

KUYPER THE POLITICIAN¹

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There were at least three major issues that Western countries had to deal with in the 19th century as they were industrializing and modernizing: universal education; suffrage; and the social question.

No politician or statesman who ventured into the public domain could avoid facing these issues and determining his standpoint with respect to them.

Neither could Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), chairman of a political party, journalist, theologian and church reformer, founder of a university and professor of literature.

In what follows I wish to give a brief sketch of the background against which Kuyper formed his standpoint as well the strategy he adopted to achieve his goals in each of the three areas so critical to the development of the Netherlands in modern times.

His prime motivation in all his multiform activities was given voice in the poem he once recited when he was 60 years old, at a public celebration of his 25-year editorship of the daily *De Standaard*: “. . . to serve the nation . . . till God is once again its Lord.”

His strategy comes out in a curious way when on one occasion he played with his own surname to draw from it the key to his unparalleled success in the public life of his country and among his fellow “neo-Calvinists” whom he had led to victory after victory in church life, elementary and higher education, parliamentary elections and social legislation: A *cooper* sets staves in a circle, builds a fire inside the circle, and bends the staves to form a strong barrel. Similarly, I brought together the orthodox Reformed in the land, stoked the fire of Calvinism among them, and so built an effective cultural fighting machine, *pro Rege*, for the King.

1. Education

- schools struggle 1840–1920; an “80-years’ war” to achieve a pluralist system
- Continental liberalism - French Revolution; anti-Christian; neutral public square
- Groen van Prinsterer - anti-revolutionary - opposed as “anti-clerical”
- the Constitution forbids private Christian schools; after 1848: forbids public funding
- 1869: Kuyper appeals to the “disenfranchised silent majority,” the “core of the nation”
- 1872: the Anti-School Law League agitates for a constitutional revision
- 1878: new Education Act stiffens standards; “double taxation?” the People’s Petition

1. Outline for a lecture in the Ethics class of Professor Max Stackhouse, Princeton Theological Seminary, Feb. ’06.

- 1879: A.R. voters' clubs and League cells combine Anti-Revolutionary Party
Works within the district system; cooperates with Catholics (since 1884)
- 1887: Constitutional Revision - *non possumus* - new interpretation - bill passes -
number of voters doubled at the next election: "clericals" gain majority and form
the next government
- 1889: Elementary Education Act - some funding for teachers' pensions
- 1904: revision of Elem. Educ. Act: funding extended; teacher's contracts mandatory
Accreditation for degrees of the Free [Neo-Calvinist] University, Amsterdam
- 1920: full parity for both school systems (public and private); by 1950: 25/75 %

2. Suffrage

- Groen: "*I speak for the people behind the voters*"
 - i.e., the orthodox Reformed people in the land, most of whom are lower middle
class and do not qualify for the vote, hence are without a political voice
- franchise limited to the upper classes and upper middle classes
- Kuyper: extend the franchise
Kuyper rides the waves of democratization

K's ideal for Second Chamber: household suffrage and weighted votes for the various
professionals; his ideal for the First Chamber: it should represent the "organic"
components of society: not individuals but groups and corporations, like industry,
business, the professions, other legitimate interest groups

- 1887: AR and Cath. control 1/3 of house, hold up constitutional revision
once passed, a new electoral law doubles number of voters: victory at the polls!
- 1894: franchise extended to all males who have a material stake or the mental
capacity; comments Kuyper: the act worships god Mammon and god Intellect
- 1901: second electoral victory; Kuyper heads the new administration
- 1907–12: third Christian cabinet
- 1920: universal suffrage; since then the Christian parties, since 1980 united in the
caucus of the Christian Democrats, have by and large held the balance of
power

3. The social question

- Kuyper had been a pastor in the country village of Beesd (peasants, agric. labourers),
in the city church of Utrecht (his ward included a slum and a red-light district)
and on the eastern islands of Amsterdam (populated by dockworkers)
- K's maiden speech of 1874: we have laws for commerce, it is high time we had laws
for labour conditions and relations - Child Labour bill does not go far enough

- K writes pamphlets honouring crafts, advocating labour councils
- During first AR-Cath administration: impatience among Christian workers
 threat of a Christian Labour Party Social Congress (½ year after *Aeterni patris*)
- In opening prayer: “They cannot wait, not a day, not an hour!”
- Opening Address: our society needs structural change (“architectonic critique”)
- 1903: railway strike - outlawed by Kuyper Cabinet (a public service, no interruption)
 at the same time: government then mandates an inquiry into legitimate grievances
- Kuyper as Minister of Interior Affairs drafts many bills: accident insurance; old age security; widows pensions, etc. His administration cut short by election loss of '05.