

Een besef van eigen kracht : Limburgse provinciale politiek in de periode 1962 - 2007

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Summary

Taking responsibility

Provincial politics in Limburg 1962–2007

Political and public debate about the Dutch provinces frequently concerns two issues: why the provinces are in fact necessary (i.e. their legitimacy) and the scale that they ought to have. What a province actually does, how decisions are taken, and how those decisions take account of social trends are often ignored in the course of this debate. This book does not focus on what the provinces ought to do or ought to be, but with how a province functions. It takes a look behind the scenes at a particular province: the Province of Limburg.

The analysis of provincial politics in Limburg focuses on the actual *practice* of decision-making, i.e. the way in which decisions by the Province are prepared, taken, and implemented. Long-term patterns are identified from a historical perspective with an understanding of the circumstances under which they change.

Until the early 1960s, the Province concerned itself primarily with the regional infrastructure (motorways, railroads and canals) and supervision of the municipal finances. The Provincial Executive [*College van Gedeputeerde Staten*] that came into office in Limburg in 1962 changed course, and took the first steps towards economic policy, social welfare policy and spatial planning. From then on the government organisation that traditionally had a limited scope, and that responded mainly reactively to events within Limburg society, became an active political player and took initiatives on fields traditionally outside its sphere of interest.

The province from a different perspective: the practice of decision-making

Formally speaking, there has been little change in how decisions were taken by the Province in the period from 1962 to 2007. From the constitutional point of view the Provincial Executive and the Provincial Council [*Provinciale Staten*] were – and still are – the decision-making bodies for the Province of Limburg. There are significant changes in the actual *practice* of decision-making however, it seems that the formal competences and policy instruments of a province do in no way determine or limit the scope of decision-making. This book therefore concerns itself primarily with analysing decision-making processes. It attempts to explain how provincial decision-making operates, what long-term patterns can be distinguished in that process, and what circumstances lead to changes in those patterns.

For this analysis a political-sociological research framework was developed, concentrating on five particular aspects. Firstly, the *use of competences and instruments* by the Province is considered. The Dutch provinces operate within the context of the decentralised unitary state, which means that only the national government that can initiate legislation. Yet, the provinces (and the municipalities) have a certain degree of autonomy within their assigned competences. The provinces also have their own legal, financial, and organisational instruments available – bylaws [*verordeningen*], subsidies,

manpower – that they can utilise in order to implement decisions.

Secondly, the practice of decision-making requires that the province takes into account the interests of various different persons, groups, and/or organisations. The Provincial Executive and Provincial Council do, ultimately, have the formal power to take a decision, but both internal and external actors influence the way that decision is arrived at. In other words, the second aspect of the research framework involves an *analysis of influence and power*.

A third element in the analysis of provincial decision-making is the *use made of geographical divisions*. In every political system geographical divisions are relevant in policy making. Governments may, for example, distinguish between policies for urban and rural areas but also between specific regions, or between depressed areas and areas with economic potential. Thus it can do justice to local and regional variations within its territory. It can also make comparisons with other provinces or sub-regions. Finally, a government can experiment with new policy for a particular defined area. The advantage of this is that if the experiment is a failure, it will not be the overall provincial policy that is called into question.

A fourth aspect involves the cooperation between politicians and the civil service. *Relations between politicians and the civil service* are relevant because civil servants play an important role in preparing decisions and formulating alternatives. The relationship between civil servants and politicians is not just a case of ‘one-way traffic’ but of constant interplay in which it is the politicians who are ultimately accountable for the decision taken. That interplay is important both when preparing and implementing decisions.

Finally, one can identify *moments of new agenda-setting*. At these turning points, there is a fundamental change in the strategic direction. The way decisions are prepared and taken changes, the role of the province changes, and new patterns of decision-making arise.

Four periods, four strategies, four turning points

This book analyses three areas of policy: spatial planning (Chapter 2), the regional economic policy (Chapter 3) and the social welfare policy (Chapter 4). These three fields are placed within a social, organisational, and political context; provincial policy is influenced by economic trends, changes in organisational structure or the appointment of persons, the composition of executive bodies, and relations with external contacts. The period from 1962 to 2007 can be subdivided into four sub-periods, each lasting between 12 to 16 years. The transitions between these sub-periods are moments of rapid changes, influencing fundamentally the overall provincial policy within just two or three years. At these turning points, a new strategy is created in the provincial politics of Limburg.

The first turning point in provincial policy was in the early 1960s. In 1962, it became apparent that the coalmining industry in Limburg was no longer profitable. This led to the announcement in 1965 by the Minister of Economic Affairs, J.M. den Uyl (Labour) of a phased closedown of the mines. In the same period, the Catholic Church gradually retreated from its active role in Limburg society. The disappearance of these two important

social institutions - the mining industry and the Catholic church - presented not only an enormous economic challenge but also had major social and spatial consequences for the whole of Limburg. The Provincial Government could no longer stand aloof and – led by the new Provincial Governor Ch.J.M.A. van Rooy (Catholic People’s Party) – worked closely with central government, the mining industry, and various Limburg organisations to give shape to a policy of restructuring, in particular for South Limburg. In doing so, the Province made use to a limited extent of the possibilities provided by new legislation in the field of spatial planning and social welfare.

In the *period from 1962 to 1978*, the Province of Limburg extended its role within the three policy fields. It investigated a new series of instruments for implementing policy intentions; it looked at how other provinces shaped comparable policy; and it commissioned studies to see which social-economic problems faced the Province. When it was announced that the mines were to close, the Province held central government responsible for the consequences this would have for Limburg. Numerous state subsidies became available, and the Province was given the task of distributing them within the region. It did so by setting up a large number of committees. In the course of the 1970s, the Provincial Government increasingly came to realise that it needed to shoulder greater responsibility regarding social-economic issues in the Province. However, the influence of a number of Limburg organisations such as the Agriculture and Horticulture Confederation, the regional economic research agency (Etil), and the Chambers of Commerce was still extremely dominant on important committees such as the Planning Committee, the Social Guidance Committee, and the Restructuring Committee. These organisations prevented new provincial policy initiatives by sticking to the status quo and thus consolidating their own position of power.

A second turning point came in the late 1970s. In 1978, unemployment in South Limburg had reached 10% and in the view of the new Governor J. Kremers (Christian Democrat) the then current system of administration via committees had not been effective. Kremers emphasized that the Province no longer should assign the responsibility for the economic situation in Limburg to the national government; rather, the Province needed to take the necessary new initiatives itself and not wait for proposals from the national government. The negotiations with the cabinet in early 1978 formed the basis for provincial policy that focused primarily on reducing unemployment in the Province. Governor Kremers and his right hand Executive Councillor K.W. Buck (Christian Democrat) set up an effective lobby towards the cabinet of prime-minister A.A.G. van Agt (also Christian Democrat). This also resulted in that Limburg was the sole province to be designated a pilot region for decentralised social welfare policy. This provides a second example of how the Province itself took the initiative to shape policy as it saw fit.

The *period from 1978 to 1990* was unique in provincial history. In the course of the 1980s, the Provincial Executive - led by Governor Kremers and Executive Councillor Buck - negotiated successfully with central government. In the mid-1980s, the Province was given an important task in planning public housing, social welfare and health care policy, but the Provincial Executive gave priority to economic policy. Hundreds of

projects were initiated and implemented by the Province in the context of this *Perspectives Memorandum Policy* [*Perspectievennotabeleid*], with most of them being financed by central government. The need for the Province to take an active role became even stronger from the mid-1980s given that central government increasingly relinquished control in favour of the provinces.

The Perspectives Memorandum Policy was terminated in December 1990, which once more brought about a change in the Province's decision-making. The administrative agreement ratifying the decentralisation of social welfare policy had already been completed one year previously. This put an end to years of collaboration with central government, but the basis had been laid for a province that took the initiative itself and made use of its competences to shape and implement policy. The Province was given full control of social welfare policy, which was transferred to it by central government. The national government also assigned new competences to the provinces in the field of spatial planning, environmental and water policy. The Provincial Executive that took office in 1991 was chaired by a temporarily appointed Queen's Commissioner, and two Executive Councillors already changed their jobs after only a year. These changes in personnel, new sectoral legislation, and different economic and political circumstances created another turning point.

The period from 1990 to 2003 saw an increase in the power of the civil service. Central government obliged the provinces to draw up policy in various fields. Particularly in the fields of the environment, nature and care, central government drew up new legislation that had to be elaborated at provincial level. At first – and in part inspired by the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 – the Province primarily sought to cooperate with the European Commission. In the second half of the 1990s, however, it was the intermediary organisations such as the Limburg Development Company (LIOF), the Syntens innovation platform, the Agriculture and Horticulture Confederation and the newly merged social welfare institution *Symbiose* that influenced provincial policy. Central government and the municipalities played only a subordinate role in this. Central government had relinquished control in favour of the provinces and was now focusing mainly on strengthening the position of the municipalities. In the 1990s, the political negotiations between the Province and the government were restricted to bilateral contacts between Executive Councillors and ministers or state secretaries. Whereas in the 1980s the overriding objective had been to combat unemployment, a variety of objectives were now formulated. There were, for example, provincial objectives in the area of technology policy, attempts to formulate quantifiable objectives in social welfare policy, and highly specific objectives in spatial planning policy. All these objectives were an expression of a more self-confident stance on the part of the Province. In order to actually achieve these objectives, expertise was required in the various policy fields, expertise that was to be found primarily within the civil service and that gave the latter a powerful position as regards the preparation of policy. It was primarily the intermediate organisations that influenced and implemented provincial policy.

That situation changed in 2003. The insolvency of a number of implementing

organisations such as Symbiose and the Limburg Tourist Board and the wish of the new Provincial Executive for a more pronounced role for the Province, led to a change of course. No longer were the intermediary partners important. Now large corporations, industry, the knowledge institutions and major municipalities were involved in the preparation of policy. Clever use was made of the new national policies such as the community work approach, the new regional economic programme and the discussion of a new 'spatial development policy'. The draining away of industrial activity from Limburg to Asia, rising unemployment, and problems regarding the quality of life in certain urban areas and villages also contributed to this change of direction.

In the *period from 2003 to 2007* the Provincial Executive gave shape to this new role of the Provincial Government. Various implementation problems in the preceding period and the economic downswing from 2004 onwards led to a new political profile. The Province collaborated with new actors such as the municipalities by drawing up joint *agreement frameworks* [Afsprakenkaders] and implementing 45 spatial planning projects. Business and industry, education institutions, and knowledge institutions worked with the Province on an economic *Acceleration Agenda* [Versnellingsagenda]. New instruments, new types of organisation, and different actors led to changes in provincial strategy. In all this, the Province of Limburg also keyed in actively to the priorities of national policy.

New provincial agenda-setting: a Limburg story?

The development of the Province features a growing awareness of the Province's own strength. Nevertheless, this development was not gradual but by fits and starts. At four points within the period from 1962 to 2007, there was a fundamental shift – within a relatively short period of only two or three years – in the administrative role and strategic direction of the Province. At these four points, a new agenda was created within the provincial politics of Limburg, with three factors playing a role: *pressing external circumstances*, *alliances between persons*, and *the scope offered to the Province by central government*. It was the simultaneous combination of these factors that altered provincial strategy within spatial planning policy, economic policy and social welfare policy.

There is no empirical study of how any of the other provinces functioned over a lengthy period and, in this book, Limburg is the first province to be analysed and described in this way. A follow-up study will be necessary to determine whether the development outlined is unique to Limburg or whether similar patterns can be discovered in other provinces.