

NOTES ON METHODS OF GOVERNMENT OF SOME OTHER COUNTRIES WITH COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

1. The Netherlands have a long history of religious differences dating back to the days of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the middle of the last century the three principal political parties were the Calvinists, the Catholics and the Liberals. Doctrinal differences between the religious parties frequently held the political stage, but both were united in opposition to the Liberals who favoured the secularisation of the state. Even when the franchise was extended in 1887 the religious problem, chiefly in the guise of denominational versus secular education, remained in the forefront of politics. Around the turn of the century, the Socialists began to emerge as a political force and in 1917 the introduction of proportional representation hastened the process of secularisation.

2. The population of the Netherlands is now fairly evenly divided between Catholics, Protestants and those of no religious affiliation. Political parties still have basically a religious or an ideological character but overall support for those with a religious basis has now declined to well under half of the electorate. In response to this attempts have been made to bring the principal Catholic and Protestant parties into some kind of "Christian Federation" but so far without success. Many aspects of Dutch society have long been organised on separate denominational or secular lines but in recent years this pattern, while still strong, has begun to show some signs of weakening. This improvement in inter-denominational relationships in ordinary life has been reflected in the steady removal of sectarian bitterness from the political scene.

3. To some extent this improvement has been helped by the process of constitutional change and in particular the introduction of proportional



representation. It is significant that since 1918 all Dutch governments have been coalitions, the formation of which has, in some cases, been a protracted business involving the appointment of an "Informateur" to explore the possibilities. This fact perhaps reflects the changing of attitudes among the population at large, who have been increasingly prepared to make common cause rather than maintain entrenched and divisive positions.

4. In Belgium there is no pronounced religious cleavage since well over ninety per cent of the population are Catholics. The division is rather a linguistic and cultural one as between the Dutch-speaking Flemings of the North (Flanders) and the French speakers of the South (Wallonia). When Belgium broke away from the Netherlands in 1830 the French-speaking Walloons, while not a numerical majority, were the dominant group. Not only was their language prevalent in politics, commerce and the professions but their part of the country was considerably more prosperous. The Flemings were very much second-class citizens but they lacked the cohesion and the opportunities to claim equality. During the twentieth century, however, the Dutch-speaking movement gathered momentum, helped by rising living standards, increasing social equality and the development of political democracy, particularly the introduction of universal suffrage and proportional representation. This culminated in 1932 with the recognition of the Dutch language as having equal value with the French language. Dutch became the official language of Flanders and French the language of Wallonia, with Brussels, predominantly French-speaking but situated in Flanders, being recognized as a bilingual area.

5. In more recent years, however, the Flemings still felt that, despite their numerical superiority, they had not achieved cultural equality with the French-speakers. Conversely the latter have had the fear that the Flemings would attempt to swing the pendulum of advantage even further away from them. These

feelings have inspired a mutual trend towards the development of separate cultural identities. This trend has also been reflected in the political scene in which have emerged both separate language parties and language wings of each of the traditional, inter-communal parties.

6. The language question thus remains very much a political pre-occupation at national level and as recently as 1968 occasioned violence on the streets. This has not, however, prevented the growth of an underlying stability in the country. Belgium has not been held back from the pursuit of economic development and the achievement of a high standard of living which is enjoyed in peace by the population at large.

7. A number of constitutional developments may be said to have contributed to this stability. Proportional representation and a guarantee of parity between the two language groups in the Council of Ministers mean that in practice Belgium Governments are always coalitions. The Constitution guarantees basic liberties and equality for all and this is reinforced by a provision whereby three-quarters of either language group in Parliament can refer back to the Government legislative proposals which are considered harmful to inter-communal relations. Parliament is also divided into two Cultural Councils which have certain powers in communal affairs. Powers are also devolved to two subordinate and elected tiers of government, in the Provinces and the "Communes", and there have recently been suggestions for more extensive devolution on a regional basis.

8. In Switzerland there is a combination of religious and cultural/linguistic differences, though the former are nowadays of less importance. The country is divided into nineteen cantons and six half-cantons, all of which enjoy very wide ranging powers. The canton boundaries do not entirely co-incide with language boundaries and the languages, in turn, do not coincide with the religious boundaries.

9. The population is more or less evenly divided between Protestant and Catholic. In 1847 the predominantly Catholic cantons attempted, unsuccessfully, to secede from the Federation. But more serious than the religious tensions was the bitterness which built up during the nineteenth century over the question of representation. The position was greatly eased by the changeover from a majority voting system to proportional representation, which was adopted by several individual cantons around the turn of the century and was introduced into national elections in 1919.

10. The Swiss Constitution guarantees religious and linguistic equality to all citizens. In fact, notwithstanding that Switzerland contains three main language groups, language as such has never been a serious cause of political or community unrest. The German-speaking majority, for instance, have never sought to impose their own language and culture on the rest of the country - perhaps because, as a seventy-five per cent majority, they have never felt themselves threatened. This state of affairs is undoubtedly due in large measure to the fact that Switzerland was never a unitary state but was built up gradually, on a basis of free and mutual consent, as a confederation of small autonomous states (cantons), all of which recognised the benefits of belonging to a larger whole whilst being concerned to maintain a strong element of independence. In recent years the principal remaining point of tension has been the growing movement to establish a separate canton of Jura.

11. The canton remains the kernel of the Swiss governmental system, and in his everyday life the average Swiss is confronted with cantonal rather than federal authority. Indeed, under the Constitution, sovereignty resides in the individual cantons, who exercise all the rights which are not delegated to the Federal Power. But it is important to note that this system has evolved organically and was not deliberately devised to solve the problems of a plural society. It is also significant that, in the political sphere, all the principle

parties are inter-communal, a fact which makes power-sharing among the various groups more easily attainable.

12. The Swiss constitution has evolved, and is still evolving, as a reflection of the extensive devolution of power which the cantonal system provides for. All the cantons, irrespective of size, have equal representation in the upper legislative chamber. The Federal Council (the Cabinet) is elected by the lower Chamber and by convention its composition takes account both of cantonal divisions and the balance of political parties in the legislature. There is no Opposition in the Westminster sense but proposed legislation is subjected to close scrutiny through a strong system of Parliamentary committees. A particular feature of Swiss Government is the well-developed system of national and cantonal referenda and a complementary device which enables an ordinary citizen to initiate legislation.