

Neo-Calvinist organisations for political action

R. Coletto

Center for Faith & Scholarship, Potchefstroom Campus,
North-West University

The importance of organisations

Kuyperian Christianity has often stressed the importance of Christian organisations. In this short contribution I use the adjectives *Kuyperian*, *neo-Calvinist* and *reformational* as synonyms. They indicate a certain “family” within the broader *Calvinist* or *reformed* tradition (which is of course part of the broader *Protestant* tradition). These organisations have been serving for decades in sectors like labour and education, politics, agriculture, art and so on. Of course ecclesiastical and para-ecclesiastical organisations are important as well, but in the following pages (and possibly in a few other short articles to follow) I would like to dedicate some attention to the extra-ecclesiastical ones. The reason is that they confirm (perhaps more than anything else), that the reformed faith is not only about church-matters. It is about “all spheres of life”.

The present brief survey will focus on some neo-Calvinist *political* organisations. One of the purposes is to inform our readers about initiatives which could become opportune in South Africa as well. And I hope such information will be accompanied by some inspiration and encouragement.

A broader perspective

In some confessional traditions Christians are inclined to deal with politics rather individually, or to rely on the members of their clergy. In South Africa, for example, we have the example of bishop Tutu, and

many Christians are individually active within parties which have no official links with Christianity. Though no strategy is probably perfect and no one totally useless, reformational Christians have traditionally insisted on the necessity of specific organisations, associations, lobbies or parties.

Of course, one can thankfully acknowledge the presence of Christian political organisations also outside of the reformed tradition. There are for example parties of Lutheran or Roman Catholic “inspiration”. Admittedly, not everything which is labelled “Christian” does always show consistency, integrity or even wisdom. For example the recent political “attempts” of some of the youngest parties in Africa and South America seem to remain rather “naive”. Political maturity is not reached overnight. Nevertheless, in recent years the number of Christian political parties worldwide has increased, and this should be something to be thankful for.

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Sometimes such organisations manage to grow within traditions and communities which would not be expected (at least from a reformed point of view) to promote solid Christian involvement in “secular” affairs. For example, in the 1970s the founders of

a Finnish (Lutheran) political party (SKL) were attacked by a prominent member of the Lutheran clergy who declared that the initiative was “un-Lutheran”. In his view, creating a Christian party constituted a confusion of the two “kingdoms” (civil and religious) so neatly distinguished by Luther. Given the Lutheran worldview, such criticism was to be expected.

But men gripped by the power of the gospel don't give up easily: they replied to bishop Wickstrom that they were not organising the SKL as church members, but as full members of the “earthly regiment”. They insisted that their intention was not to distribute “blessings to their voters”, but “to be faithful in social and political issues”. And so they did. During the 1970s the party gradually gained up to 9% of the votes (in 1978) of the Finnish electorate (it is suspected that some of the bishops voted for the SKL as well ...!?). The party (renamed “Christian Democrats” since 2001) has celebrated 50 years of service in 2008.

As it would be impossible, however, to deal with political parties in all Christian traditions, I will focus specifically on neo-Calvinist political organisations. One reason is that *Woord and Daad* is the journal of the Reformational Movement of South Africa (which is a neo-Calvinist movement). A second one is that the reformational movement worldwide has traditionally emphasised the necessity of Christian organisations, also in the political field. It is therefore interesting to see whether it has kept its promises.

Of course it must be admitted that the members, voters or supporters of the organisations mentioned below are not all neo-Calvinists. However, what these institutions have in common is the fact that basic reformational principles have been and are instrumental (or at least present) in shaping their policies, aims and strategies. Let us start from what has been achieved in the Netherlands, the cradle of reformational political action.

The Netherlands

- **Past achievements and present opportunities**

Historians and other scholars may be fairly familiar with the names of the pioneers of reformed political theory: Julius Stahl, Johannes Althusius, Groen van Prinsterer, Abraham Kuyper. But not all of us may be familiar with the manyfolded efforts to organise Christian political action in the Netherlands in the last 130 years. Starting from Kuyper's Anti-revolutionary Party (founded in 1879) the Dutch Protestant community has organised six “Gereformeerde” parties, five “Hervormde” parties, five “Protestantse” parties and an “ecumenical” party (the CDA, discussed below). (From 1904 ten Roman Catholic parties were also founded.)

Most of these political parties have ceased their activities during the twentieth century. Even today, however, the reformed community living in the Netherlands has the possibility of supporting three parties upholding reformed principles.

- **The Christian Democratic Appeal**

The first one is the Christen Democratisch Appel (CDA – Christian Democratic Appeal), an “ecumenical” party in the sense that it is the result of the merger (realised in 1980) of two Protestant parties plus a Roman Catholic one. These parties were: Kuyper's Anti-revolutionary Party (ARP), the Christian Historical Union (CHU), and the Catholic People's Party (KVP). The CDA is currently the biggest coalition partner in the fourth Balkenende Cabinet (discussed later on in this article).

The CDA operates on the basis of principles like “sphere sovereignty”, “solidarity” and “stewardship”. The readers who are familiar with Kuyper's ideas will surely recognise his “footprints” here. As far as the CDA is concerned, these principles are supposed to be compatible with Catholic concepts like “subsidiarity”, “shared responsibility”, et cetera.

Sphere sovereignty refers to the way society should be organised: instead of

having one social institution controlling all the others, the state, the market, the churches (and so on) should have sufficient autonomy to function according to the specific norms which apply to them. The same applies to the state. Not one level of the state should have complete control; responsibility should be shared between local, provincial and national government. The principle of stewardship refers to the view that natural and cultural resources, the environment and other assets should not be exploited but preserved and treated as a gift from God.

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To mention some of the practical implications of these principles, the CDA wants to make, e.g. schools and hospitals more responsible for their own policies, instead of being too strictly regulated by the government. The party promotes European integration and Turkey's possible membership. The toleration of soft drugs should come to an end while prostitution, abortion and euthanasia should be restricted. The state deficit should be repaid in one generation, to avoid placing an excessive burden on the next one.

The CDA has been quite successful in electoral terms. Being the most voted party in the Netherlands (26,5% at the 2006 general elections) it has 41 seats in the Second Chamber and seventeen in the First Chamber. And now of course, European national parties participate in the European Parliament. In that context the CDA is a member of the European People's Party, and has a chance to influence political decisions beyond the national borders.

- **The Christian Union and the Reformed Political Party**

But the CDA is not the only party "appealing" to reformed Christians: the *Christen Unie* (CU – Christian Union) and the *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP – Reformed Political Party) should also be mentioned.

The latter (SGP), though it gathers only 1,4% of the Dutch votes, is the oldest party still present in the Dutch parliament. It is also the most "conservative" Christian party, sometimes bordering on fundamentalism. It is indeed remarkable that SGP has never joined any cabinet (not even with CDA and CU) and has always remained in opposition. It remains, however, a "testimonial" party often cooperating with the Christian Union and constituting a sign of the vitality of the Dutch Christian-reformed community.

The Christian Union was born from the fusion (in 2001) of two reformed parties: the *Gereformeerde Politiek Verbond* (GPV – Reformed Political Alliance) and the *Reformatiepolitieke Federatie* (RPF – Reformational Political Federation). Among its members of parliament one finds well-known reformational academics like Egbert Schuurman or Roel Kuiper. The CU receives some 4% of the votes of the Dutch electorate (2006) but it is rapidly improving its results through the last Provincial (2007) and European (2009) elections. Compared to the CDA, some regard it as a "purer" expression of neo-Calvinist political spirituality. The party (on Christian-social positions) is collocated more at the left than the CDA, though some insist that the CDA remains more "progressive" in its policies.

The fact is that the Christian Union is rather "conservative" when it comes to ethical issues like euthanasia, homosexuality, drug-addiction and abortion. When it comes to social welfare, immigration or environmental concerns, it finds several points of agreement with parties of the left.

- **Support and cooperation**

It is worthwhile mentioning a few organisations which support (or cooperate with) our Christian parties. Political parties need a “think-tank”, for example. In this category one should mention the Academic Bureau of the CU, namely the *Groen Van Prinsterer Stichting* (a name which is surely evocative). One should also mention the “youth leagues” of both parties (the CDJA and *Perspectief*). Admittedly, these are “internal” organisations.

Apart from these, both CU and CDA enjoy “fraternal” links with institutions like the Dutch Union of Christian Employers (NCW), the National Federation of Christian Trade Unions in the Netherlands (CNV). They entertain good relationships with newspapers like *Nederlands dagblad*, *Reformatische dagblad* and *Trouw*, with broadcasting societies like the Dutch Christian Radio Association (NCRV), the Catholic Radio Broadcast (KRO) and Evangelical Broadcast (EO), with several academic institutions and church denominations.

CDA and CU, of course, cooperate between themselves as well. In February 2007 the two of them, together with the Labour Party (PvdA), have managed to form the fourth Balkenende Cabinet. Apparently, the latter is also known as the “Dooyeweerd Cabinet”, due to the fact that many of its members are well acquainted with the ideas of the famous neo-Calvinist philosopher of the Free University.

The reformed community worldwide, especially its reformational branch, can indeed be thankful for past realisations and present opportunities of service in the Dutch political arena.

North America

Moving to North America, we meet two organisations which seem to reflect the same political differences characterising the CDA and the CU in the Netherlands. They are the Centre for Public Justice (CPJ-USA) in Washington, and Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ-Canada). Politically speaking, as far as I understand, CPJ-

USA is closer to the CU, while CPJ-Canada is closer to the CDA.

But before coming to them, two lines should be dedicated to organisations which existed and served in the past. In this category one finds the National Association for Christian Political Action (NACPA). It had its headquarters both in Washington DC and in Sioux Center (Iowa), and it published the journal *Politikon*.

- **USA: the Centre for Public Justice**

In the United States the Centre for Public Justice operates from Washington DC. The Centre has enjoyed for many years the competent leadership of James Skillen (president) a practical organiser but also a well-known academic in the Dooyeweerdian tradition. Other prominent leaders include Stanley Carlson-Thies and Steven Monsma. One should notice that Skillen has recently retired as president and has been replaced by a young South African, Gideon Strauss. The latter has tried for several years to develop a similar organisation in South Africa, but after a few (unsupported?) attempts he resorted to offer his service in the United States.

The purpose of CPJ-USA is “to transform public life by working to establish the proper relationship between government and non-governmental responsibilities in society, and to uphold equal access for and treatment of all faiths in the public square”. The CPJ mission is to “equip citizens, develop leaders and shape policies in pursuit of our purpose to serve God, advance justice and transform public life”. Traditionally, to describe its activities the CPJ has used the image of a “three pronged fork”. The three “prongs” are: information/education of citizens, research and publication, and cooperation with the government in the legislative process. I will limit my few notes to the third aspect.

As the electoral system in USA differs from the European system, CPJ-USA is not exactly a party, but functions more like a “lobby”. In other words its representatives favour or oppose laws in close interaction with the government. For example,

a recent achievement of CPJ-USA has been the extension of State subsidies to Christian (and other “faith-based”) organisations who volunteer to provide their services in various fields (for example by helping drug-addicts).

In the past, the legislation reserved state subsidies to agencies with no confessional affiliation (i.e. not “too religious”) although in practice Christian organisations were not automatically excluded. Officially and legally, however, an organisation based on Marxist or Liberal principles could receive financial support to help fight poverty or drug-addiction, while a Christian one could not. In 2002 the CPJ played a crucial role in the White House to obtain the recognition of legal equality for all organisations involved in volunteer work, thus helping to abolish a form of discrimination based on religious affiliation.

In any case, when speaking of the CPJ as a “lobby” one should remember that this is only one of its three “prongs” and that, as a lobby, the CPJ is a very unusual one. The hundreds of lobbies present in Washington normally protect very specific interests (like those of professionals, veterans, all sorts of fraternities). Very few lobbies can offer the type of encompassing political project which is provided by the CPJ. As a matter of fact, the Centre is not there to defend the rights of any specific community, but to promote “public justice”. This principle can be briefly discussed while presenting the next institution.

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- **Canada: Citizens for Public Justice**

In Canada, *Citizens for Public Justice* (CPJ-Canada) is “an organization inspired by faith to act for justice in Canadian public policy”. This organisation has been serving for almost 50 years. Among its historical leaders one should mention Harry Antonides, Edward Vanderkloet and Gerald Vanderzande. The latter has worked for social justice under the auspices of CPJ for almost 50 years. In 2001, he was awarded with the Order of Canada by the Governor General of Canada.

Compared to the 27 000 members of the Christian Union (after all a party of modest size in the Netherlands) the 1 500 members of CPJ might seem rather disappointing. But as Gordon Spykman wrote a few years ago, what counts is faithfulness in promoting kingdom-centred politics. In his view, one day the Christian community in Canada would become much more supportive of such organisations.

“Public justice” is one of the central concepts characterising neo-Calvinist reflection on political issues. According to this principle, the purpose of Christian political action is not to defend the privileges or to obtain advantages for the community of the Christians. The state should not try to stifle the *confessional pluralism* present in society, and should treat with equality all the different communities living within its borders, whatever their fundamental commitments may be. In addition, these communities should be allowed to live out their commitments even in the “public sphere”, by creating organisations and institutions (e.g. schools) which reflect their points of view. This principle goes under the name of “structural pluralism”.

These principles are not just chimerical. In the Netherlands they have been applied for decades and are part of Dutch public life. In a recent article Prof. Glenn shows that the Dutch experience compares quite well with (and is even preferable to) the strategies adopted in France, Germany or England.

South Africa

The picture would not be complete without mentioning South Africa. Here, unfortunately, Kuyperian ideas were often misused, in the past, to achieve results that have “astonished” the whole world! All this should inspire humbleness: holding neo-Calvinist ideas is no guarantee of decent political policies. It should also warn that attempted “mixtures” of Christian and secular principles usually result in failure. And yet there was something valuable hidden in the folds of a rather dark past. There were jewels in the mud. Many would say some of those jewels could be found in those reformational circles where the mixture of Christianity and nationalism was resisted. Someone would even mention the contribution of *Woord en Daad* and the Reformational Movement of South Africa, as Prof. Mottie Tamarkin from Israel, has recently done.

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Today South Africa doesn't have a solid Christian political organisation notwithstanding the presence of a considerable Christian/reformed community. Previous experiments with Christian-national politics and their consequences may surely advise prudence in the contemporary context. But I suggest that South African Christians should recognise the mistakes of the past without withdrawing from their present political responsibilities. As far as the

reformational movement is concerned, in this moment the study and dissemination of sound political principles seems to me the most important step to take.

Conclusion

I think we have mentioned the main neo-Calvinist political organisations for political action. But it might also be interesting to enquire on the views of other reformed parties (e.g. the EVP – Evangelical People's Party of Switzerland). It might be interesting to explore both similarities and differences with neo-Calvinist parties (after all the Dutch Reveil leading to neo-Calvinism started from Switzerland). It would also be interesting to enquire on past reformed-political contributions in Hungary or Romania (the 1989 revolt against the Ceausescu regime was led by Rev. Tokes, a reformed pastor in Timisoara).

In Indonesia (a country with links to the Netherlands) the Christian Party of Indonesia (Parkindo) was supported especially by the reformed communities. From 1970 it merged into the Democratic Party of Indonesia (DPI-Perjuangan) which was the third most voted party at the 2009 elections. Again it would be interesting to have more information on the principles and policies of this political organisation (language barriers do play a role there). Finally, it would be interesting to know whether a substantial reformed community like the South Korean one, is not planning to develop something meaningful in the political field.

Reformed Christians in South Africa are often inclined to pessimism, especially concerning the future. I hope this brief survey of past and present achievements may induce to some more positive feelings.