Jan Pronk, *Suriname: Van wingewest tot natiestaat*. Volendam, the Netherlands: LM Publishers, 2020. 560 pp. (Paper €29.50)

Dutch Labor politician Jan Pronk was 33 years old when, in 1973, he became the first minister of Development Cooperation in the history of the Netherlands. In this capacity he was one of the protagonists in the complex negotiations on Suriname's independence. He visited Suriname for the first time in mid-1974, and many trips would follow to untangle knots and appease frequent frustrations in both the opposition and the government camp or to calm the waters between Paramaribo and The Hague. Pronk is known for his copious and meticulously archived notes, and these result in a dense book—with the dull title “from colony to nation state”—to account for Dutch policy in the former colony. The first half deals with the independence process, while the second part is on Suriname-Dutch relations in the postindependence period.

To quickly set the scene: in 1974 newly elected Suriname Prime Minister Henck Arron unexpectedly announced that his country would become independent in 1975. His message caused more anxiety at home than in the metropole. The progressive Dutch cabinet was happy to oblige and soon started talks on the transfer of sovereignty. Arron ignored objections by a large part of the Surinamee population. Consequently, about a quarter of the population migrated to the Netherlands. Politically, independence was passed with a one-vote majority in the Suriname parliament. Pronk's sympathy lies with Arron, rather than with the main leader of the opposition, Jagerath Lachmon.

Pronk's bureaucratic saga revolves around mistrust, reproaches, colonialism, and tone deafness, none of which disappeared after 1975. Two topics dominated the two-year-long discussion: economic development and the establishment of an army—exactly the two topics that would determine developments in Suriname as well as the uneasy Suriname-Dutch relations for decades to come. Wanting to repair damages for 300 years of colonialism, The Hague settled on giving Suriname US\$1.2 billion (and excusing it from its remaining debt of US\$200 million). According to Pronk, it was the highest per capita development assistance in the world (pp. 108, 120). The allocation of and control over these so-called Treaty Funds was a major bone of contention during the negotiations and in the years after independence.

The Dutch were not keen on establishing an army, but gave into the demands for a comprehensive military force. (In 1980 the army grabbed power and returned to the barracks seven years later after serious human rights violations and in the midst of a socioeconomic and political crisis.) Both issues highlighted the crucial problem: who is in charge, the government of the new republic or the Dutch financiers?

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Pronk tries to convey Suriname's history and the dire legacies of colonialism and Dutch rule honestly, but in the end says little about the sentiments in Suriname society. Somehow, his book comes to life only occasionally, especially when he pointedly characterizes a person with whom he's had a conversation. And it is marred by typos and the misspelling of names. Thus it is not a page turner with juicy anecdotes, nor does it reveal any new information, but it is an important, business-like source for both the Dutch approach to the making of the Republic of Suriname and Dutch-Suriname relations as viewed from The Hague. Unfortunately, it is rather short on reflection and introspection.

It is also a publication by a child of his time. The social-democrat and Tiers-Mondist Pronk, as the second longest-serving government minister, parliamentarian, assistant secretary-general of UNCTAD, diplomat, and professor of International Development, has always served the public sector. He has been in the vanguard of experts and activists fighting for human rights and socioeconomic justice. The book is a factual testament to his zeal for addressing global inequality and atoning for past wrongs.

Pronk is one of the last Mohicans involved in the independence negotiations. Now at 81, he is as convinced as always that the chosen road to Suriname's independence was the only option. He also squarely blames Suriname's current socioeconomic and political difficulties on the role, over 40 years, of the young republic's former military dictator and ex-president, Desi Bouterse. When I questioned Pronk about this in a radio talk show on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the military coup, he denied that other structural problems—such as clientelism, corruption, institutional weaknesses, and lack of trust in the State, often dating back to colonial times—could also have contributed to the republic's travails. This is rather surprising given his professional background, but it seems to illustrate his lack of reflection almost half a century after Suriname's independence.

Rosemarijn Hoftte

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean
Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands
hoftte@kitlv.nl