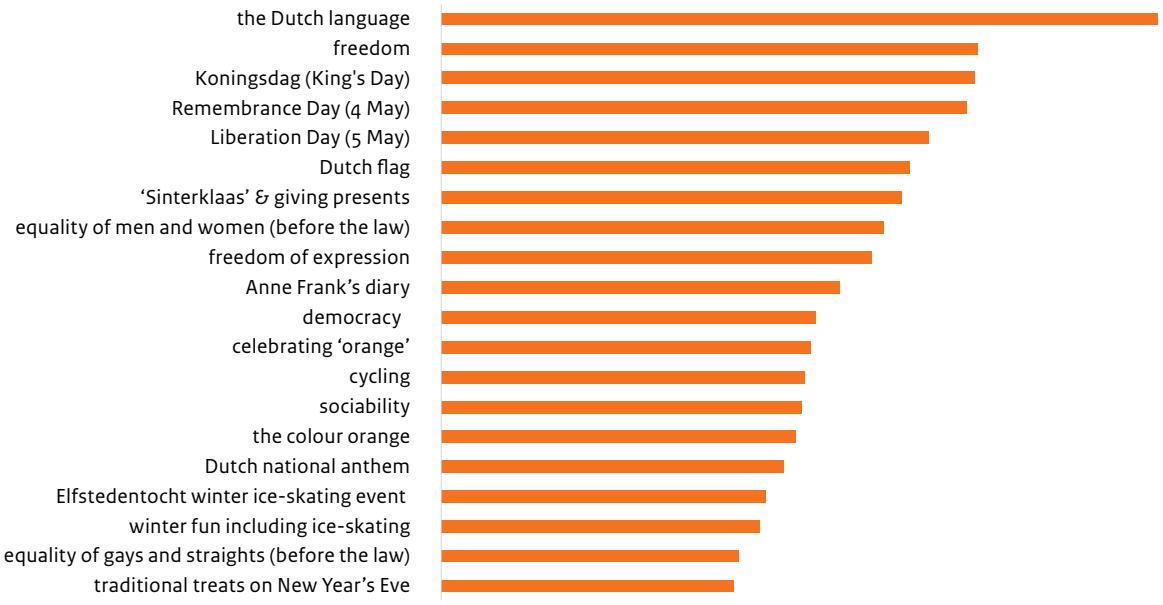
* of a total of 185 items, excluding answer categories: 'not familiar with' and 'don't know'
Source: SCP, DAN'18

Language the most important binding factor

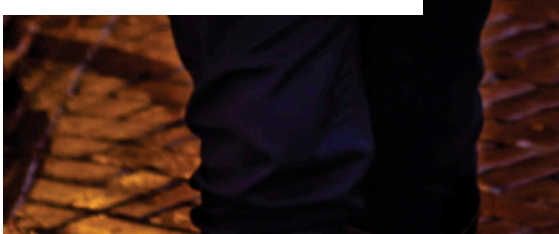
What the Dutch consider the most *characteristic* of The Netherlands need not necessarily also be the reason why they feel *attached* to The Netherlands. Attachment is about The Netherlands as an emotional community. The feelings of attachment to The Netherlands are strong, and the differences are small between people with a high and low education level, older and younger people, people with and without a migration background and living in urban or rural settings. That is striking, given the tenor of the public debate, in which the emphasis is regularly placed on the extreme positions that certain groups supposedly take.

The Dutch see their language, as the most important binding element and as the most important component of a collective identification. People also feel attachment to The Netherlands through symbols, icons, traditions and large gatherings. The second strand which binds the Dutch to The Netherlands runs through values such as freedom, equality between men and women and between gay and straight, democracy and general suffrage, the Constitution, freedom of the press, freedom of expression and freedom of education. Religions such as Islam, Buddhism and to a lesser extent Christianity are not sources of attachment for most Dutch people.

What contributes most to your sense of belonging to the Netherlands? Top twenty*
(individuals 16 years and older, results corrected for sample characteristics)



* of a total of 185 items, excluding answer categories: 'not familiar with' and 'don't know'
Source: SCP, DAN'18



The Dutch are not especially nationalistic or chauvinistic in international perspective, but they do have clear views on what makes The Netherlands The Netherlands

‘The first time I ate sprouts was at a friend’s house’

INTERVIEW

Artjanna Hulsmann-Harkhoe (31)
Works as a story coach and visibility expert.

“As a child it seemed natural to go to a temple instead of a church. I was brought up bilingual: I speak Hindi and Dutch. My parents come from Surinam. I myself was born in The Netherlands. We spoke Hindustani at home, and we celebrated different holidays. The first time I ate sprouts was at a friend’s house.

When do I feel Dutch and when do I feel Hindu? When I pray I am definitely Hindu. But I feel Dutch much more often. I work as a story coach; that’s about making yourself visible and daring to project your own narrative to the outside world. But above all it’s about your personal development and how you give that tangible form. This emphasis on the importance of your own happiness feels like a very Dutch ambition.

Two years ago, I got married to a Dutchman. We celebrated our wedding day in a castle in Baarn. First we had a Hindu wedding, then we did it all over again according to Dutch tradition. And all on the same day. For the Hindu wedding I wore a traditional Hindu dress in red, decorated with lots and lots of beads. The guests also wore traditional dress. The priest addressed us in Hindi, and translated everything he said for the Dutch guests. After that, it was time for everyone to get changed and the Dutch legal marriage took place. In my white bridal dress, I immediately felt typically Dutch. My boyfriend and I had decided that both cultures should also be given a role during the evening reception, so there was vegetarian food, Hindu food, but also typical Dutch finger food.

I often look back at it and think how brilliant it was that everyone joined in with all that getting changed. That open and free attitude is something I think typifies The Netherlands.”

We present a thumbnail sketch of the different ways in which the Dutch identify with The Netherlands

Thumbnail sketch of how people identify with The Netherlands

Although the strands of the debate about national identity do not run along the traditional sociodemographic lines, there is still a real debate about what binds the Dutch (together). Examples of topics which are currently the subject of debate include the 'anglicisation' of the Dutch language, the role of the European Union and the appearance of Sinterklaas' assistant Black Pete. These examples often crop up in the debate about national identity.

For this publication we investigated the different positions people adopt in the debate. We describe these different positions and conclude that people tend towards one of three positions in the public debate about national identity. These are the extreme positions on which people fall back when determining their position in a debate. Some tend more towards stressing symbols and traditions in their identification with The Netherlands; others lean more towards civic freedoms (such as the right to demonstrate and freedom of religion), while a third group have no pronounced view. There is no such thing as 'the' Dutch citizen, but it is nonetheless possible to draw a profile of the different ways in which the Dutch identify with The Netherlands.

Most Dutch citizens appear to see something of themselves in all three of these positions. The debate about national identity is dominated by the adoption of strident positions on the flanks, suggesting that people mainly adopt extreme positions. The debate then becomes narrowed down to things such as the question of whether someone thinks that Black Pete should continue to be a black person or whether it is acceptable to protest against continuing the tradition of Black Pete. In the debate on national identity, this produces a picture of a society made up of diametrically opposed groups. The reality, however, is that these positions are more the exception than the rule and that most Dutch people can identify to a greater or lesser extent with each of these positions.

They do not do this arbitrarily; the tendency towards adopting a particular standpoint on national identity is associated with other preferences. People's chosen position in the debate is related to which newspapers they read, their political preference, their opinion on the role of religion in society, and the role of Europe.

Dutch citizens whose affinity with The Netherlands is based on symbols and traditions tend to be proud of The Netherlands and see European unification as a threat. Those who adhere to civic freedoms see European unification more as an opportunity. This group also apply different criteria for what makes someone Dutch and take a different view of cultural heritage (such as Black Pete or Jan Pieterszoon Coen, a controversial officer of the Dutch East India Company). Their default positions in the debate are also associated with a different expectation for the future. The group who see symbols and traditions as the main binding factors tend to think in terms of 'the' Dutch identity and believe that the government has a responsibility to safeguard that identity and those traditions. Those whose attachment is channelled mainly through civic freedoms believe that the government's primary responsibility is to safeguard democratic freedoms and the inclusiveness of the constitutional democracy.

Freedom is the major common denominator for many Dutch people, though how that concept is interpreted can vary and is sometimes contradictory: where one person's view of 'freedom' is the freedom to adhere to certain traditions, for others 'freedom' means precisely the opposite, namely the freedom to demonstrate against those same traditions. Based on the three anchor points, SCP observes a tension on fundamental issues between people whose attachment with The Netherlands is based on symbols and traditions and those whose attachment is based more on civic freedoms. When it comes to the debate about Black Pete, for example, people quickly retreat to their default position, and we moreover observe conflicting world views.

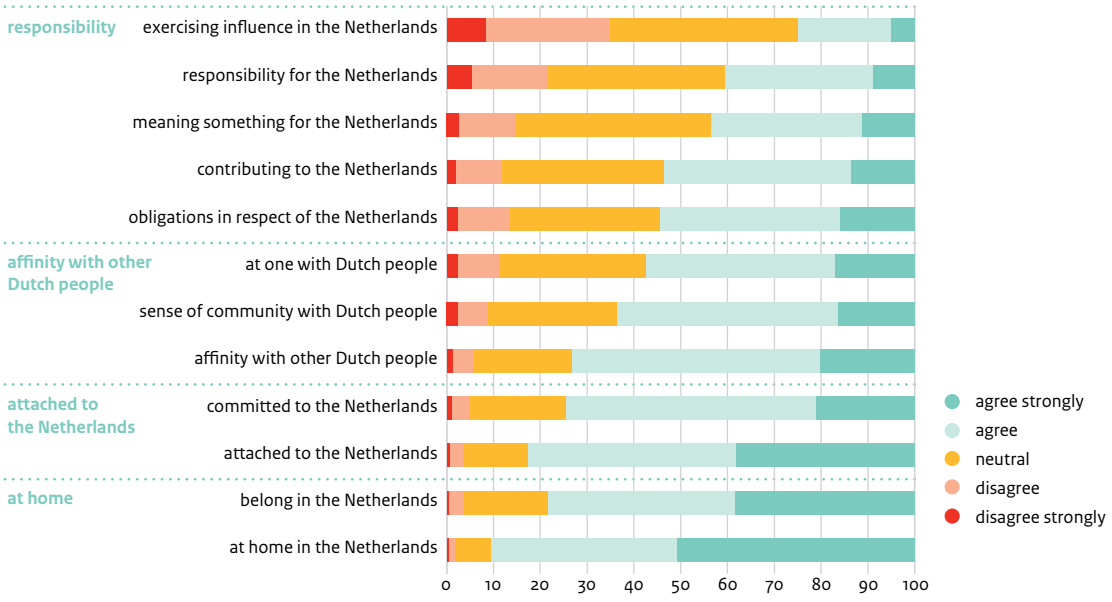

10
2000 PUZZLE
Chiquita

Attachment is not the same as commitment

The vast majority of Dutch citizens associate The Netherlands with 'home' and the place where they 'belong'. However, the high degree of attachment that people feel with The Netherlands does not mean that they also feel engaged or responsible, let alone that they are willing to stand at the barricades. Identity by no means always translates into loyalty. One in five respondents say they do not feel responsible for The Netherlands, while one in three even believe that they cannot exert any influence in the country.

There is a relationship between identity and loyalty. People who feel an affinity with other Dutch citizens on more characteristics of the country and in more situations are more often convinced that there is such a thing as a Dutch identity. They are also convinced that people think the same about what typifies The Netherlands. The same applies as people feel more at home in The Netherlands or more responsible for it.

Feeling at home in the Netherlands, sense of belonging in the Netherlands, feeling responsible for the Netherlands (percentage points)
(corrected for sample characteristics)



Source: SCP, DAN'18

INTERVIEW

‘I was homesick for The Netherlands’

Isabelle Buhre (29)
Latinist, translator and political scientist.

“When I want to relax I jump on my old sit-up-and-beg bike, go for a ride in the countryside and enjoy the Dutch landscape. I always feel Dutch. But you only really become aware of that when you’re in another country. I noticed it for the first time when I spent a year studying in London. I hadn’t expected it, but I felt very homesick for The Netherlands: for the flat, polder landscape and the dykes, but also for the mentality, the traditions and the national holidays.

Once I was back in The Netherlands I became increasingly interested in the question of Dutch identity. I find it an incredibly interesting subject, and at the same time I see that our identity has come under pressure in several respects. There’s the heavy Americanisation, for example, with all the tee-shirts printed with ‘New York’ or ‘Los Angeles’; you never see people walking round with tee-shirts printed with names like ‘Dordrecht’ or ‘Saint Petersburg’. Then there’s the large-scale immigration of people from different cultures. There are whole neighbourhoods where the entire population is made up of people who are not really connected to ‘Dutch culture’. I’m talking specifically about the Islamic culture here; I worry about that.

I saw this magnified during my year in London. London isn’t an English city, but nor is it a Pakistani or Indian city. People there are caught up in a perpetual rat-race to survive, and no one is really part of the community. I finished my year of study, but I also took a decision: ‘I’m not going to live or work in all kinds of different places. I’m just going to stay in The Netherlands’.”

Hot topics

This is not a study of migrants or of perceptions of ethnic groups, but the survey does allow us to say something about the hard edges of the identity debate. After the polarisation of society, the Dutch regard Islam and Islamic statements as the factor that poses the greatest threat to The Netherlands. Islamic traditions are generally not regarded as typically Dutch, and for the majority of Dutch citizens are not a source of attachment to The Netherlands. However, Dutch citizens whose attachment is based on civic freedoms do believe that people should be free to follow religions such as Islam.

As regards globalisation in general and European integration in particular, those Dutch citizens who believe there is such a thing as a Dutch identity are more concerned about the disappearance of The Netherlands as an independent country and are more likely to regard internationalisation and Europeanisation as threatening (rather than positive) developments for the country.

Young people value comradeship

Group discussions were held with young people aged under 25 to investigate their views on a Dutch identity. Although these group discussions are not representative for all young people, they still provide interesting insights. Young people say that the idea of community or comradeship is important to them. They also believe that being Dutch has to be a positive choice and involves active attachment to The Netherlands. Some Dutch citizens are regarded as more Dutch than others, because of their appearance, origin and cultural baggage. Earlier SCP research has shown that people who are regarded as 'less' Dutch are expected to make their loyalty to The Netherlands explicit. The young people in our discussions felt this was a form of exclusion: despite the fact that people feel Dutch, they are not always accepted as such.

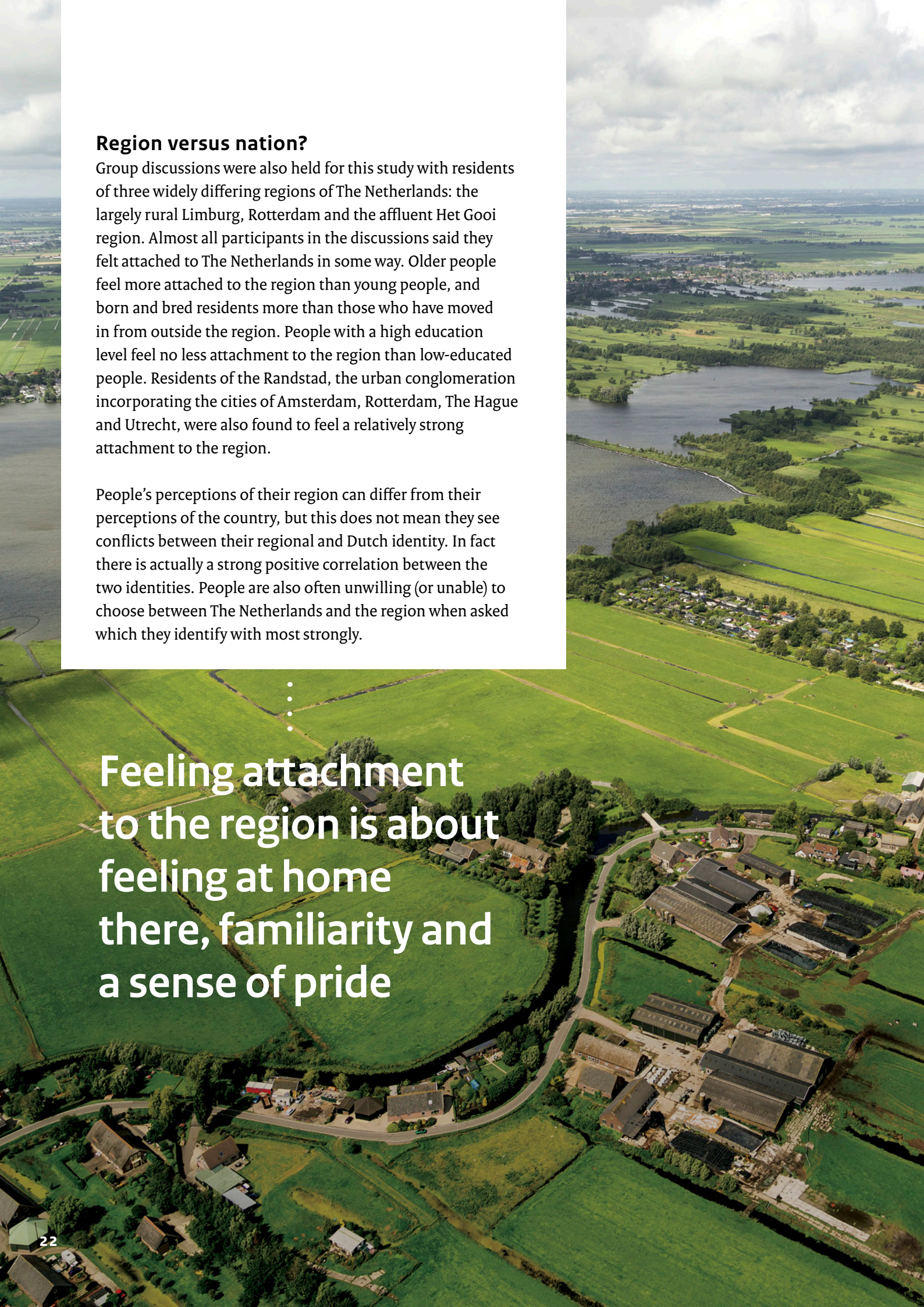
The role of history

Theories and debates about the Dutch sense of identity often assign an important role to the national history (for example the debate about the historical canon). In our survey, Dutch history comes to the fore mainly through the importance that is attached to national commemorations and celebrations, as well as to traditions and customs (traditional treats on New Year's Eve, for example, or skating and winter leisure activities). Generally speaking, people's historical knowledge proves to be limited. For example, no fewer than 50% of our respondents had no opinion on the Act of Abjuration (Plakkaat van Verlatinghe), the 1581 'declaration of independence' by the Dutch provinces from Spanish rule, which was chosen in a television vote in early 2018 as the 'showpiece of The Netherlands', either because they had not heard of it or because they did not know what they thought about it. More generally, the top 20 missing observations contains no fewer than 11 themes which refer to events or personalities dating from or before the Dutch Golden Age.

Region versus nation?

Group discussions were also held for this study with residents of three widely differing regions of The Netherlands: the largely rural Limburg, Rotterdam and the affluent Het Gooi region. Almost all participants in the discussions said they felt attached to The Netherlands in some way. Older people feel more attached to the region than young people, and born and bred residents more than those who have moved in from outside the region. People with a high education level feel no less attachment to the region than low-educated people. Residents of the Randstad, the urban conglomeration incorporating the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht, were also found to feel a relatively strong attachment to the region.

People's perceptions of their region can differ from their perceptions of the country, but this does not mean they see conflicts between their regional and Dutch identity. In fact there is actually a strong positive correlation between the two identities. People are also often unwilling (or unable) to choose between The Netherlands and the region when asked which they identify with most strongly.



Feeling attachment to the region is about feeling at home there, familiarity and a sense of pride

INTERVIEW

‘There were celebrations **in every meadow, in every street’**

Gre Kalf (91)
Retired. She worked as a secretary and volunteer.

“I feel Dutch at all kinds of moments: when I’m on holiday and hear our national anthem; when a Dutch sportsman or woman wins a medal; or when I see a ditch in the Dutch countryside, covered in duckweed. But on 4 and 5 May I feel even more connected. It moves me every year.

‘Before the war’, ‘during the war’ and ‘after the war’: whenever I think back to particular events in my life, I always do it in those terms. I was very frightened when the Second World War started in 1940. I was aged 12. I can still remember the bombing of Schiphol Airport, which was near where we lived. I never usually slept in bed with my mother, but I did at those times. Afterwards I went with other children from the neighbourhood to watch the Germans marching into The Netherlands; it was astonishing.

My grandson thought they were fighting in the streets here, but it wasn’t like that. Lots of people just went to work as usual; daily life continued as far as possible. And yet you felt confined, less free: there were Germans billeted everywhere. And of course there was the NSB, the Dutch fascist party. You would see them marching through the village on a Saturday evening. My small act of resistance was to turn away my head as they marched past.

If you didn’t experience the war, it’s hard to realise what it was like. To be honest, that idea of a shared Dutch identity only really began after the Liberation. It was a special sort of bonding which had arisen during the war. On Liberation Day, 5 May 1945, we all took to the streets. Everywhere you could hear people shouting: ‘There’s peace! There’s peace!’ There were celebrations in every meadow, in every street. We celebrated from our hearts; it was something just tremendous.”

The Dutch and water

The Dutch consider elements relating to the presence of water, such as canals, dykes and the Delta Works, to be typically Dutch, and also regard them as important binding elements. This prompted us to look in more detail at the relationship between the Dutch landscape and Dutch identity.

Some of the characteristics which are ascribed to the Dutch appear to go back to the characteristics that were needed in order to carve out an existence in the past, especially in the low-lying regions. Apart from commercial acuity, those characteristics are a love of freedom, a relatively egalitarian outlook and a consultative culture, a belief in the ability to shape the land and society, and a strong sense of order in how that is done.

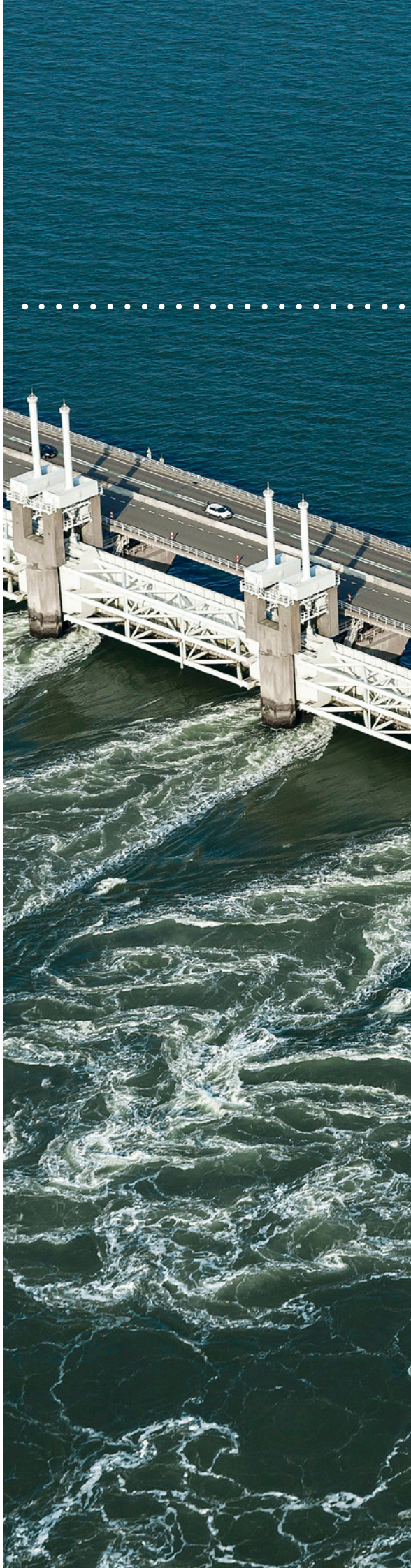
Identity politics is not only pursued when nurturing our history of controlling and managing the water, but also when mobilising people and politicians to safeguard the unique Dutch landscape against urbanisation and one-sided economic exploitation.

Cultural heritage:bone of contention or anchor point?

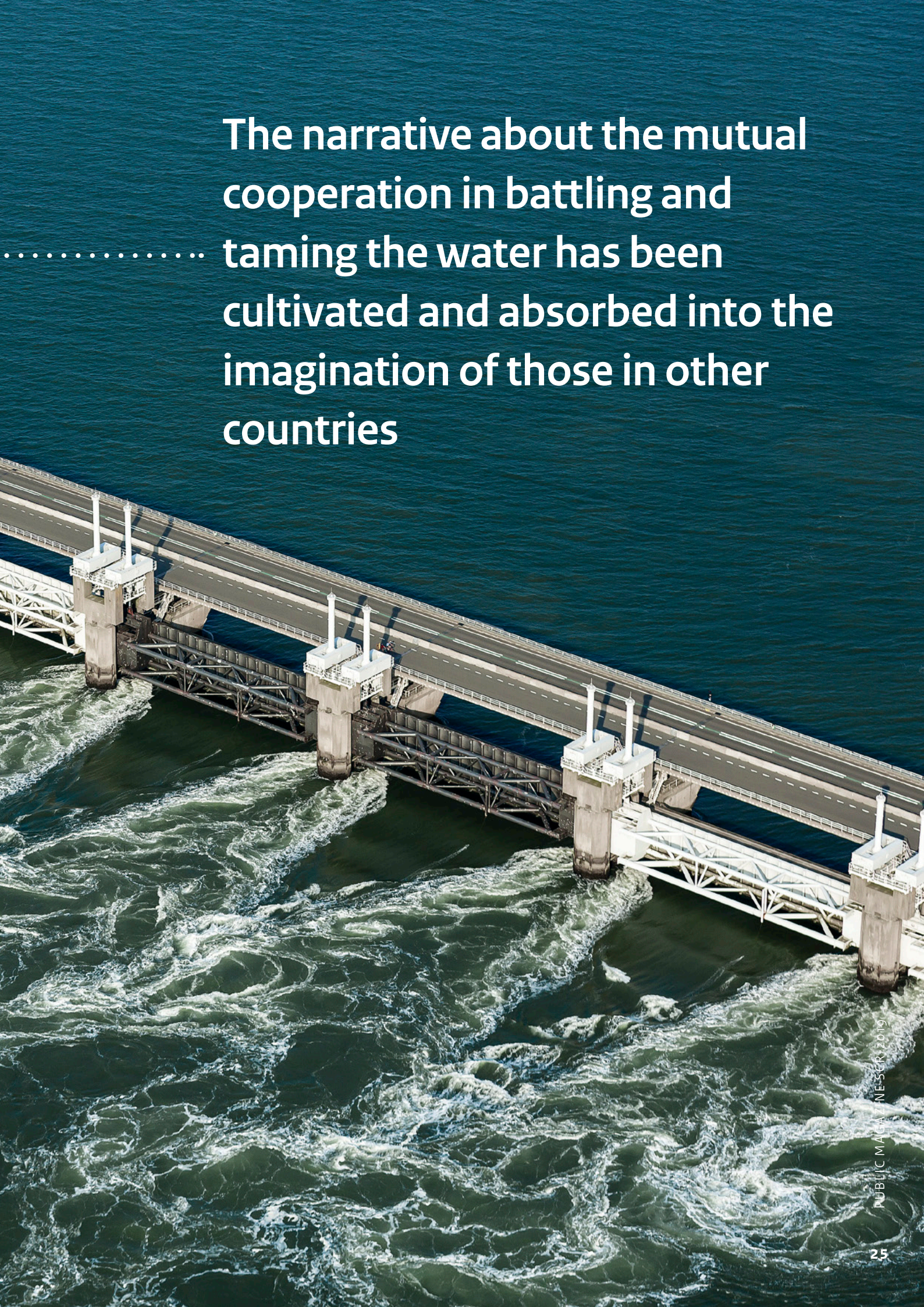
The current debate on identity is taking place in a society which contains people whose forefathers were on the other side of the story in ‘our’ history of colonialism and slavery. As part of their emancipation they are demanding attention for this, and this perspective on history can lead to uncomfortable questions. Heritage can then be more of a bone of contention than an anchor point. Municipalities are confronted with debates about statues, street names and the festive entrance of Sinterklaas to The Netherlands each year. Museums and the media are encountering similar debates.

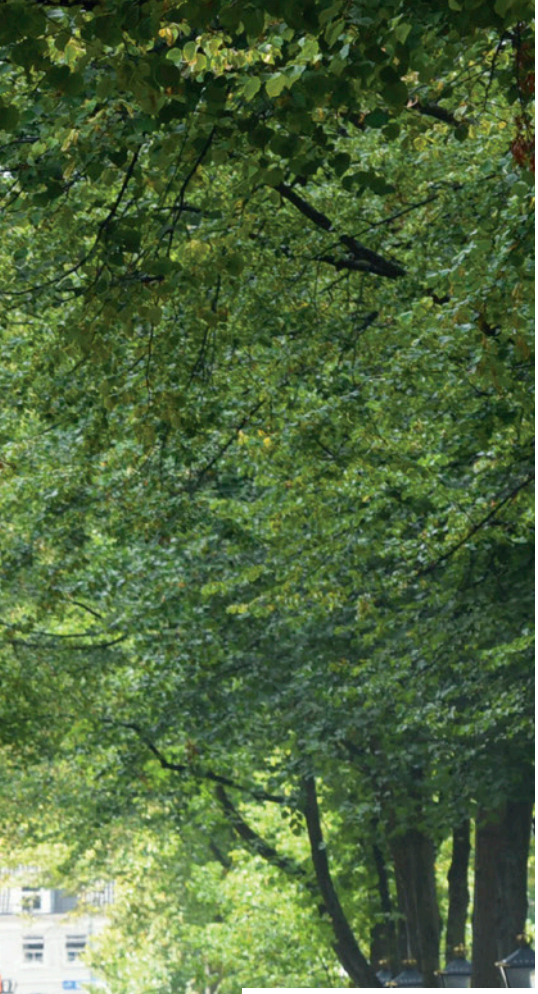
The view from outside

A large-scale international comparison of cultural differences characterised Dutch society as highly individualistic, relatively egalitarian and scoring highly on values that emphasise the importance of happiness and enjoyment. These cultural characteristics put the Dutch between the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries. The Netherlands is a unique country in many respects, but based on the prevailing norms and values can be readily characterised as ‘the most southerly Scandinavian country, which likes to mirror itself against Anglo-Saxon countries and with roots in the German-speaking region of Europe’.



The narrative about the mutual cooperation in battling and taming the water has been cultivated and absorbed into the imagination of those in other countries



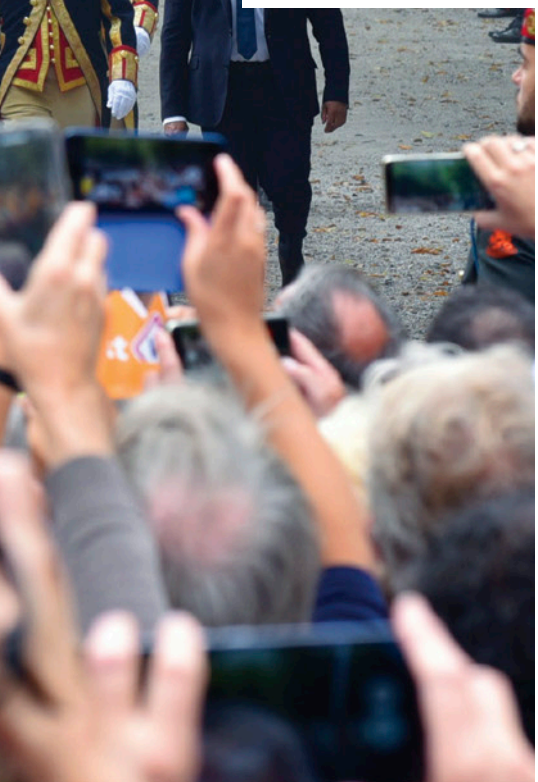


Reports by visitors to The Netherlands and group discussions with expats produce a picture of Dutch citizens who stand out through their direct manner of communication, pragmatism and equally pragmatic tolerance (though not of everyone), egalitarian power relations, limited ambitions, a desire for freedom and concern for the less fortunate.

From a distance, it is the everyday that binds

The strongest factors binding Dutch people living abroad to The Netherlands are family and friends as well as the Dutch language and culture (food, national holidays, traditions), and The Netherlands as the country where they were born and raised. When Dutch people living abroad are asked what makes them feel happy and positive about The Netherlands, social provisions (education and care), the economy, the open character and good organisation, infrastructure and freedom all stand out. It is as if, from a distance, it is above all the everyday that binds, while social provisions and freedoms contribute more to making them feel proud of The Netherlands.

The Netherlands is more than just a spot on the globe: it is an imagined community, experienced by many as a country, a people, a society with its own collective identity. With recognisable traditions, customs and symbols. With shared experiences, memories and ideas about the future



Dutch citizens living abroad are struck by how full and busy The Netherlands is, but also how convivial and well organised. The Netherlands is often characterised by what amounts to two sides of the same coin. In the eyes of many Dutch people living abroad, the Dutch are sometimes lacking in social graces and somewhat antisocial in their behaviour, but those same characteristics are also regarded as direct and sober. The bureaucracy and rules in The Netherlands are very apparent when seen from abroad, but there is also a recognition that things in The Netherlands are well organised. The Netherlands is expensive, but also has good social provisions. Lower-educated people place rather more emphasis on Dutch traditions, food and public holidays, while those with a higher education level emphasise the tolerance, openness and good organisation in The Netherlands – although a substantial proportion of them believe that this tolerance is declining and that the Dutch are no longer as tolerant as they themselves often think.

INTERVIEW

‘Dreaming in Dutch’

Mumen Al-Azhar (47)
Owner of restaurant Sham
in Amsterdam.

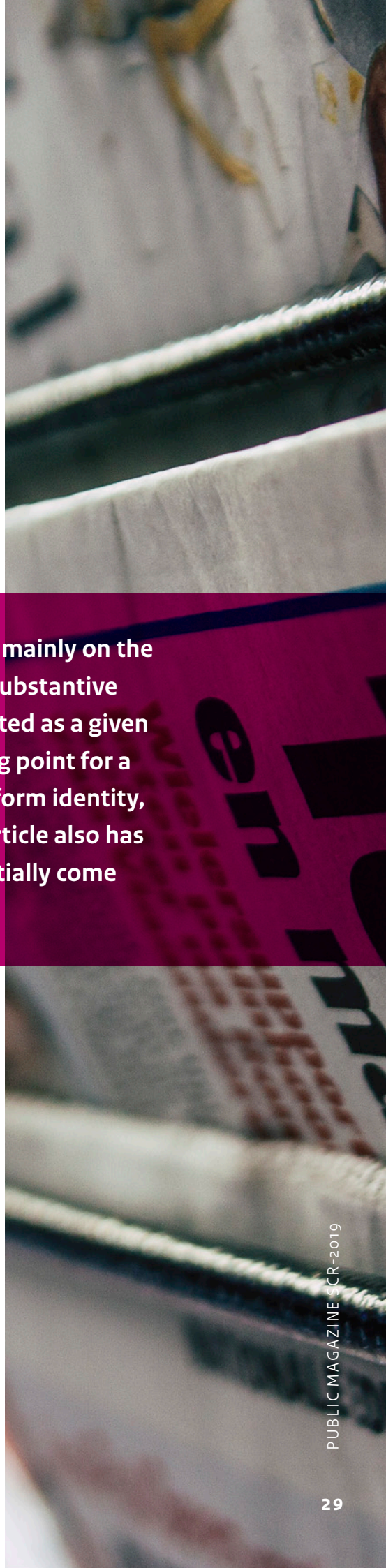
“I had lived in The Netherlands for ten years when my son was born. Since that day, I have come to feel more and more Dutch. It’s happened step by step, little by little. I’ve always worked in the hospitality industry. I first spent eighteen years working in a steakhouse on Damrak in Amsterdam. Our guests were tourists. The menus were written in Spanish, French, Italian, German and English. Dutch was more of a problem, and there were also hardly any Dutch people who came to eat with us.

And so, despite my Dutch passport, I was still something of a tourist myself. Somewhere in the back of my mind I always thought: ‘There will come a day when we will all be able to go back to Syria’. That feeling changed when my son was born; I knew right then: this will be his home. His mother-tongue is Dutch; it’s the language he dreams in. At the same time, the situation in Syria was deteriorating very rapidly after the hopeful resistance against Assad in 2011. After several years of war, I lost every scrap of hope. I knew then that I had to accept that my son would not be able to see Syria for the time being.

Around 2016 I increasingly saw Syrian refugees walking along Damrak. They’d all been sent to me. There was a job to be done there: I wanted to offer them a base in The Netherlands, somewhere they could work and learn the Dutch language. That’s when I hit on the idea of launching *Sham, a Syrian* restaurant.

My life changed dramatically: I began to enjoy my work more and more. Many of our clients were people who lived locally in Amsterdam, and my Dutch improved by leaps and bounds. Following a major conflict with the owner, I had to leave last year. I’m someone who doesn’t give up easily, so I started again at a different location. Lots of staff from the old team, all of them asylum status-holders from Syria, came with me. I have an important message to give to them: ‘Accept where you are now and enjoy all the different cultures. That will make life here much easier’.”

In the newspaper: **a debate about the debate**



Media reports about Dutch identity notably focus mainly on the issue of Dutch identity per se, rather than on the substantive elements of that identity. Dutch identity is presented as a given about which there can be no doubt, or as a starting point for a debate on whether the Dutch (should) share a uniform identity, or lastly as a mystery to which the author of the article also has no answer. Not uncommonly, these reports essentially come down to a debate about a debate.

Institutions

Some of the norms and values developed by society are encapsulated in institutions: the healthcare system, housing market policy, clubs and associations and pensions, for example. Institutionalisation is important for both identity and attachment, and this applies both for those who tend more towards symbols and tradition and those who lean more towards civic freedoms.

The institutions reveal a desire for mutual solidarity. They are visible in areas such as the welfare state: broadly accessible, but expensive provisions. The solidarity is also evident in the discussions about patient co-payments in healthcare and about pensions. We also observe a desire for consensus and consultation in the 'polder model' institutional system. Finally, the Dutch are a nation of savers.

What does the future look like?

Professor and Spinoza Prizewinner Joep Leerssen argues in his essay (see chapter 4 of this report) that the image of the Dutch will continue for the foreseeable future to move within a threefold paradigm of bonvivant, sober individualist and philistine.
In a multilingual and globalised landscape, language will be experienced more consciously as a commonality. In the perception of the physical environment, the typical Dutch landscapes and townscapes will tend to be seen as picturesque local elements, while the modern urban ambiance will increasingly set the tone as a multi-coloured consumption and leisure-time community. Today's generations are growing up in a globalised urban culture, at the same time surrounded by enormously strong examples of everyday nationalism such as Amsterdam Airport Schiphol and the Dutch national football team.

Current ecological developments mean that water management could regain its historical importance for the shared Dutch identity. Politically, a Dutch identity will be fragmented in international frameworks, and the European framework in particular will continue to be a political discussion point. The Dutch political identity will become a conjunction of differing, sometimes opposing orientations in an increasingly disharmonious global system.

Developments such as the greater attention for the environment and sustainability, rising education levels, women's emancipation and technological advances are mainly seen as strengthening factors for The Netherlands. By contrast, the growing polarisation between groups, but also Islam and bureaucratisation, are sources of concern about The Netherlands.

Everyday nationalism

Nationalism is not something that is ignited only when the Dutch national football team is playing, on Remembrance Day or Liberation Day, when the Dutch national anthem is sung or when a Dutch soldier is killed in battle. Nationalism is an everyday phenomenon. We are exposed day after day, often in subtle ways, to elements which fuel and sustain the national consciousness: children's exercise books with a picture of the Night Watch on the cover, talking about 'we' and 'us' when the Dutch Women's Football team have won, pictograms of clogs and windmills for the different parking levels at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, and so on. Everyday nationalism feeds the collective memory and contributes to the national consciousness, often without us being fully aware of it.

INTERVIEW

‘An **orange T-shirt** brings you together’

Martin Zwart (47)
Owner of ‘Aladdin’s Notenhoek’, a shop selling nuts in Amsterdam.

“I recently organised a competition in our shop. We filled a glass jar with macadamia nuts and put it on the counter with the question: how many nuts does it contain? The winner would receive a free collection of nuts. I thought to myself, we might get ten entrants. I couldn’t have been more wrong: in no time at all, we had a bin bag full of entries.

As soon as there’s a chance of winning something, the Dutch are in. You see that especially during sporting events, of course. If I see an orange T-shirt passing by on the television, it always makes me stop and watch: ‘Hey, a Dutch team!’. Orange brings you together.

The first time I experienced ‘orange fever’ was in 1988. I was 17 at the time, and the Dutch football team had just won the European Championships. No one had seen it coming. Before then, Holland had occasionally finished as runners-up. The atmosphere was always one of: ‘Just act normal, that’s mad enough’. That changed completely after 1988; from then on it was: ‘Act crazy now and again, and do something totally off the wall once in a while.’

In 1988 I went to Amsterdam wearing an orange T-shirt. The homecoming was celebrated in the centre of Amsterdam. The players sailed through the canals on a boat. It was so crowded that people were even standing on the houseboats. In the end, I think I did just manage to catch a glimpse of the players. But really I couldn’t have cared less; I was just so incredibly proud that we had won.”

What do the study results tell us?

Taking all the results presented in the eighteen chapters of this report together, we can conclude that there are no diametrically opposed camps when it comes to the question of a Dutch identity. There is much that binds the people of The Netherlands. It is not possible to identify 'the DNA' of The Netherlands, but that does not mean that The Netherlands does not exist as an imagined community.

The debate about identity often leads to suggestions of a polarised country. Debate arises when people take positions on the flanks. Questions then often become narrowed down to simplistic choices, for example 'more or less EU' and 'keep or abolish the tradition of Black Pete'. It sometimes seems as if The Netherlands is made up of a collective of opposing views. This edition of the Social and Cultural Report (*Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport*) underscores the existence of conflicting views (and more specifically: the tensions that arise between people who feel attached to The Netherlands mainly on the basis of symbols and traditions and those whose attachment is based more on civic freedoms), but simultaneously illustrates that this diversity is accompanied by broadly shared views about what The Netherlands is for many Dutch citizens and what binds them to The Netherlands.

This unity in diversity appears to be a contradiction, but it is not. Many Dutch citizens are concerned about increasing polarisation, intolerance, growing differences of opinion and the pressure to choose sides. Social media exacerbate this: the things that people agree on are often lost in the discussion and then largely ignored, while the things that we disagree on receive wide attention. In such a situation, balanced communication about what binds us and what divides us is crucial. This report offers a contribution to the insights into what binds and divides the Dutch as a nation, by analysing and describing what we as Dutch citizens share and what we do not. That changes over time, but also remains largely the same.

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