CHAPTER VIII

Towards a Commonwealth?

It is rather ludicrous when, almost twenty years later, the Netherlands summons Suriname to formulate proposals for a Commonwealth relationship. Who lives to reach an old age, experiences a lot! (Former Prime Minister Sedney in response to the ‘Lubbers Plan’ in early 1991, cited in Schalkwijk 1994:214.)

As the new regime intended to prepare a diplomatic offensive so as to avoid the Republic’s renewed isolation on the international stage, political circles in Paramaribo were unexpectedly confronted with a new Dutch proposal concerning the future of transatlantic relations and, indeed, the very nature of the Republic’s existence as a sovereign state. Utterly frustrated with the repeated military interventions in the former colony, Dutch Prime Minister Lubbers introduced the plan to establish a Commonwealth composed of the Netherlands, the two remaining Dutch Caribbean territories – the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba – and Suriname. Within this confederation, Paramaribo would transfer power in essential areas such as foreign policy, defence, monetary and economic affairs to The Hague. Even though the Surinamese public, the State Council, the Democratisch Alternatief 19911 and various scholars and journalists acclaimed this proposal as the answer to the Republic’s political and socio-economic problems, other intellectuals, commentators, representatives of the civilian parties and members of the NDP denounced the Lubbers Plan as merely boiling down to a form of recolonization. During the subsequent debate the nation plunged itself into some soul-searching deliberations whilst evaluating the past fifteen years of independence.

1 DA’91, Democratic Alternative 1991. DA’91 has been founded by opponents of the Bouterse-regime and who, at the same time, did not feel ‘home’ at the traditional parties. The party tends to gain its support from the rather well-educated section of the general public. DA’91 attempts to represent all ethnic groups in Suriname and is a supporter of closer ties with the Netherlands. The party might be best compared with the Dutch D’66.
An idea emerges

The Lubbers Plan, it must be stressed, originated from The Hague’s growing frustration with Suriname’s political situation. During a parliamentary debate just days following the Christmas Coup, VVD leader Frits Bolkestein introduced a motion aimed at intensifying transatlantic relations. This would allow the Kingdom to play a ‘stabilizing role’ in the Republic’s domestic affairs. As Bolkestein claimed, ‘if the Surinamese economy is going to improve at all, this will only be possible through foreign investments. And these will not come about as long as investors do not have the feeling that the Netherlands is helping to stabilize things there’ (NRC Handelsblad, 27-12-1990:3). To achieve this, the establishment was suggested of a Gemenebest (Commonwealth) relationship between the two states.

Even though this proposal was only an outline, other Dutch politicians from across the political spectrum supported Bolkestein. PvdA member Ad Melkert, for instance, declared to be ‘one hundred and eighty per cent’ in favour while D66 leader Hans van Mierlo announced to have ‘no objections whatsoever’ against the motion (NRC Handelsblad, 27-12-1990:3). Even GroenLinks (GreenLeft) politician Leoni Sipkes asserted that ‘we cannot continue to follow a policy of opening and closing the money flow. I would like to call it cooperation rather than Dutch assistance, but if you do it properly, you do not have to worry about paternalism at all’ (NRC Handelsblad, 27-12-1990:3).

Recognizing the mood among Dutch parliamentarians, following the May elections Lubbers began preparing a more specific plan to reshape Dutch-Surinamese relations. For this purpose he established a working group including himself, Hirsch Ballin, Van den Broek and Pronk (Dew 1994:182). Despite the working group’s failure to reveal to the public or even to Paramaribo the details of what would become known as the Lubbers Plan, Melkert argued that with the Dutch ‘willingness’ to form a Commonwealth, it was now up to Suriname to respond. In his own words: ‘The motto should now be to strengthen communication instead of isolation, assuming that this is supported by all. Fundamentally, the Surinamese political parties will now also have to indicate which orientation takes centre stage’ (NRC Handelsblad, 28-1-1991:3).

Melkert’s call on Suriname to become involved in the discussion raised some eyebrows in Paramaribo. As Schalkwijk (1994:207) rightly pointed out, the Commonwealth was not a new initiative, and certainly not a Dutch idea. As early as the third Round Table Conference in 1961 Pengel had introduced a motion that suggested ‘a revision of the Charter in order to provide Suriname with the status of a dominion – such as that of Canada and the British Commonwealth – with full self-determination in defence and foreign affairs
matters’. Under the Sedney administration (1969-1973) several proposals had been brought forward to discuss Suriname’s participation in a Dutch Commonwealth, particularly with regard to development aid, defence and judicial cooperation, so as to counter any calls for independence by NPS and PNR (Schalkwijk 1994:209-14). Yet nothing ever came of these plans due to the growing willingness of the PvdA and of the Arron government to fully decolonize Suriname – hence Sedney’s witty opening quote of this chapter.

Despite these earlier proposals, it was with great surprise that Paramaribo reacted to the Dutch initiative; it needed time to formulate its position. Eventually, after a month Melkert received a reply – although neither from the politicians nor in the form he had hoped. Instead, Bouterse criticized the Commonwealth as a Dutch plot to influence the forthcoming elections in favour of the old civilian parties. He feared that the parties backing the Lubbers Plan could promise the electorate more Dutch aid as a reward for their support. In an angry yet comic way Bouterse announced that he was in favour of a close association with the Netherlands so ‘that everybody receives dual nationality, citizenship, as many foreign currencies as they please and unemployment benefits for everyone’. Moreover, Suriname’s navy would get ‘a battleship’ and ‘I myself will be part of the staff of the Allies. [...] Together with General Schwarzkopf I will then make plans against Iraq’ (NRC Handelsblad, 22-2-1991:2).

While warning the public not to believe that an association with the Netherlands would solve the Republic’s problems, Bouterse rightly emphasized that as yet no details had been presented to Paramaribo. Instead (to the outrage of Surinamese politicians), the Dutch Foreign Affairs Department did inform Caracas, Washington, Paris, Brasilia and the OAS about Lubbers’ intentions. The primary reason for The Hague excluding Paramaribo had to do with the lack of consensus within the Dutch cabinet about the idea of a Commonwealth. The proposal put together in January 1991 failed to gain unanimous support as several ministers criticized the plan for creating a neocolonial impression (NRC Handelsblad, 23-2-1991:1). Fearing a negative regional response, it was requested that the position of the major Latin American countries be taken into account before approving the scheme.

Controversy was also rampant in Paramaribo. The Front coalition refused to give a response to the idea of a Commonwealth prior to the elections as this would highlight the division within the coalition. Whereas the NPS, which had fought hard for Suriname’s independence, was naturally critical of the proposal, the Hindustani VHP, initially opposing decolonization, assessed it in more favourable terms. Recognizing growing public support for the Lubbers Plan, the party even saw it as a ‘gift from God’ (NRC Handelsblad, 23-2-1991:3). Derby, however, was angered by The Hague’s move. The leader of the SPA rightly claimed that ‘the Netherlands does consult the United States
and the Organization of American States but it has failed to present the idea to the country most involved. That is inconsistent' (NRC Handelsblad, 23-2-1991:1). Other politicians contacted Ambassador Koch to learn the details of the Commonwealth, but the Dutch representative had to admit that there was ‘no finalized plan’ (NRC Handelsblad, 23-02-1991:3).

Since no specific information was available, even the NDP remained ‘neutral’, neither condemning the idea nor embracing it. A similar ‘non-committal’ attitude could be observed during a conference in The Hague on 2 May 1991. While discussing ‘The Relationship Netherlands-Suriname, Now and in the Future’, Schalkwijk (1994:227) pointed out that within the Paramaribo delegation ‘the term Commonwealth had scrupulously been avoided’. What united most Surinamese politicians was their insistence that the Republic’s sovereign status should not be compromised. According to a member of parliament ‘after fifteen years of independence, this would be a betrayal of ourselves’ (NRC Handelsblad, 23-2-1991:3).

This indecisive atmosphere in Paramaribo changed when just prior to the elections support of the proposal increased. Mid-March the new party combination DA’91, comprising the Alternatief Forum (AF, Alternative Forum), the HPP, Pendawa Lima and the Bosneger Eenheidspartij (BEP, Bush Negro Unity Party), openly advocated closer relations with the Netherlands (NRC Handelsblad, 12-3-1991:3). Including many younger intellectuals from across the ethnic divide, the leadership of this electoral alliance incorporated the Commonwealth in its programme as a means of easing the country’s problems.

Only days before the elections, the State Council publicly spoke out in favour of the Lubbers Plan. Following the establishment, in March, of an ad hoc commission to seek consultations with Suriname’s main political and socio-economic organizations (including the ASFA, the CCK, RAVAKSUR, PALU and the VSB) chairman Harold Ramdanie presented a report in which it was emphasized that many of these groups would welcome a Commonwealth, although most stressed the need for more information (Schalkwijk 1994:224-6). On the basis of these findings, the State Council’s suggestion was for the newly elected government to define the Republic’s own position on the issue and initiate negotiations with The Hague before seeking public approval in a referendum. The Council members were particularly pleased with the idea of integrating the NL into the Dutch armed forces, thus ‘taming’ the officers’ taste for political power. Surprisingly, the lack of specific details did not prevent the State Council from promoting the Commonwealth.

In other words, following the coup and the ensuing international condemnation, Surinamese politics would rapidly become dominated by debates regarding the future relations with the Netherlands. Other regional and global issues were perceived to be of lesser importance, which does not mean to
suggest that in the foreign policy sphere there were no developments between Christmas 1990 and May 1991. Suriname, in fact, experienced severe difficulties with Washington in this period, highlighted by Paramaribo’s initial refusal to welcome the new American Ambassador, John Leonard, in reaction to the White House’s condemnation of the coup (NRC Handelsblad, 13-3-1991:7). While this problem was finally solved with President Kraag receiving Leonard in March 1991, a second dispute emerged following American accusations that the NL continued to be involved in drug trafficking. To calm the situation, Kraag announced his intention to seek closer cooperation with Washington in combating the trade in illegal narcotics (Haagsche Courant, 23-5-1991:1).

A related problem was Bouterse’s objection to the in his opinion large number of OAS representatives to oversee the elections. With the backing of the civilian parties, which sought to repair the Republic’s international image, the OAS dispatched forty observers from sixteen Latin American and Caribbean countries, justifying this number by stating that Suriname was ‘the last military dictatorship’ on the South American mainland (NRC Handelsblad, 18-5-1991:3). Whereas the OAS saw the elections as an important step in the democratization process in the Western Hemisphere, Bouterse criticized the large delegation of observers as a sign of the organization distrusting the current regime to carry out free and fair elections.

Finally, on 25 May 1991 the elections took place. Despite some problems in the organizational sphere, including the transport of ballot papers in boats to and from remote areas, the OAS representatives declared the voting valid (NRC Handelsblad, 25-5-1991:3). The result, however, came as a surprise to the watching international community and, in particular, to the Netherlands. Of the 51 Assembly seats, the Nieuw Front (NF, New Front; the former Front coalition), this time also comprising the SPA, won ‘only’ 30 seats – against 40 in the 1987 elections. These, in turn, were divided as follows: NPS (12), VHP (9), KTPI (7) and SPA (2). The DA’91 gained 9 seats, that is, 3 seats each for the HPP and the BEP, 2 for Pendawa Lima and 1 for the Alternative Forum. The other 12 seats went to the NDP – previously represented by only 3 parliamentarians.

Yet if Bouterse thought an increase of the NDP’s popularity could be translated into a strengthening of the military’s influence, he had misjudged the situation. Just days following the NF’s return to government, Van den Broek and his American counterpart (Trouw, 27-5-1991:5, 30-5-1991:1) publicly warned Bouterse that a repeat of the 1980 and 1990 coups would not be tolerated. Both countries thus signalled their willingness to consider military interference if the NL was to overthrow a popularly elected cabinet once again. Similarly, Weisglas argued that
if it appears that the armed forces continue to violate the rule of law and are involved in drug trafficking, then it [a military intervention] is permissible. Such a possible intervention is comparable with the Dutch presence in North Iraq. We must be less afraid to violate borders if that can alleviate the fate of individuals. (NRC Handelsblad, 27-5-1991:3.)

Unlike Washington, where the American OAS representative Luigi Einaudi reaffirmed the position of the White House that it would intervene in the event of another coup, comments in The Hague by Van den Broek and Weisglas generated a lively debate. Dutch Defence Minister Reluster Beek, along with parliamentary leaders of the CDA, PvdA, D66 and GroenLinks questioned the option of removing Bouterse through violent means following a possible new coup (de Volkskrant, 29-5-1991:1). Eventually, Prime Minister Lubbers was forced to clarify the situation: even if a democratically elected government in Paramaribo were to officially ask The Hague for military assistance, no such proposal would be considered: ‘I think that we should in no way interfere with the internal affairs of Suriname’ (NRC Handelsblad, 1-6-1991:1). This controversy within the Dutch cabinet highlighted the fact that neither in the National Assembly nor in the States General a formal position with regard to the Lubbers Plan had been tabled. Whereas some ministers saw a role for the Dutch armed forces in Suriname, others refused to incorporate defence matters into the Commonwealth debate.

This uncertainty finally ended when Lubbers appeared in the House of Representatives on 5 June 1991 to introduce more concrete ideas with respect to the Commonwealth. On the macrolevel, the Prime Minister foresaw the creation of a Dutch Commonwealth composed of the Netherlands, Aruba, the Netherlands Antilles and Suriname with the objective of coordinating foreign, defence, monetary and economic policies between these four ‘partners’ (Dew 1994:182). On the microlevel Lubbers’ proposal included a series of administrative, judicial, military, political, monetary, economic and social reforms for the Republic to implement. In more detail, the plan contained provisions for Dutch advice and support to strengthen Suriname’s redemocratization process, particularly by reorganizing the country’s administrative sector. Even though the courts would continue to operate independently, the police force was to be restructured with Dutch assistance. Another cornerstone of the plan was that both countries would coordinate their defence policies, a step which Lubbers clearly intended to use as a check on Bouterse’s activities. Moreover, the proposal argued for close economic cooperation and a monetary union with the aim of restoring international confidence in the Republic’s domestic stability. In addition, freedom of movement between the two countries was to be guaranteed, which would allow Surinamese to travel to the Netherlands without visa requirements. Finally, a coordinated foreign policy would be implemented by both countries following close consultation (Het Parool, 6-6-1991:3).
The case for a Commonwealth

What the Lubbers Plan presented came close to what might indeed be described as a recolonization of Suriname. The suggestion of close ‘cooperation’ in foreign, defence, monetary and economic policies in particular, must be understood as providing The Hague with legal powers to determine Surinamese affairs. Whereas close cooperation between two countries with similar political interests and characteristics, or of comparable economic and military strength, may well function as a pact between equals, the contrast between the wealthy, democratic, industrialized and homogenous Kingdom and the politically unstable, economically underdeveloped and socially fragmented Republic was enormous. A comparison of their respective GDPs in 1991 clearly demonstrates this gap. The Netherlands, with a population of 15 million, boasted a GDP of Nƒ 542.2 billion, whereas Suriname’s GDP stood at Sƒ 3.7 billion with a population of 400,000. In view of these fundamental differences, the idea of generating a lively debate among scholars and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic was proposed, including Haakmat, Meel, Schalkwijk and Fernandes Mendes. In analysing their views of the Lubbers Plan, it is important to be aware that given the lack of details, arguments for and against the Commonwealth were generally based on mere assumptions.

To begin with, supporters of the Commonwealth pointed out that the plan would allow Suriname to reorganize its administrative and judicial institutions, which had so far remained limited due to the NL’s resistance to reforms. Lubbers himself argued for the necessity of restructuring and reducing Suriname’s public service sector, for appointing a Dutch judge as the Chief Justice of the Republic (Gemenebest 1991:14) and for creating an ‘overarching justice system’ with the Netherlands (Dew 1994:183). Through these measures, all integral parts of the redemocratization process, Lubbers hoped to make the administration more efficient, to reduce the costs of running the relatively large bureaucracy and to ensure the protection of human rights.

A core objective of Lubbers’ redemocratization programme was Dutch-Surinamese cooperation in military affairs with the silent intention of restricting Bouterse’s political influence. Looking at this issue, Rosemarijn Hoefte, along with many Dutch and Surinamese commentators, defended Lubbers’ proposal, arguing that ‘the military can only be removed through outside intervention’ (Hoefte 1991:11). In view of the difficulties experienced by Shankar from the very first day of taking office, Lubbers’ emphasis on a bilateral defence policy is understandable. Surinamese soldiers were to be retrained.

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2 Financial statistics 1993:522, 672. In 1991 the Dutch guilder fluctuated between 1.71 and 1.86 to the US dollar, hence allowing for a relatively easy comparison as the Surinamese guilder remained fixed at 1.79 to the US dollar.
by Dutch personnel to form a more professional armed service equipped for the country’s defence while the NL’s constitutional rights were to be further reduced. On this last point raised by Lubbers, Fernandes Mendes’ comment that ‘in South American democracies it is quite normal for the military to play a significant role behind the scenes’ (Hoefte 1991:11) had become obsolete in view of the progress made by many Latin American democracies in recent years.

By diminishing the NL’s political influence, Lubbers aimed to strengthen democratic institutions and to attract international and domestic investors in a bid to stabilize Suriname’s economy. The keystone in achieving this was the establishment of a monetary union (Gemenebest 1991:14). It was unclear whether the Surinamese guilder was to be permanently pegged to the Dutch guilder or, more likely, if the latter would come in its place. Nonetheless, it was hoped that through a monetary union the Republic’s main economic problems, including accelerating inflation and the growing gap between the official exchange rate and the black-market value of the Surinamese guilder, could be brought under control. Furthermore, since the Central Bank would be unable to simply print money to cover government expenditure, the administration would be forced to cut spending.

A further measure aimed at improving Suriname’s economic prospect was to provide the Republic with additional Dutch aid on top of the remaining development assistance promised in the Aid Treaty. This technical and financial support was intended to improve and diversify the country’s agricultural and industrial infrastructure, which would eventually stimulate local and overseas investors (Gemenebest 1991:14). As might have been expected, Anthony Caram (1993:296) of De Nederlandsche Bank (DNB) in Amsterdam evaluated the Lubbers Plan positively.

In the economic area, easily the most attention has been attracted by a recently publicized suggestion to form a commonwealth between the Netherlands and Suriname, possibly even extending to the formation of a monetary union. Closer links between the two countries are warmly endorsed, since this would in all probability mean that additional financial resources and manpower would be made available – admittedly under certain stringent conditions – to help overcome the crisis.

An improvement in Suriname’s political and economic conditions was to go hand in hand with a strengthening of its social services. Consequently, a central component of the Lubbers Plan foresaw the abolition of visa regulations and free migration between the two countries. This was a crucial point, as a failure to improve the Republic’s domestic situation would certainly lead to another exodus towards the Netherlands. By strengthening the Republic’s domestic structures, particularly through additional funding for social services such
as housing, education and health, the Dutch government hoped that many Surinamese currently residing in the Netherlands would consider returning to the Caribbean.

Finally, with regard to Suriname’s foreign policy, closer cooperation between the two countries meant that Paramaribo could benefit from what Dew (1994:183) described as improved access to ‘a more extensive and professional foreign service’. As an active member of the international community the Netherlands maintained an extensive global network of diplomatic missions which would take, once again, responsibility for representing Suriname. Also within international organizations The Hague could act on Paramaribo’s behalf. In addition, the Dutch Foreign Affairs Department would provide its Surinamese counterpart with professional skills, legal advice, organizational support and training facilities. This support could prove highly useful in strengthening Suriname’s relations within the region since severe financial difficulties had made it impossible to maintain an adequate service of its own in Latin America and the Caribbean. Moreover, taking into account Haakmat’s estimate (1996:149) that 70% of Suriname’s diplomatic work had been focused on trying to regain access to Dutch aid, these scarce human resources could be used elsewhere once development assistance would be guaranteed in a Commonwealth treaty.

Considering the ‘generosity’ of the Dutch plan, it comes as no surprise that the majority of the Surinamese population strongly endorsed the formation of a Commonwealth. While according to Verschuuren (1994:146) 80% of Suriname’s citizens favoured closer ties with the Netherlands, Haakmat (1996:134) cited a figure of 60% for Surinamese residing in the Netherlands and 70% for those living in the Republic. The preference of the Surinamese people was thus evident and as such could be used effectively as a justification for Paramaribo to join the Commonwealth, despite the ensuing limitations on the Republic’s sovereign status.

Suriname’s sovereignty was not an issue of primary importance for supporters of the Lubbers Plan as they argued that the Republic, on 25 November 1975, had merely gained political autonomy, but no economic independence. According to Haakmat (1996:133-4):

the political and the economic situation in Suriname do not track. On the one hand there is political independence and on the other an ever-increasing economic dependence on the Netherlands. As the years pass by, this discrepancy becomes greater. With this, the paradox has emerged that channeling more development aid to Suriname has led to more dependence, which was the opposite of its aim.

In other words, to modify current political reality into a Commonwealth would merely reflect the country’s existing economic dependence on the Netherlands.
Yet Commonwealth advocates pointed out that it was unlikely for the Republic’s sovereign status to be affected negatively by close ‘cooperation’ with the Netherlands. Their views were based on a letter to the House of Representatives in June 1991, in which Lubbers and Van den Broek informed parliament that, in contrast to Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, Suriname’s participation in the association was to be based on ‘a close bond between two sovereign states regulated by a treaty, with the mutual option of termination’. Moreover, throughout the debate, the Dutch cabinet emphasized that a Commonwealth will only be established ‘if Suriname agrees to it’.

Interestingly, there was not only strong support for the proposal from the Surinamese population and some political parties and democratic institutions, but also from the major regional powers. In fact, when the House of Representatives began debating the idea of a Commonwealth, France, the United States, Venezuela and the OAS, as Hoefte (1991:9) has pointed out, had been pressurizing the Netherlands to solve the Surinamese ‘problem’. For Paris, the Commonwealth would mean political and economic stability in a country bordering a French overseas department. This, it was hoped, would encourage the almost 10,000 Surinamese still residing in refugee camps to return home. Furthermore, France was eager to reduce the incidence of Surinamese smugglers selling goods on the black markets of St. Laurent and Cayenne in search of quick profits. ‘In this respect’, according to NRC Handelsblad (18-5-1991:3), ‘for Paris, which traditionally is a lot less reluctant to interfere in the affairs of other countries, the Lubbers Plan is more than welcome’.

In Washington it was hoped that the proposed Commonwealth would primarily bring about Dutch involvement in combating drug trafficking. It was evident to the United States that some of the narcotics on its home market arrived through the Republic. Even with this knowledge, cooperation with Paramaribo had proven unsuccessful due to the NL’s participation in the drug trade. Consequently, the White House favoured the reform of Suriname’s legal institutions according to Dutch advice, ‘because it is that country that has the privilege here’. According to an American diplomat, ‘the best guarantee that this will actually succeed, is that the judicial system here is able to function independently once again. The Lubbers Plan can help’ (NRC Handelsblad, 18-5-1991:3).

Caracas welcomed the Commonwealth as it would prevent the NL from carrying out any further coups, which, as it was feared, could have wider regional implications. Venezuela was also pleased to have been consulted on the Lubbers Plan, with The Hague, besides Paris and Washington, seeking Caracas’ opinion. This was seen as a boost for Venezuela’s image as a regional leader.

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Finally, in the eyes of the OAS, the Commonwealth would largely guarantee the Republic’s respect for human rights as well as improve the international image of the continent while ensuring that the last military regime on Latin America’s mainland had come to an end. To conclude, since Suriname and the Netherlands would cooperate as two equal sovereign states within this Commonwealth (at least in theory), there could be no talk of recolonization (NRC Handelsblad, 18-5-1991:3).

The case against a Commonwealth

Despite these positive responses, the Lubbers Plan also met with opposition. This disapproval took a wide range of forms, including the choice to remain silent (Brazil), the careful voicing of criticism (the NF cabinet) and the issuing of a sharp warning of possible unforeseen consequences (several scholars on both sides of the Atlantic). To begin with, and in contrast to other regional powers, Brasilia adopted a reserved position, stating that it was following a policy of non-intervention towards Suriname’s domestic affairs. Even though President Fernando Collor de Mello did not publicly oppose the Lubbers Plan, Brasilia’s silence indicated that The Hague could not count on its support (NRC Handelsblad, 18-5-1991:3).

Surinamese politicians were facing a far more difficult situation. Whereas the State Council, DA’91 and indeed the majority of the population favoured the Lubbers Plan, the NDP (following the May election) rejected the proposal as it implied the de facto recolonization of Suriname. Nationalistic in its outlook, the party – like its predecessor the VFB – had continuously battled against The Hague’s overbearing influence in Surinamese affairs. A Commonwealth was therefore seen as an unacceptable step in the wrong direction. The New Front found itself in a particularly awkward position. Although aware that public opinion was in favour of seeking closer ties with the Netherlands, a Commonwealth would undeniably indicate that the ‘old’ parties had failed to lead the country through a difficult period and that they had been unable to solve the political and socio-economic crisis. The NPS in particular, since the early 1970s strongly in favour of independence, but also the VHP, finally supporting Suriname’s withdrawal from the Charter, would inexorably have to admit that they had been unsuccessful in meeting the aspirations of their supporters since November 1975.

According to Haakmat (1996:135) this ‘resistance among politicians’, especially from those within the ruling NF, but also from NDP parliamentarians on the opposition benches was ‘understandable’.
At least 80 per cent of the politicians who run the show in Suriname have in one way or another cooperated in the transition to independence. To now advocate a return in the form of a Dutch Commonwealth would be equal to admitting that at the time the decision for independence was wrong. The fact that leading Surinamese politicians and political parties are unwilling to put some kind of restored political bond with the Netherlands on the agenda means that the solution should not be sought in this direction.

The NDP and NF found support from various scholars and journalists who would raise strong objections against major elements of the Lubbers Plan. Dutch control of Suriname’s defence policy was one of the least controversial issues (of course except amongst NL officers, who feared a loss of political influence), even though any subordination of the Republic’s defence policy to the Netherlands could actually weaken Paramaribo’s position. The inaction of the Dutch Armed Forces in Suriname (the so-called TRIS) during Guyanese army operations in disputed border areas in the late 1960s and The Hague’s dismissal of Arron’s request in the mid-1970s to send military assistance to deal with this conflict, had made clear that the Netherlands lacked credibility in defending the Republic.4

With regard to this issue, the Surinamese writer Rudi Kross rejected the idea that the Surinamese government was the only one to blame for the uncontrollable NL. As he emphasized, The Hague had given in to the demands made by Surinamese politicians to establish an army in the summer of 1975. This had come about, according to Kross, simply for reasons of prestige, springing from the belief that a sovereign state must have its own military apparatus (Hoefte 1991:9). Dutch Colonel Valk had then provided Bouterse with crucial advice, enabling him to carry out the February 1980 coup, while The Hague’s pressure on the Front to curb the officers’ constitutional position proved a critical factor in contributing to political tensions between the government and the military in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In other words, a Commonwealth might primarily provide the Netherlands with an opportunity to correct past mistakes, but it would also reduce Suriname’s status to that of a guinea pig, allowing The Hague to practise decolonization.

More objections were raised against Lubbers’ attempt to strengthen Suriname’s democratic and legal structures. In his book Herinneringen aan de toekomst van Suriname (Memories of the future of Suriname, 1996) Haakmat predicted that the Commonwealth might be called into question if the NDP could retain its popularity with the Surinamese electorate, particularly in view of the party’s fourfold increase in parliamentary seats between 1987 and 1991. Following a discussion of the weaknesses and strengths of the other political

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4 Yet it must be acknowledged that the danger presented by Bouterse and his followers to Suriname’s democratic institutions was far greater than any external threat.
parties, Haakmat argued that the NDP, as the representative of the Creole working class, would become Suriname’s most influential party in the near future. With its sharp attacks on The Hague’s ‘neocolonial’ policies and its support for regional integration, a future NDP-led government would in all likelihood severely clash with The Hague on Commonwealth issues requiring close cooperation.

From a different but equally important angle, Oostindie observed that in recent years The Hague had increasingly intervened in the domestic affairs of the remaining Dutch Caribbean territories despite their autonomous status. Similarly, the degree of self-government offered to the Republic might be less generous than expected by many Surinamese. This, at least, had been the experience of Antillean politicians. According to Oostindie (1996:221):

Even if the recent Dutch re-involvement in the Caribbean is not adequately defined as re-colonization, many Antilleans are apprehensive about exactly this. In Curaçao, the main Antillean island, the political response to the renewed Dutch presence was initially characterized by indignation and a defensive attitude. Yet the political elites’ attempt to play out the argument of neo-colonialism stood little chance of being fully heeded in a post-Cold War international context.

Economic cooperation and the establishment of a monetary union also provoked considerable criticism. Even though the argument put forward in the article ‘Gemenebest; Stap vooruit of terug?’ (Commonwealth; A step forwards or backwards?) (Gemenebest 1991:13-6), that Suriname had strengthened and diversified its economic structure throughout the Bouterse era, could be questioned – most agricultural, mining and industrial production had, at best, stagnated under Bouterse, with diversification only taking place in palm oil and crude petroleum production (Europa year book 1993, II:2678) – it was true to claim that the economy had learned to become less dependent on Dutch aid.

Consequently, Haakmat (1993:12) warned that economic cooperation and a monetary union would only contribute to Suriname’s increased reliance on the Netherlands, emphasizing that it was particularly the financial aid received that had manifested this dependence.

5 Haakmat 1996:139-45. Haakmat’s prediction about this proved to be correct, at least in so far as the 1996 election result. Following the general elections of 23-5-1996, the seats in the Assembly were divided as follows: NF 24, NDP 16, DA’91 4, Pendawa Lima 4 and Alliantie (Alliance) 3. The KTPI and a faction of the VHP, the Basispartij voor Vernieuwing en Democratie (Basic Party for Renewal and Democracy), defected from the NF and joined the NDP-Alliance coalition government (Europa year book 1997, II:3084). Likewise following the general elections of 25-10-2010, the Mega Combination, of which the NDP is the main force, won 23 seats. Allowing Bouterse to form a coalition government with the support of the A-Combination. The NF, in contrast, merely won 14 seats.
Besides revenues gained from the bauxite industry the Dutch development aid, which included the ‘independence present’ of Nf 3.1 billion, has become of prime necessity to the independent state of Suriname to keep its head above water. What the Netherlands had intended with independence, namely that it would no longer need to concern itself with Suriname, has completely failed to materialize. Since independence the Netherlands has actually become more involved in and with Suriname than in the previous period.

Rather than translating economic dependency into a similar political relationship by forming a Commonwealth, Haakmat (1996:135) suggested to do the reverse, by applying the current political actuality (that is, independence from the Netherlands) to the economic sector.

Suriname must become economically independent of the Netherlands. No more leaning on the Netherlands and asking support for every futility. The cause of the economic dependence is, as we have seen, the development aid that Suriname receives from the Netherlands. This ‘aid addiction’ must be ended.

Haakmat was supported in his views by Edo Haan, who in his 1998 PhD thesis on Dutch aid to Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, compared the effects of the increasing development aid provided to the Netherlands Antilles (amounting to Nf 500 annually per capita) with the waning financial assistance granted to Aruba since 1986. Whereas the latter island had initiated a process of opening up its economy as an alternative to relying on Dutch aid – resulting in a significant increase in socio-economic prosperity – the industrial and service sectors of the Netherlands Antilles generally continued to operate inefficiently since there was always the prospect of being ‘bailed out’ by Dutch financial assistance (Haan 1998:265-6).

Even if Suriname decided to accept the Lubbers Plan and receive additional Dutch development aid, the expectations held by many Surinamese might not necessarily be met. As the banker Caram (1993:296) emphasized when talking about economic cooperation and a possible monetary union:

there is certainly no room for undue expectations, particularly since a shift is taking place in Dutch development cooperation towards a more business-oriented approach. As a dramatic deterioration in Suriname is essentially due to persistent economic mismanagement, Suriname itself will have to bear the lion’s share of the burden of reform and restructuring.

Especially strong objections to the Lubbers Plan were raised with regard to the intended cooperation in the field of foreign policy. As outlined in Chapter II, in the immediate post-independence period the Surinamese Foreign Affairs Department made extensive use of the support offered by its Dutch...
counterpart. The outcome was a further strengthening of the already strong links with the Netherlands, pushing the issue of regional integration even more into the background. Only during the Bouterse era, when Dutch-Surinamese relations were extremely tense, was progress made with regard to the desirable objective of closer ties with other Latin American and Caribbean countries. Consequently, it had to be feared that a renewed reliance on The Hague in the field of foreign affairs could contribute to the impression amongst many regional politicians that the Republic was something of an ‘outsider’ on the continent.

The Commonwealth’s collapse into oblivion

Despite intensive discussions the Lubbers Plan would eventually fail to materialize. Heeding the concerns expressed by the NF cabinet and the strong rejection by the largest opposition party, the support for the Commonwealth steadily dwindled. Political attention in Paramaribo became centred on the NF’s attempt to have NPS politician Ronald Venetiaan elected as President and former Justice Minister Adjodhia (VHP) as Vice-President (*Europa year book* 1993, II:2679). In the wake of the NF’s loss of a two-thirds parliamentary majority, the Verenigde Volksvergadering (United Peoples’ Convention), comprising members of parliament and representatives of the municipal and district councils, confirmed the government’s nominees only after lengthy debates on 6 September 1991 (Verschuuren 1994:147). This delay put off any negotiations regarding the Commonwealth. In November 1991 Dutch and Surinamese representatives met on Bonaire to discuss the future direction of the relationship. However, during this meeting the Lubbers Plan was not discussed; instead, the Surinamese delegation pressured The Hague to reinstate the urgently needed financial assistance, while the Dutch delegation stressed the need for Paramaribo to first establish peace in East Suriname, to combat the drug trade and strengthen the democratic process by limiting the military’s influence (Verschuuren 1994:147).

In other words, the two countries continued to go around in circles while the Republic’s political and socio-economic problems remained largely unsolved. A breakthrough seemed to occur in the summer of 1992. Instead of establishing a Commonwealth, both countries now attempted to stabilize transatlantic relations while negotiating a far-reaching agreement which respected Suriname’s sovereign status. While Lubbers enthusiastically proclaimed that this new phase in the relationship symbolized ‘the end of the beginning’, Venetiaan announced ‘that we are now much better able to solve our problems’ (*NRC Handelsblad*, 14-6-1992:3).

The Hague and Paramaribo thus agreed to make a fresh start, laid down
in the Raamverdrag Inzake Vriendschap en Nauwere Samenwerking tussen het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden en de Republiek Suriname (Frame Treaty for Friendship and Closer Cooperation between the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Republic of Suriname) of June 1992 (Appendix IX). This treaty was upheld by both parties as a compromise, whereby the Netherlands agreed to grant the remaining Nf 1.3 billion in aid in exchange for Suriname’s promise to establish a SAP, to negotiate peace with the various rebel groups and to address the problems regarding the NL’s involvement in politics and drug trafficking.

A closer analysis of this ‘new’ Aid Treaty reveals that it appears all too similar to the ‘old’ Aid Treaty of 1975, with the stipulation that Suriname use at least Nf 300 million for economic projects, Nf 250 million for public education, health and housing, Nf 175 million for improving general infrastructure, Nf 150 million for various social programmes, Nf 75 million to reform the judicial and administrative sectors and Nf 50 million to rebuild the war-torn areas in East Suriname (NRC Handelsblad, 14-6-1992:3). This familiarity was not surprising since the Frame Treaty referred directly to the former agreement. In fact, Article 3.1 clearly stated that:

This Frame Treaty leaves unchanged the agreement signed between the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Republic of Suriname on 25 November 1975 pertaining to development cooperation, including the supplementary regulations and additional protocols. This Agreement serves as the point of departure for Financial and economic cooperation. (Appendix IX.)

The objectives of the 1975 Aid Treaty were thus still valid, while the Frame Treaty also made use of the same financial sources, since the Nf 1.3 billion in funds made available in the ‘new’ agreement constituted nothing more than allowing Suriname continued access to the remaining aid, to which the Netherlands had already consented in 1975.

Furthermore, an examination of the first two paragraphs of Article 5 of the Frame Treaty makes it impossible to avoid a direct link to the agreements signed in 1975, in which Paramaribo had accepted The Hague’s ‘assistance’ with regard to foreign affairs and had allowed the Netherlands to continue representing Suriname’s interests wherever the Republic would not maintain its own diplomatic representation (for more details on both agreements, see later in this chapter).

5.   Foreign Policy and Defence Policy:
5.1 The Governments of both States will hold periodic consultations on subject matters regarding foreign affairs that touch upon the interests of both States.
5.2 The Governments of both States cooperate in the diplomatic and consular field, in particular through mutually offering the use of facilities by their representations abroad. (Appendix IX.)

Finally, the Frame Treaty included a paragraph (Article 2, Paragraph 7) assuring Paramaribo that should all development funds as promised in the 1975 Aid Treaty be spent, the Netherlands would continue to play an important role by continuing to provide financial assistance to Suriname.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands confirms its willingness to offer the Republic of Suriname further financial support after the funds, which have been agreed upon in the Treaty of Development Cooperation of 25 November 1975, have been exhausted. The volume, nature and duration of this aid shall be linked to the accomplishment of the objectives indicated in Article 1 of this Treaty and, in view of the necessary continuity, will be defined by both States in good time. (Appendix IX.)

Considering the objectives and the way in which the Frame Treaty was worded, it allowed both governments to concentrate on the positive opportunities opened up by the treaty. Thus it was only to be expected that the Lubbers Plan would lose its appeal. While Suriname was able to thus ensure its sovereign status and long-term continuation of Dutch aid, the Netherlands had regained its most important tool for influencing political and socio-economic developments in its erstwhile colony while leaving direct responsibility for the welfare of the Surinamese people with the government in Paramaribo. At the same time this significant shift away from the Lubbers Plan 'back' to traditional relations allowed both governments to avoid any possible negative consequences of the Commonwealth idea.

In the meantime Commonwealth advocates within the Dutch government were certainly right to argue that through close transatlantic 'cooperation' the Netherlands would be in a position to solve many of Suriname’s diverse problems in the short term. This would provide The Hague with a second chance of 'decolonizing' the Republic by 'creating' a more stable political and socio-economic environment. It was hoped in The Hague that this would only lead to a temporary, albeit considerable, involvement in Surinamese affairs. Once the 'problems' would be ironed out, the Dutch government would withdraw from what it perceived to be a necessary, temporary interference in the Republic’s development.

Yet in all of this, Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles actually illustrated the risk The Hague was running in becoming permanently engaged in Caribbean matters. While the Netherlands provided significant financial, technical and administrative assistance to these territories in comparison to many neighbouring islands – in order to maintain relatively stable political
and socio-economic structures— the notion of sovereignty had received only minimal public support (Country profile 1995:63). The example of Aruba, which in 1986 had agreed to proceed towards full independence within ten years in exchange for Dutch acceptance of the island’s Status Aparte (Separate Status) from the Netherlands Antilles in the meantime (Croes and Moenir Alam 1990:81), demonstrated the islanders’ opposition to ending constitutional ties with The Hague. Rather than seeking full independence, Aruba successfully lobbied the Netherlands and remained part of the Kingdom, thus ensuring the island’s continued socio-economic prosperity.

Moreover, by ‘generously’ providing aid, The Hague had not succeeded in solving the migration issue on the islands. The Netherlands Antilles, in fact, continued to be affected by an exodus towards the European metropolis, where a third of its population had settled (Amigoe, 23-4-1998:1). A similar development could be in store for Suriname, where, according to a survey undertaken at the twentieth anniversary of independence in November 1995, 53% of its citizens still favoured their country’s readmission into the Kingdom, while many expressed the wish to retain the option of being able to migrate to the Netherlands (de Volkskrant, 21-11-1995:6). Once part of the Commonwealth, many questions would still have remained as to whether the Surinamese public would eventually seek full independence from The Hague and return to their ‘homecountry’ once stable political and prosperous socio-economic structures had been created with active Dutch support.

This development would have militated against the Dutch desire to reduce, in the long term, its involvement in the Republic’s affairs, but also against Paramaribo’s wish to be free to govern without continuous intervention from The Hague. Throughout this book it has become apparent that all cabinets, including the various Bouterse regimes, had looked across the Atlantic in the hope of gaining at least some assistance in funding economic development projects and social welfare schemes. Similarly, local business circles had relied on Dutch investments to establish and sustain the mining, agricultural, forest and manufacturing industries. Meanwhile, the Surinamese public often counted on Dutch funds for education, health and housing programmes.

This tendency of cabinets, business people and the population itself to direct their focus across the Atlantic has resulted in the perception that ‘the Netherlands is not the motherland, but the fatherland for the Surinamese’

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6 Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles are among the richest territories in the Caribbean region. Moreover, they have been classified as part of the, politically speaking, ‘most free’ countries and territories in the world, see Castello-Cortes 1991:98-9.

7 Even though the possibility of achieving sovereignty was not ruled out at a later stage, the Netherlands and Aruba agreed that first a public referendum on this issue needed to be held on the island and that a two-thirds majority in the Staten of Aruba was required to pass an act of independence.
(Haakmat 1996:156). In other words, rather than assuming the role of guardian to help the Republic in developing its own political and socio-economic structures, the Netherlands has become central in the thinking of many Surinamese. It may even be argued that a form of political ‘cargo cult’ has emerged, glaringly apparent in the Republic’s tendency to seek Dutch assistance in bolstering its development process and easing various domestic problems. This dependence on the Netherlands would only have been strengthened by Suriname’s participation in a Commonwealth, while, at the same time, Dutch willingness to solve the Republic’s difficulties could not be taken for granted (Weekkrant Suriname, 28-4-1994:8).

Instead, it is important that both countries learn to steadily strengthen Suriname’s political and socio-economic foundations with the ultimate objective of reducing the Republic’s dependence on the Kingdom. This does not imply the immediate rejection of Dutch aid, as it is vital for Suriname’s development to maintain access to financial and technical assistance. But what it does mean, is that the Netherlands must begin to gradually reduce its aid payments and allow Suriname to learn to access different financial sources. This also implies that The Hague must ease its direct intervention in the Republic’s affairs (for instance by refraining from pressurizing civilian politicians to act against the NL’s political influence) and that it must give Suriname a chance of integrating into the region (for example by supporting attempts to acquire local and regional rather than Dutch goods and services). In addition, the Netherlands must accept that its financial assistance cannot be used as a political tool. By repeatedly seizing the opportunity to withhold funds The Hague has ensured that Suriname was forced to abandon development projects and start all over again once aid was forthcoming, thus contributing to funds being wasted. For Suriname it is of vital importance to stabilize its democratic structures by rejecting corruption, apanjahtism and military rule. Although these goals may seem difficult to obtain, especially considering the recent history of the young republic as well as its socio-economic and political characteristics, they are, however, not unrealistic. A good example of such a success story is Botswana, which demonstrates that political stability will most likely attract foreign and local investors, which in turn will enhance and diversify the economy and generate positive social effects. More significantly, Paramaribo has to end its cargo-cult mentality as Dutch aid is aimed at establishing and strengthening specific socio-economic

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8 Africa South of the Sahara 1998:195. In 1991 Botswana was the only African country enjoying the political classification of ‘most free’ (Castello-Cortes 1991:98-9). And even though at the transfer of sovereignty in 1966 the country belonged to the twenty poorest nations, in the 1980s its economy saw a rapid growth. ‘In the 1990s Botswana became an “upper middle income” country under the World Bank definition and, unusual for an African country, a contributor to Bank funds’ (Africa South of the Sahara 1998:195).
structures but should not be taken for granted on a permanent basis. This can be achieved without having to dismantle the special relations which have evolved between the Netherlands and Suriname over the last three hundred years. Nevertheless, it is crucially important to develop a more mature interaction between the two nations based on mutual respect.

The dissatisfaction felt in The Hague regarding the state of affairs in Suriname would reach a new peak following the 1990 Christmas Coup. Irritated by developments within the Republic since the November 1987 elections, and indeed, it could be argued, since the actual transfer of sovereignty, The Hague introduced the so-called Lubbers Plan – named after its initiator – which foresaw the creation of a Commonwealth – a transatlantic association in which Paramaribo would primarily be asked to transfer foreign, defence, monetary and economic policies to The Hague. Through such a draconian measure the Netherlands attempted to help solve the political and socio-economic problems the Republic was facing.

Naturally, from this plan ensued a lively debate among Dutch and Surinamese scholars and politicians contending its pros and cons. Looking back at the first fifteen years of independence, those in support of a Commonwealth argued that the Republic had never achieved full sovereignty since its economy had remained fully dependent on the Netherlands. Consequently, Suriname’s participation in a Commonwealth would merely bring Suriname’s political status more in line with its economic reality. Yet opponents objected to increased Dutch involvement in Surinamese affairs and instead proposed to work towards achieving complete political and economic independence from the former colonial power. In the end, neither position was implemented. The Frame Treaty of June 1992 outlined the situation characterizing Suriname’s status since independence: the Republic would continue to function as a sovereign state while in socio-economic terms remaining dependent on the Netherlands.