

Will the Dutch Hilary Benn please step forward

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On 21 April the US ambassador to the Netherlands, Roland Arnall, published a short comment in *De Volkskrant* to mark 225 years of Dutch-American diplomatic relations. Emphasising the long-standing support for positive transatlantic relations from both nations, he went on to highlight their current cooperation, via NATO, in Afghanistan.

It is certainly true that the Netherlands and the United States have a long record of close relations. Nevertheless, it feels a little forced to celebrate a 225th anniversary. Arnall himself stated that such a positive relationship does not happen automatically, and that it is therefore necessary to reflect on what binds the two nations together. Yet this also gives the impression that a relatively insignificant anniversary is being celebrated partly to overcome issues which are putting the relationship under strain. Arnall's statement therefore prompts us instead to reflect on the *divisive* issues in order to judge their importance and their meaning for Dutch foreign policy and the nature of Dutch-American relations as a whole.

Simply put, after World War II Dutch relations with the United States were defined in the context of three broad interests (one might say 'pillars'): security, economics/trade, and international law. There is a centuries-long tradition of support for free trade and international legal norms, and the Dutch worked closely with the Americans to ensure the success of a regulated post-war political and economic international system via organisations such as the UN, NATO, the OECD, and the Bretton Woods institutions. During the Cold War these three pillars were integrated more or less in harmony. While the Dutch-American economic relationship grew, potential clashes between security interests and international law were overcome by the presence of a greater enemy, the Soviet Union. However, since 2000 the foreign policy of the two Bush administrations has put this harmony under some stress. Trade and investment still remains a bedrock of mutual interest between the Netherlands and the United States. The Netherlands is the second largest investor in the USA behind the UK, while in 2003 the US invested far more in the Netherlands than in any other EU state. But security and international law have increasingly come into collision. The disagreement over

the International Criminal Court (leading to Congress passing the infamous ‘Hague Invasion Act’ in 2002) and the ‘small ice age’ (Ben Bot) caused by revelations of CIA rendition flights passing through Schiphol and Rotterdam airports are two of the most telling examples. The continuing calls for an enquiry into the full meaning of ‘political support’ for the Iraq war, and the divergence of approach between the US-led Enduring Freedom operation and the NATO ISAF mission towards counter-terrorism and opium production raise other, broader questions about transatlantic accords that should not be taken for granted. It does not help that, having gone to Uruzgan partly for the sake of NATO, the Dutch forces in Uruzgan now get criticised in the *New York Times* for their ‘soft approach’. Meanwhile, the inevitable pressure from Washington is now building to ensure those forces stay longer than August 2008.

Alliances are never perfect, and tensions are ever-present – Any look at the history of NATO makes this evident. But fundamental interests are now in opposition. As Foreign Minister, Ben Bot was acutely aware of this. In 2006 he wrote in *Internationale Spectator* that it was time for the Netherlands to move from the ‘pure multilateralism’ of the Cold War, where Dutch national interests merged with the general interest of a managed (US-led) international system governed by international organisations and norms of behaviour, to a ‘realistic multilateralism’ where it can no longer be assumed that national and general interests are in harmony. The world has changed, and the Netherlands needed to change with it by adopting and projecting a clearer vision of its national interest. In a speech given at the Roosevelt Academy in January 2007 Bot made his position more explicit by outlining four cases where ‘the existing legal order is losing legitimacy’ – significantly, two of the cases involved the United States (the US-India nuclear agreement and ‘illegal combatants’). Bot attempted to resolve these anomalies, for instance with the international juridical commission assembled in late 2006 to clarify the status of illegal combatants. This is a worthy response, but it may well do no more than absorb Dutch moral integrity within the broader interests of US security policy.

It is not the intention here to call for any ‘break’ in Dutch-American relations. Other commentators have called for a greater focus on the EU as a ‘counter-weight’, or on the UN. The point here is instead to emphasise how the pillars of Dutch foreign relations are clashing thanks to the unilateralism of the United States, and it is time to face up to the damage this can do for the Netherlands’ integrity. Bot fully understood the implications, aware that the

Netherlands had to act to retain its status and image abroad as a paragon of international law and political ethics. There is no public indication that the current government follows his approach, and this misses a major opportunity. Last month Hilary Benn, Tony Blair's international development secretary, criticised the 'war on terror' and its emphasis on military force in a speech at New York University. The Iraq war has raised serious questions within British politics, the media, and the military about the conduct of recent UK-US relations and the implications for the future. Benn's statements deserve more attention than they have received. The tone of the debate is that the UK remains a close ally of the US, but it should defend its own interests more. It is an opportune moment for the Netherlands – perhaps in coordination with the UK - to do the same. UK-Dutch relations are already closer thanks to a convergence of interest on the EU constitution, offering the potential to team up on transatlantic matters as well. Crucially, they can do this as supportive but critical allies and not as opponents. As Arnall said, 'criticism from good friends is healthy'. Will the Dutch Hilary Benn therefore please step forward.