

*Integrity, values and corruption in
nineteenth-century Netherlands*

The Letters Affair of 1865

Ronald Kroeze
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Research-project:
The Genesis of public valuesystems
1650-1950

- The research team consist of 5 professors and 3 phd-students (see: www.corruptionproject.nl).
- Use political corruption scandals to analyse (changing) public values
- My phd-research focus on the history of public values and corruption in 1850-1950 in the Netherlands and in international perspective.

Approach:

- Why do we use corruption scandals to analyse public values?
- Concepts like morality, integrity and corruption change over time. Their content can only be made clear by looking at the values which are connected to these concepts in different historical settings and organizations.
- These values often remain implicit.
- Scandals are moments of large (public) disagreement in which the discussion about 'right' and 'wrong' (i.e. values) is made explicit.

Approach:

- Different sources of values:
- Public opinion (news papers etc).
 - Moral authorities/ best opinion.
 - Shopfloor/ internal codes of conduct.
 - Legal laws/ rules.
- Sources of values give meaning to concepts of integrity, ethical behavior, morality and corruption.

Presentation of a Dutch political
corruption scandal.

The Letters Affair of 1865

The Letters Affair in short:

- During the elections of 1864 the liberal minister of Finance G.H. Betz wrote a letter to a MP-candidate from the province of Limburg.
- In this letter Betz promised to pull back the tax proposal to higher the tax in the province of Limburg, if Limburg would vote for a liberal candidate.
- Betz also wrote that he had ordered the director of the taxes in Limburg to operate not to strict to favor the people of Limburg.
- The liberal MP candidate in Limburg, P. Th. van der Maesen de Sombreff, showed the letter to voters in Limburg to gain support for his election.
- The letter was published in 1865 in several newspaper.

Betz wrote to Van der Maesen:

- 'With you I hope that (...) the liberal principles in Limburg will be victorious (...). And (...) [I have] made you a promise that I shall cancel the land tax, if only the attitude of the Limburg voters would make it possible for me to do so. [I have also ordered the director of the taxes] to not prosecute small tax offenders. The people in Limburg will see that the Minister of Finance is not so bad after all'

(Published in: *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 22 November 1865).

- It was called: 'an act of imprudence', 'corruption', 'not nobel', 'harmful to political morality' etc.

Nineteenth century Dutch politics

- New constitution in 1848 which formed foundation for political and public administration organisations.
- Dominant role of liberals after 1848, especially Liberal leader J.R. Thorbecke.

Nineteenth century (unwritten) political rules, rules of modernization

- After 1848 independence of politics with regard to family, king, party, city, province etc.
- Serve the general interest
- Be aware of difference between private and public
- Discuss and make rational decisions in public settings (newspapers, parliament etc) and not backdoors.

Nineteenth century integrity based on bourgeois values

- Focus of liberal bourgeois on **capacity and character**, not on universal right (=democratic) or descent (=aristocratic) to be active as a public official. (*You have to prove with good behaviour that you have the capacity to serve as a integer public figure/ official*).
- Important role for high and middle class bourgeois (burgers) with independent professions: especially lawyers, professors and entrepreneurs.
- Important values: rationality, appropriateness, strictness, openness, independency of public officials and honourability.
- Liberal/ bourgeois valuesystem is European phenomenon especially dominant in Victorian England.

Debate in parliament and newspapers. Why it was corruption?

Arguments:

- General interest was harmed by favoring Limburg with lower taxes (public interest harmed).
- Independency of politicians and elections was harmed because Betz influenced elections (political rules violated).
- The strict separation between public and private was harmed (political rules violated).
- Van Zuylen: Limburgers 'could calculate down to the last penny what financial advantage they would derive from the withdrawal of the tax proposal' (financial private gain on behalf of the state).
- Integrity was harmed. Difference between what liberals proclaimed officially in public and actually did behind the scenes. They harmed integrity by appointing public officials based on party reasons (mayor Pijls, other civil servants) and made backdoor agreements about tax regulation, but officially proclaimed that it was not allowed.

The debate in parliament and newspapers. Why it was not corruption?

- Thorbecke: it are rumors 'plucked from the slums and backstreet districts'.
- Thorbecke denied accusations: civil servants did not influenced the elections.
- Betz: It was common for years to make 'backdoor' appointments with the director of taxes.
- Liberal MP Van der Linden: It was a private letter for private use, so it has nothing to do with politics or the public interest.
- *Algemeen Handelsblad*: It was an 'act of imprudence' but it is 'absurd' to make such an big issue of it now Betz has resigned, because it harms the political morality, integrity and trust in the political system.

Further debate about Letters Affair

- Minister Betz and MP Van der Maesen de Sombreff resigned shortly after the publication of the letter.
- Opposition asked for further investigation and focused their critique on Thorbecke and the liberals in general. (*There were signs that Thorbecke also had written a letter with aggravating material*).
- The opposition asked for 'clarity', 'openness' and 'public and official disapproval' to restore 'political morality' and 'trust' in political organizations.
- Because public officials have to act 'respectfully' and with 'esteem', they must not be harmed by 'suspicion' and 'distrust'.

How did they deal with it?

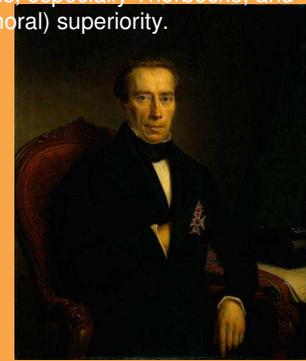
- Liberals tried to downplay the scandal. Thorbecke spoke of 'rumors'.
- Conservatives asked for parliamentary investigation.
- Focus on morality: 'ministers have to act with esteem and respectability'.
- Focus on role of persons/ leaders for integrity. (Liberals focused on the integrity of Thorbecke who was 'honest', 'unfaltering' and 'resolute'. Conservatives opposed this.)

Integrity connected with ethical behavior of leader Thorbecke

- Prime-minister Thorbecke decides what is right and wrong, he admitted Betz his corruptive act in parliament and Betz resigned:
"The minister [Betz] understand that this letter exposes him to allegations, accusations, and charges to which a Minister should not be exposed. Thus, he has asked the King to release him from his office".
- But Thorbecke still claimed moral superiority and integrity:
"This is what I have to say first of all (...): the elections in this country have never been as free and will never be more free than they are at the moment."
- Also other parliamentarians proclaimed that Thorbecke stood for integrity, because he is 'political honest', 'unfaltering' and 'resolute' in his manner and appearance.
- One liberal MP said: If Thorbecke is regarded as corrupt than not only his 'honour' but 'that of the whole country' is under question, according to many parliamentarians.

Dominant role of liberals, especially Thorbecke, and claimed (moral) superiority.

- Base selecting of public officials 'on ability'.
- Serve the general interest.
- Act independent from personal, family, region of party interest.



Prime minister and liberal leader J.R. Thorbecke (1798-1872)

Conclusion I:

- Eventually no more letters were found and the parliamentary investigation did not get enough support.
- However the debat gave insight in why it was seen as immoral and corruption
 - private gain for tax payers in Limburg
 - violation of political rules and values for party interest (i.e. general interest, independent elections and separation between private and public were harmed)
 - several public officials had not acted morally correct: i.e. being honest, strict, respectable, and act rational and in public.
- Non-corruptive i.e. moral politics was based on a whole set of formal and informal rules and values.
- That there was a difference between what liberals proclaimed in public and did backdoors.
- A lot of rules about taxation and appointment of public officials were not quite clear or observed.
- Claiming moral superiority is highly vulnerable!

Conclusion II

- Interesting points to consider for nowadays morality and integrity:
- Important values and ideas connected to integrity have historical foundation: nowadays rationality, general interest, separation between private of public, independence of public officials and free elections still important.
 - Contradiction between organisation (i.e. party) and general interest.
 - Role of leaders important for preserving integrity instead of NGO's, I.O., laws etc.
 - Implicit values (honour, respect, etc) and rules on which we judge public officials and give content to corruption were (are?) very important.
 - The dilemma that corruption scandals ask for public debate (=conservatives), but debate harms trust and integrity in organizations and its leaders therefore better not to pay much attention to it (=liberals)?!

- Thank you!