The Creation of Political Institutions: Two Cases from the Netherlands

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In an age acutely conscious of scarcity, the resource which may be in shortest supply is authority. Western societies have long since abandoned the acceptance of authority grounded in traditional values and are disposed to accept charismatic authority only in crisis situations. According to Weber’s typology, this leaves only legal authority (Weber, 1947).

Legal authority inheres in legitimate political institutions, which the advanced industrial societies do possess. But the authority of political institutions may be declining (Crozier et al., 1975), and the creation of new political organizations is no easy task.

Mindful of the importance of organizations for generating authority and promoting political community, it is the purpose of this article to compare two emerging political institutions in the Netherlands. I will focus on the effectiveness of the two new organizations and try to relate differences in effectiveness to internal traits of the organizations and aspects of their environments.

There is wide agreement among sociologists on the factors that enhance organizational effectiveness. Few accounts vary significantly from Huntington’s (1968) list of traits that contribute to institutionalization: adaptability, complexity, autonomy and coherence. Of these four, autonomy and coherence are the most important for a new organization. And, since coherence is fostered by autonomy (Huntington, 1968, 22-24), coherence can be seen as the most important aspect of institutionalization in new organizations. As Huntington notes, coherence leads to coordination and discipline, hallmarks of organizational effectiveness. Coherence will thus be central to this analysis of two new organizations in the Netherlands.

Two New Federations

For most of this century, Dutch society was characterized by highly organized subcultures. A phalanx of institutions reinforced the division of society into Catholic, Calvinist, liberal and socialist blocs. Lijphart (1975, 23) pointed out that “The fourfold division of Dutch society is manifested in vir-
ually all politically and socially relevant organizations and group affiliations. These organizations reinforced each other and together managed to channel all Dutch political and social action along the cleavage lines of religion and class.

That situation has greatly changed, however, since the late 1960’s (Lijphart, 1975, 196-219; Van den Berg and Molleman, 1974). At the mass level, adherence to the values of the separate blocs declined greatly as Dutch society became more secularized. Deference to political leaders has also been replaced by increasing political activism outside of the traditional, subculturally based organizations. For their part, and largely as a consequence of changes which have occurred at the mass level, Dutch elites no longer conform to the accommodationist norms characteristic of consociational democracy (Rochon, 1982).

Organizationally speaking, the two most dramatic changes in the old, pillarized system of Dutch politics are the establishment of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV). Both the CDA and the FNV went through a period of federation between once-independent parties or unions. However, each is now a fully unified institution, superseding the former rivals.

The Christian Democratic Appeal was formed in 1976 through federation of the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP), the Christian Historical Union (CHU), and the Catholic People’s Party (KVP). The party survived the tensions of 1976-1977, when the ARP and KVP were in the government while the CHU formed an important part of the opposition. In the 1977 national parliamentary elections, the Christian Democratic Appeal presented its first joint electoral list. Although the three constituent parties maintained their separate organizations until 1978, all party operations were unified in the merger protocol put into force in 1980. Today all vestiges of the former parties have been erased. The CDA has remained united in coalition first with the right (1978-1981), then with the left (1981-1982), and then with the right again (since 1982).

The present position of the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions is similar. The idea of federation was first pursued in negotiations between the socialist (NVV), Catholic (NKV) and Protestant (CNV) trade union federations. The Protestant Trade Union Federation withdrew from the negotiations in 1974 when it became apparent that their differences with the socialists were too great to be bridged. Agreement on a federation between the Catholic NKV and socialist NVV was reached in 1976, with full merger accomplished in 1981.

The organizational structure of the trade union federations is somewhat more complex than that of the political parties. Each federation is composed of semi-autonomous unions which operate in different sectors of the economy. Examples include the unions of factory workers, builders, transport workers, agricultural workers, restaurant and hotel employees, civil servants, artists, and so on. There are between fifteen and twenty separate unions in each of the