

The Ties That Bind: Dutch Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende and the Legacy of the International Visitor Program

De Groene Amsterdammer, 1 February 2008

Giles Scott-Smith

On 19 April 2007 Dutch-American Friendship Day was celebrated in The Hague to commemorate 225 years of diplomatic relations. In his speech, which concentrated on the shared values and common 'strijd voor vrijheid' of the two nations, Minister President Jan Peter Balkenende also said the following:

'Feit is dat de Verenigde Staten tot op de dag van vandaag symbool staan voor dynamiek en geloof in de toekomst. Zelf heb ik dat nadrukkelijk ervaren tijdens mijn eerste uitgebreide kennismaking met de Verenigde Staten in 1985. Ik reisde er toen in het kader van een uitwisselingsprogramma vier weken rond.'

[The fact is that right up to this day the United States stands for dynamism and a belief in the future. I have experienced this more than ever myself during my first meaningful contact with the United States in 1985. I travelled there for four weeks as a participant in an exchange programme.]

Many elements contribute towards close diplomatic relations between nations. Democratic political cultures, a commitment to free trade, the effects of immigration and long-running historical ties, shared religious beliefs, even the existence of a common enemy can contribute towards pervasive cross-border ties. What is of interest here is how this common ground can be deliberately cultivated in order to smoothen the maintenance of such ties. This has become known as the field of 'public diplomacy', a phrase which broadly refers to the efforts of a nation (meaning its government in combination with private organisations) to improve its standing in the eyes of others. By improving the level of knowledge and understanding for one's national identity, interests, and culture, a more favourable context for the conduct of diplomatic relations can be nurtured. Public diplomacy involves a whole variety of activities ranging from the effects of policies themselves to the pursuit of cultural relations through art exhibitions, theatre productions, speaker tours, and film festivals. One particular means to assist in the circulation of people and ideas are exchange programmes. It was via the US State

Department's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) that Balkenende first visited the United States.

The IVLP began life in 1950 as the Foreign Leader Program – it was renamed the International Visitor Program in 1965, then under Condoleezza Rice it regained the 'Leadership' tag in 2004. The IVLP was designed to build favourable contacts with foreign elites in order to facilitate US foreign policy interests. Despite the name changes, its guiding principles remain more or less the same as they were when it was set up in 1950. As the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs put it in a policy document in 1973, exchanges are valuable tools to "favorably influence the environment within which US foreign policy is carried out," and in particular "to enlarge the circle of those able to serve as influential interpreters between this and other nations." By developing such a body of people who could act as respected channels of information in their own societies on all matters American, it was hoped to gradually remove misconceptions and negative stereotypes about US attitudes in general and foreign policy goals in particular. A 1981 report added the following goal: "to 'reach' or 'influence' present and potential political leadership in given countries." The cultivation of 'local opinion leaders' in this way was thus another means to strengthen sympathetic elites, fortify pro-democratic forces, maintain pro-market norms, expand knowledge and understanding of the US way of life, and reduce the legitimacy of communist, neutralist, or indeed any alternative that went against fundamental US interests. Each US Embassy receives an annual budget out of which exchanges are paid, and it is up to a committee consisting of representatives from each Embassy section to select appropriate candidates according to the particular objectives they intend to secure in the host country. Short-term and long-term considerations are taken into account, so that each year's list of participants will include those connected to specific policy matters of interest and those who would benefit from longer-term political or cultural 'orientation'. US Ambassadors consistently place the IVLP at the top of their list of most effective items in their public diplomacy toolbox.

The 1980s, of course, were a difficult period for the transatlantic alliance. The placement of Soviet SS-20 missiles directed at West European targets and the modernisation of NATO's intermediate nuclear force in response caused deep-seated opposition from European publics. US public diplomacy needed to be stepped up in order to solidify a positive public and political environment for the placement of Cruise and Pershing missiles on West European

soil, and the Netherlands was at the centre of this approach. During the 1980s the embassy sought to both build constructive relations to support immediate NATO policy and also lay the ground for a broader improvement in public opinion towards the United States in the longer term. The IVLP was therefore used to both connect with the existing power-brokers (especially if they had no real first-hand experience of the United States) and develop favourable relations with those who could well be power-brokers in the future. Talent-spotting has always been an integral part of the operation. The Reagan administration expanded its anti-communist information programmes on all fronts. The IVLP's global budget alone rose from around \$18m in 1982 to \$42m in 1989, and the number of participants (either as individuals or in group projects) duly increased, in the Dutch case from around 18 in 1980 to 35 by 1985. Careful attention was given to spreading the increase in invitations around various professions, to avoid any hints of political manipulation. Hence under Ambassador L. Paul Bremer (1983-86) great attention was also given to media personnel, academics (especially those working in the fields on security/international relations, history, and American Studies), trade unionists, local government officials, and others from the cultural world (such as Frans Haaks from the Groningen modern art museum).

Yet despite this spread, the political intent was never far away. During the early 1980s US public diplomacy placed an increasing emphasis on making contact with the so-called 'successor generation' in Western European politics. The aim was to build intellectual and mutually beneficial bridges with the generation of politicians and other professionals who were then entering positions of leadership. Due to their relative youth, their worldviews were not set by the formative events of WW II or its immediate aftermath (such as the Marshall Plan). In the words of Hans Tuch, during the 1980s a Public Affairs Counsellor in Bonn, "this gap of knowledge and understanding was perceived as posing a danger to the future cohesion" of the Atlantic alliance. When discussing this in interviews, Jimmy Kolker, Political Officer in London from 1986-89, remarked that "we were very busy with the 'successor' thing", and Jake Gillespie, the US Embassy's Information Officer in The Hague from 1976-81, had this to say:

An IV grant was always looking for the future... We wanted to identify 'is this someone who ten years from now is going to be there?' If you go through the list you can see where we were good and where we were bad. We made some very good choices. But there's a percentage.

It is noticeable that several future leaders received their first trip to the United States via the Program during this period: Anders Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark in 1982, Guy Verhofstadt of Belgium in 1983, from the UK Gordon Brown in 1984 and Tony Blair in 1986, Nicolas Sarkozy (at the time the 29-year-old Mayor of Neuilly-sur-Seine) in 1985, and Jan Peter Balkenende, also in 1985.

Balkenende was at the time a researcher with the CDA Wetenschappelijk Instituut (WI), having joined in 1984, and was becoming noticed within party circles as a rising talent. These were important years for the Instituut, as is sought under the leadership of director Arie Oostlander to map out a future direction and ethos for the newly-formed CDA. Thijs Broer & Max van Weezel have described this period well in *De Geroepene*: Oostlander, looking for ways to weld together the three streams of KVP, ARP, and CHU, saw the Instituut's task as 'een ideologische grondslag onder de partij te leggen.' He sought 'dwarse denkers' who were prepared to confront awkward issues and be open to useful inputs from all streams of thinking. Balkenende was one of these.

Oostlander was himself a participant on the IVLP in August-September 1981, when he travelled to the USA with a broad agenda. In that year Oostlander had been the co-author with Professor P.J. Teunissen of a CDA report on security policy that laid the basis for the party's election manifesto, and, according to the US Embassy, he "stressed that his primary interest concerns strategic policy, US/European relations and the functioning of political research institutes." However, his US schedule was also set up for him "to make contacts with his counterparts in similar political institutions and other American organizations dealing with social change," covering in particular the role of religious groups in the political process and the dynamic processes of American civil society in general. Oostlander, in a recent interview, confirmed that his 1981 trip did strengthen his support for the NATO modernisation strategy, but only because the views he heard in the US coincided with the views he held already on the need to free the peoples of Eastern Europe from Soviet-backed oppression. However, the most interesting aspect of his IVLP tour was its use for introducing him first-hand to the role of citizens groups in a society that did not expect everything to be provided by the government. Examples from the US were certainly useful and fed into the deliberation processes then under way at the WI, but it is not as if they were given priority. In the words of Oostlander, it was important to know what was going on in the United States, but highlighting American trends above others "would strengthen suspicions". Not all examples he came across were

positive, either. The fervent conservatism of several US religious movements towards gay rights, for instance, was totally opposed to the kind of ethical progressivism that Oostlander and the WI were trying to formulate for the CDA at that time.

By the time Balkenende himself went to the USA, the dominant prognosis of Oostlander and his colleagues at the WI was that the future for social change in the Netherlands lay not with an all-powerful state but with more flexible social relations fuelled by independent personal initiative and individual moral responsibility. The question was how to establish this approach within the CDA and as the norm in Dutch political culture and in society at large. Looking to engage with local developments and stimulate intellectual exchange on this point, the US Embassy assembled a four-man IVLP group in 1985 for a study tour entitled Economic and Social Well-Being in the United States, which took place from 19 August to 15 September 1985. The participants were Hendrik Jan Brouwer, Director General for General Policy at the Ministry of Social Affairs, Flip Buurmeyer, PvdA spokesperson on social affairs, Thijs Woltgens, also of the PvdA, and Jan Peter Balkenende. Balkenende was certainly the junior member of the group, having come to the attention of the US Embassy cultural staff through his interest in the Ampart programme which organised public lectures by visiting American speakers (similar to what the John Adams Institute does now). At the time it was clear to the Embassy that Balkenende was a talented individual who would succeed professionally, hence his inclusion ahead of other more established figures, although the spread of his skills (academic, political, socio-economic planning) made it impossible to predict what success might mean. His inclusion was a typical example of the IVLP being used to connect with a rising young talent, stimulate their curiosity and interest about the USA, bring them more within a US-focused intellectual orbit, potentially introduce US examples and experience into their work, and lay the basis for favourable relations over the longer term.

The programme was assembled for the four Dutchmen on the basis of Embassy objectives and the wishes of the participants themselves. It aimed to provide a cross-section of US social policies at federal, state, and municipal levels, covering not only macro-economic perspectives but also specifics such as “enterprise development and job creation, technological innovation, the role of venture capital, the changing labor force, worker training, and shifts to new economic bases.” The main theme throughout was how best to combine public and private forces to release “local economic development and private initiative as an agent for change.” The tour began with an intensive schedule in Washington

D.C., taking in the Departments of Commerce, Labor, the Treasury, the Federal Reserve Board, and various private sector institutes such as the National Development Council and the Corporation for Enterprise Development. The group then moved on to Pittsburgh, Parkersburg West Virginia, Minneapolis, Portland, Austin, Tampa, and New York, in each location examining in detail the various examples of urban renewal, industrial restructuring, city planning, the implementation of public-private partnerships, and the generation of an enterprise culture. An effort was made to cover both small and large communities and declining and expanding industries.

Asked to fill in a questionnaire at the end of a whirlwind tour of the US socio-economic scene, all the participants responded very positively. There was general appreciation that the result turned out close to what had been agreed in discussions at the US Embassy in The Hague. All four found four weeks sufficient for their task, since any longer would have led to 'information overload' and a shorter trip would have lessened their experience of the regional diversity of the USA. Brouwer referred to the advantage of being "more able to place thoughts coming from the US in a better 'framework'," a perfect example of the uses of the IVLP to improve understanding of US culture and society. Buurmeyer valued the chance to improve his understanding of the similarities and differences in economic performance between the USA and Europe, and "the shifts in Pittsburgh from a steel-oriented economy to more service-oriented activities." Woltgens was more sober in his reaction but was still "convinced that US experience has given us stimulating impulses" on how to energise the labour market. Balkenende was as equally enthusiastic as his colleagues. Not everything he saw and heard on US socio-economic policy was applicable in the Netherlands, but the trip had broadened his thinking, making him more aware of the possibilities and problems that could be encountered in this field. Oostlander recalled that the level of city pride in Pittsburgh, which fuelled the drive to successful urban regeneration, had a big effect on Balkenende. Concerning suggestions for the future, the future Minister President significantly remarked: "Give more people in key positions in the Netherlands [the chance] to participate in such a project, especially the men who are on the board of the trade unions."

The Escort Officer assigned by the State Department to guide the group around the United States, William Brown, also offered his own views on the value of the trip in an evaluation report. There was a good group dynamic between the four, according to Brown, so much so that they almost operated deliberately as a team to deliberate on and check out the facts and

figures they were presented with. Every opportunity was taken by them to check official pronouncements with the attitudes and everyday experiences of members of the American public, so much so that when flying between cities they sat apart to increase their contact time with ordinary citizens. Wary of propaganda, they therefore balanced overly optimistic views on the US economy from government officials with down-to-earth, man-in-the-street observations. Significantly, “the best and most realistic view of the United States economy” came from the Conference Board, an independent business research institute based in New York. Brown also noted that “although Mr Balkenende is from a different party than the other three, he was in complete agreement most of the time with the other members of the group.” Brown found them critically engaged at every turn and all were equally keen to both follow up on contacts made and return soon to the USA.

Soon after their return to the Netherlands the European bureau of the United States Information Agency (USIA) communicated to the US Embassy that it was “extremely pleased with the project and with the group’s written review....We praise your initiation of this program and your selections.” Further embassy communications to Washington confirmed the initial positive reactions of the participants. Frank Albert, the USIA Public Affairs Officer in The Hague, reported in October Hendrik Brouwer’s comments that “the program enabled them to observe the economic issues from various angles and perspectives” and that “the acquired background would help to place US developments in the right perspective.” In December Albert reported on comments from Buurmeyer and Woltgens that deserve being quoted at length:

Flip Buurmeyer and Thijs Woltgens told Ambassador Bremer recently that they were full of praise for the efforts of USIA in arranging this project....Particularly noteworthy for them was the close connection between business and universities, our creative, active capital markets, the fact that our young people work even while at school, and the importance of the service sector in introducing them to the labor market. They were also impressed with the spirit and optimism of the American people which leads them to take chances to start and support new firms.

Buurmeyer and Woltgens are at the forefront of renewing the social/economic policies of the Dutch Labor party as it tries to find its way out of the rote welfare state mentality of the 60s and 70s and chart a course which will increase economic growth and individual initiative. While they are neither able nor willing to support the US

model in the Netherlands, much of what they saw they readily admit could be in part applied here to good effect.

The above demonstrates the effectiveness of the International Visitors Program in explaining the values and dynamics of American society to foreign audiences.

Conclusion

Balkenende went on to write his Ph.D. at the VU (entitled ‘Overheidsregelgeving en maatschappelijke organisaties’) on exactly the topics he had examined during his trip to the United States. The scriptie, in the words of Broer and van Weezel, was basically a pleidooi “voor herstel van de eigen verantwoordelijkheid van maatschappelijke organisaties die verslaafd waren geraakt aan overheidssubsidies.” It is of course not the case that Balkenende became ‘pro-American’ simply because he visited the United States via the IVLP in 1985, as some simplistic interpretations might have it. Neither did he return convinced of the merits of American-type solutions for Dutch socio-economic problems. Many influences fed into the research directions taken by the CDA (and PvdA). However, the 1985 tour illustrates perfectly the more subtle effectiveness of the Program in inter-national relations.

Firstly, it is a useful means to connect already-existing trends of thought and research, in this case within the WI and the PvdA, with relevant developments in the US, giving them an extra stimulus and possibly introducing US-style thinking along the way. During the 1980s the impulse for reform and renewal in the Dutch economic, social, and education fields was strong. The US Embassy made every effort to follow these trends, interact with them, and where possible link them with similar processes and communities across the Atlantic. Significantly, the Wiardi Beckman Stichting also became the focus of attention in the late 1980s, with Joop van den Berg (1986), Paul Scheffer (1987), and Paul Kalma (1988) all invited to visit the US as the Embassy sought to build bridges for the future with the social democrats. There is no set pattern here – The United States is put on show, both in a positive and negative sense, and visitors can draw their own conclusions, often (as is the case with the 1985 group) deciding that US examples are not ideal but that they still present valuable lessons for similar policy-making elsewhere.

Secondly, in doing so it opened up increased spaces and opportunities for interaction between Dutch policy researchers and their US counterparts. Balkenende himself mentioned his wish to follow up one particular contact he had met during his tour for further discussion “on practical subjects (training etc).” These kinds of contacts may seem small-scale, but they can

act exactly as primers for attracting and encouraging further contacts in the future, gradually making the lattice-work of transatlantic relations ever more dense and bringing the presence of the USA closer into the policy-making processes of other nations.

Thirdly, in this way the US still remains the focal point of attention for those seeking answers, maintaining its place at the centre of global intellectual networks. Of course, this could not succeed without the dynamism of US society and the quality of its research base, but there is still a strong element of American Exceptionalism at work here that perpetuates the USA as the forefront of social, cultural, and political change.

Fourthly, there is an important socialisation process taking place, whereby the USA becomes 'normalised' for those who may operate within less pro-American environments, such as the PvdA in the 1980s. The comments of the four participants confirmed the value for them of seeing the USA face-to-face, especially for the first time, in so doing increasing their curiosity and raising their awareness of all things American. Coupled to this is the positive psychological factor that an IVLP invitation communicates to its recipients that they are individuals of some importance and talent.

To conclude, the IVLP operates on far more intricate levels than just as 'propaganda'. It is a constant, year-in-year-out method of building favourable relations – be they political, social, cultural, economic, etc – over a longer period, person by person, group by group. Foreign policy objectives drive its focus, but the results may take a long time to come out, and the judgements and predictions of US Embassy officials are not always perfect. But Balkenende's reference to his 1985 trip in April this year shows how in many cases it *can* pave the way for favourable relations later on. As the Minister President ended his report: "It would be interesting to look for an opportunity to continue the discussion between socio-economic specialists from both countries."