

Independation and the case for quality

A personal account of developments in the Dutch public sector and the influence of Great-Britain on these developments

Peter Noordhoek

Much of the literature on management and public administration is dedicated to the art of breaking through circles. Through the circle of bureaucracy creating bureaucracy, through the circle of regulations creating regulations, through the circle of incidents chasing incidents, and so on, and so on. Each year new concepts are developed to break through at least one of the circles. And from time to time, at the moment people believe their own country is not able to reform itself, they are looking outward, to other countries, and look for tools to break through their endless circles. Great-Britain offers great examples of these kind of conceptual tools.

This article offers a very personal account of the experiences with public service reform in the Netherlands as influenced by British (Anglo-Saxon) concepts. Because I have followed the developments in Great-Britain from the time I was a student, I have for a long time been able to compare and learn from the new concepts from the other side of the Northsea. And as a manager, as an educator and as a quality specialist, I have been able to follow, translate and develop concepts of public sector management for the Dutch government sector. These are my experiences.

Managing independation

At the centre of my approach, 'my story', is the manager of a public sector organisation who is responsible for the 'independation' of his or her organisation. By independation I mean "the move towards a more independent position from central government". During the past twelve years there have been a lot of changes in the 'mother-daughter relation' of many bodies of government in the Netherlands. Sometimes the daughter left her mother's house altogether (privatisation), but most of the time the daughter left her mothers embrace but stayed within easy reach (as an agency).

Independation is a translation of the Dutch word 'verzelfstandigen'. Since the word does not exist in the English language (it would be something like "making things/people more independent"), I have taken the liberty of creating a new word. I am afraid it is not the only liberty I take with the English language. Please excuse me for any massacre of spelling and syntax.

Of course, what may feel like independation, is in reality nothing more than the exchange of one form of dependency (of the government) by another (of the market). Still, getting through this process of independation can be one of the most wrenching experiences an organisation and its manager can go through. I know, I went through such an experience. And I tried to learn some lessons.

A game

Once I developed a simple simulation game. Just a way to see whether some of the observations I had made were correct. This is how it goes.

A management team is confronted with a financial cutback of several million guilders. The management team has three options: 1) asking central government to make the cutback less severe ("going to The Hague"), 2) searching for internal solutions, and 3) going to the market to find compensations for the cutbacks.

First individually, then as a team I let them choose. Of the 28 management teams with whom I played the game, each team consisting of 7 players, more than 60% of the management teams opted for going to the market, the other options got an equal 20%. The individual choice was even more for using the market option.

Then the real play started, consisting of not much more than time pressure and the need to motivate choices, with a penalty of more cutbacks when failing in either of these two respects. The play usually took no more than one and a half hours.

This is the result: Of the 28 teams, two were consistent in their choice of the market option and made it all the way. Another two ended in a sort of grey area, one team went consistently to The Hague. All other teams chose for the market and ended up going to The Hague, while collecting more and more cutbacks. These teams usually couldn't motivate their choice for going to the market, or if they did, they usually only did more of what they already did.

To sum it all up: it is easier to talk with the enemy you know than meet with the new friends you need.

A struggle on three fronts

The attempts by managers to move their organisation from mother to market is what I call 'independation as a struggle on three fronts'.

On the first front you, as the manager, have to deal with the mother-organisation, both in its political and civil service form. You negotiate the terms of separation, you try to make deals about future commitments and do anything you can to steer the independation through the political process.

On the second front there is the internal organisation. Independation is rightly seen as an opportunity to push through all kind of changes in the internal organisation. It is a moment of change. Sometimes a lot of funds become available when an organisation is to become independent. Then some problems can be bought off. But more often independation comes together with cutbacks in both personnel and funding. Then what?

Finally, on the third front, there is the market. For most organisations, going to the market means doing more of what they are already used to doing. Certainly in situations of competition the market will not stay the same. Business as usual is out.

(As a matter of fact there often is a fourth front. Most organisations can not make independation on their own. They have to merge with another organisation. You can imagine what this must mean for his agenda: it will be hard not to get mad)

Fighting for time on different fronts

Can one person fight on all three fronts? And for how long?

One thing that makes it hard to fight for a long time on all fronts is the realisation that each front has its own timetable.

As far as the motherfront is concerned, it is not hard to observe that the time it takes to get a law on independation through parliament often takes up to ten years and more, with many pitfalls along the way.

The time it takes to make your organisation more market-oriented is a little shorter, but it will still take some years, especially if the goal is a major change of culture. For a real transformation it can easily take

five years or more. Meanwhile the organisation is in turmoil. People are loyal, often more loyal than in 'the old days', but not forever. After more than two years of independation, uncertainty starts to take its toll. The organisation becomes a drifting organisation, somewhere in between the market and the mother.

The time it takes to go to the market is less than zero. You are often starting a race in which you are often already quite behind.

Thinking about it should make it clear, that it is not feasible for any manager to be a good fighter on more than, say, two fronts for more than a few years. Someone who is well able to steer the independation through the political process, is often not the right person to find the way towards new markets.

This may be the main reason why I have never, after having watched independation processes for over ten years, seen the manager who is in the driving seat at the beginning of the process still in that seat at the end of the process.

The problems and the challenge

Apart from the problem of different timescales there are other problems an organisation and its manager can run into during independation. Some of them are system or functional problems. There usually has got to go much effort into changing from one financial system (the governments budget system) to other financial systems. Certainly in the Netherlands many privatisation plans ran aground because the government's pension scheme is/was so fundamentally different from that of the market sector. But the real problems are not functional. The real problems have to do with people and the way they are motivated. The 'uncertainty principle' of independation seems to indicate that both employees and the market won't allow the manager no more than two years to make the important changes. Reality shows that periods of five years or longer are the rule and not the exception. During that period all kind of things happen to the drifting organisation. More than one organisation will at the same time show both the characteristics of a pioneer organisation and a traditional bureaucratic one. Tracking the organisational dynamics can be really interesting for the cool observers and truly bewildering for the participants.

All this is for a good manager a great challenge. Independation is usually well worth it. It is part of the growing up for a daughter to leave her mothers house. Both parties are at the end usually better off, the relation may even improve. And beside, what are the alternatives? No, independation as such is a good thing. For the manager involved it can be good thing too. Even if the manager has to move on after a while, he or she will leave the organisation with an unique and valuable experience.

The real pain is with the people who cannot leave the organisation in the direction of a new job. I believe that the price that has been paid for many independations has come out far higher than it ought to have done. In many cases it would probably have been less painful to start a new organisation and end the old one, than to put it through the kind of messy transitions it now often has to go through.

From my personal viewpoint, I state that I have had to fire too many people who might have made it if their had been better conditions for the transformation to the market. Some people have made objections to the fact that I use the phrase "a struggle on three fronts". It sounds too much like war, not enough like the 'fun' it should be. I understand the criticism, but I have seen so many people break or become sick under the pressure, that it is hard for me to think of independation in other terms than that of a struggle.

Waves of independation

In the Netherlands independation started officially in 1982 with the arrival of the first Cabinet of Prime-Minister Lubbers. Some civil servants from the Ministry of Finance had read documents about American and British ideas about deregulation and independation. They introduced these to the new cabinet and subsequently became part of the new policy approach. After another few years of studies the first real privatisation was started; the first wave of independation. However, things did not go smoothly. Many privatisations got bogged down. Except for a few -admittedly big - exceptions (notably Dutch Post and Telecom) not much was privatised. The speed with which privatisation took place in Britain was never matched in the Netherlands, though the government of Mr. Lubbers was in many ways as tough as that of Ms. Thatcher.

Why not more privatisations?

In an analysis I did in 1984, as a student of law and public administration at the University of Leyden, I studied more than 600 American and Dutch books and articles about deregulation. I found out, that within half a year after the introduction of the concept, the content of definitions about deregulation changed from an economic and ideological nature to a legalistic-procedural one. The lawyers took over from the economists.

This reflection of the continental legal tradition shows that it is hard in the Netherlands to set anything in motion without changing laws and regulations. Everything is put in the perspective of that great building of laws we have in the Netherlands, with the Constitution as foundation. Removing one stone makes the whole building tremble.

What goes for deregulation, goes for privatisation. Only a few privatisation operations were successful from the start, often because of reasons that had nothing to do with the official policy of the government (for instance, the privatisation of the post and telecom agency (PTT, now KPN), became possible only after the Ministry of Finance became afraid that the funds needed for updating the telecommunication equipment would create such a precedent that it would be profitable to hide this investment behind the privatisation label.).

Most privatisations got stuck. However, talking about privatisation created an atmosphere in which a new way of thinking about public sector management became possible. So, in the first 'transformation period', a number of new concepts entered the discussion. Contractmanagement, integral management, public private partnerships, all became part of the new public lexicon. The upshot of it all was a new realisation of the importance of a good execution of policy. Of course, this also translated into a need for the right institutional form for those organisations who specialise in executive tasks.

This resulted in the second wave of independation. A little after the so-called government agencies were formed in Great-Britain, attempts were made to do the same in the Netherlands. This was not the result of any Cabinet-Office decision. Independation was 'guided' by a committee which was dominated by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry of Finance saw agencies as a mild form of privatisation, the Ministry of Interior saw agencies as a way of translating the concept of agencies they already had to the other departments of government. The Ministry of Interior also used independation to decentralise a number of tasks in the direction of local government.

It is not clear whether the organisations that now became subject of independation would not have gotten the same amount of autonomy without the official label of independation. Probably it would not have made much difference. Still, independation provoked an intense debate about what should be the 'core-tasks' of government. One 'coretask' is certainly the formulation of policy, so that should remain central in so-called 'core-departments'. All other tasks, in as far as they cannot be fully privatised, would have to be put at a distance. Everything that has to do with the implementation of policy would have to take place outside the core-departements.

By the end of 1993 the trends towards independation looked irreversible. A substantial number of organisation were said to be working on their independation, and in a number of reports - one of them written and signed by the Secretary-General of each department - their seemed to have been made some choices about what is a core-task and what not. A third wave of independation seemed to be on the way.

But not so. When in August 1994 a new government is formed, they make independation a central part of the 'Government Contract' that is made by the ruling coalitionpartners. Even so, within two months after the government is formed, in stead of a wave of new announcements of independation, there has come a wave of stories, reports and ministerial quotes about the failure of independation so far. Most organisations cost the taxpayer more instead of less money, much of the extra costs due to increased salaries. And there have been too many incidents, giving many within central government the feeling that they have not enough control. The outcome of the elections and the low turnout has given the politicians a fright; it seems that not enough has been done to give the citizens the feeling politicians are listening to their concerns. Wasn't independation to be part of the solution?

Where to? The intellectual debate seems to be running in circles. Many still see independation as the logical way ahead. But some believe that is not possible to make a viable distinction between policy and implementation, which is at the hart of the independation argument. The critics contend that both policy and implementation can be outsourced. They believe that the real role of a core-department is no more than the guidance of policy-processes through the machinery of government. Independation, as such, is only worthwhile if there is a marketsituation at that outcome?

All in all, at the beginning of 1995 independation seems to be a train that is trying to move while the brakes are on.

Putting your back towards mother

Let me return to the start of independation. Back to my own experiences.

I have been lucky. Director of an education institute in the public sector too small to be noticed by Parliament, I had more opportunities than most to manage my own independation. My market became a very competitive market, there was no luxury to spoil any disposition towards hard work. Every participant of each new course I and my associates developed (from 8 to 80 in less than 5 years) brought me closer to true independation. I had a clear bottomline to aim at. Nevertheless, for a long time I was convinced it was necessary to put as much energy as possible in the negotiations with the department about all kinds of financial arrangements and legal positions. I thought I was negotiating for our future, the training activities were 'just work'.

What changed my mind were two meetings within one morning at the Ministry of Education and Science. The first meeting was with the

civil servants who formulated policy. They were very sympathetic to my efforts and admired my endurance. Unfortunately, all money matters were decided by the financial people, so there was really nothing they could do. But they told me that if they could do anything to help me I should just ask. One person in particular approached me at the end of the conversation and asked me whether he could help me with any consultancy work. Only part-time, of course.

The second conversation was with the financial people. They were also very sympathetic, but they told me that the money they had reserved two years earlier for the costs of the privatisation was unfortunately gone. Other policy plans, you see. But maybe if I could talk to the people from the policy ... No!

So I turned my back to mother and my eyes to the market. I did look back, but only to see whether the department could be another of my customers. They owed me something.

Quality

After privatisation, and working for a private education institute, I put my experiences with independence to good use by organising workshops around the theme. I liked these courses. The surest road to learning must be the teaching of others. But most of my work had little to do with government. I had other tasks. One of them was small in the beginning, but grew in significance. Led by the general director of De Baak Foundation, my new employer, we started to aim for 'total quality management'. For two years we did a number of projects to improve our standards of service. But it was not enough. We considered ourselves to be too inward-looking. We needed an external push for our quality-efforts. This became the ISO 9000-project. This became The Project.

Because of earlier involvement with the certification of post-graduate education, I was a sort of one-eyed king in the land of the blind, and subsequently became the 'quality-co-ordinator' of the project. Since we were just about the first management education institute to go for ISO-9000, one of my first tasks was to look for appropriate examples. What could we learn from others. Ultimately I found two organisations that were of interest to De Baak. One was a small Dutch organisation, the other a British one, in a number of ways similar to ours. Sundridge Management Park had managed to be the first training institute to be certified on the basis of ISO-9001-4. Since I knew their quality manager (yes, a manager) from earlier days (teaching presentation skills. I needed that). I asked him to tell us about their approach. He told us a lot. And I got worried.

In essence there are two ways to go about a project like the implementation of ISO-9000. One way is to make a firm statement by the board of management about the need for ISO-9000 and then delegate the actual development of the system to a competent quality manager. If the manager is really competent - as in the case of Sundridge he obviously was - he involves as many people as possible, but ultimately it is his job to get the organisation to ISO-9000 in as short a time as possible. The drawback of this approach is that you cannot be sure of the real commitment of the organisation. There is also a very real chance of the organisation falling into a sort of black hole after "achieving ISO", when in reality ISO certification is nothing more than your entry ticket to the real quality race.

The other approach is through linemanagement. The board of management declares itself to be the 'Quality Steering group'. Quality is nothing more than doing the usual things in the right way. ISO certification is the result of a collective effort. There is no quality manager

in whose lap problems can be dropped. Each procedure has to be written by the people themselves, with only technical assistance from the 'quality co-ordinator'. Quality is every persons business. The advantages are clear, but so are the drawbacks. If you're not careful, tempo is set by the slowest manager. And it is a fact of life that not every manager has a feeling for quality. You only have to take one look at the mess at the desk of your average 'brilliant' program manager, to know that he or she is not the one to teach others about quality. So the slowest link determines the pace. I learned enough of independation to know that in any change speed is of the essence. What then determines what approach to take? What is decisive? I am no lover of hierarchy, but here I do believe that it is the person of the general director (CEO, in business) that makes the difference.

About quality and leadership

Anyone who has ever gone through a quality project knows that the involvement of topmanagement is crucial. If there is no visible commitment to quality, there is no quality management. Our general director had that commitment, and he showed that. He also had vision, and that is more rare. He said, for instance, that in the end it is not about 'total *quality* management'. The management of the quality system is important, but it is only a means to an end. Ultimately it is about 'total *management* quality'. Each person is a manager of his or her own resources. The moment such a person takes responsibly for his or her own action and ensures quality, then a formal quality system is only a proof of something that is already there. Then there is no need to fear the bureaucratic aspects of ISO or other quality systems.

He said all that, and he meant it. But he did not always show it. After some time it became clear that the message did not come through to the organisation. There was no real opposition, that is something you can deal with. There was just the ever ready excuse of too much work, too many courses that had to be sold. Always valid arguments, always valid excuses for something not to happen. To the general director it must have felt like the organisation was slipping like water through his hands. What to do?

His solution was to change the organisation. Make people more responsible by assigning specific functions. Delegate responsibility. No one can hide behind his or her agenda if someone else also has responsibility for the final results.

Therefore, when the first procedures came in, he insisted that into these procedures would be written the new organisation structure. no procedure would be approved without the new 'unit managers' written into the text.

I will not hide the fact that I disagreed with my general director on his insistence of putting organisational changes into existing procedures. We argued fiercely. I had told people that in their writing they should stay as close as possible to the actual way of doing things. I knew it would be hard enough for most of them to do that and survive an external auditor asking for 'written evidence' of what they were doing. I did not want to put any 'new' elements into the procedures, and certainly not elements that were a cultural change in themselves. So we fought. Of course I lost the immediate battle. I like to believe I will win the final battle, but in the meantime precious time got lost.

We are still not certified, we are still not satisfied. We have written our procedures, we have had our internal audits, and it is fair to say that have showed some real improvements in quality, still .. we should have been much further down the road. It has been, it is, a hard struggle. Much harder than I could have imagined.

I have not written this to make points over the back of my general director. I think he erred in some of his judgements, but I admire his vision and I still think he is far ahead of others in his thinking about quality and the role of management. He has done me and his organisation the ultimate service of having learned something we will need in the future.

But here is the point; what does government do without such managers? De Baak is just a small organisation. People know each other, arguments can be fought out face to face. What does the government, what does the State do when it has to ensure the quality for services rendered by hundreds of organisations, led by thousands of managers, directing the efforts of tens of thousands of people?

ISO for the public sector?

What would happen if a government organisation would go for ISO? Even before I ran into my own particular patch of trouble, I thought it would probably end in disaster. It is always dangerous to make generalisations about 'the' government. For those organisations who already have something like a clear product and production line ISO could be a real option. I also knew that for some government organisations - laboratories, organisations in aviation, defense - ISO is a mild system compared to what they already have. But for all those others I was doubtful, to say the least. This is not a reflection on ISO itself. If managed correctly ISO is a perfect system. But even after having put the customer into better focus, ISO is still a largely inward looking system. It asks for procedures, written evidence and form of planning, all of them too close to the bureaucratic mindset. Apart from my own doubts about ISO, I knew from the participants of our courses that there are enough critical managers within the government who would never stand for a system like ISO. They would consider it an anathema to every thing they are trying to change within the government. In the nineties it is no longer popular to imitate everything that comes from business. This is one businessconcept they would love to kill.

What about Charters?

In the autumn of '92, looking for alternatives for ISO, I came across a short article about something called 'Citizen's Charters'.

As I understood it, these Charters asked from the newly formed governmental agencies (aha, I thought, these Brits are also working on independation, not just privatisation!) to formulate specific standards for services rendered, with the possibility of compensation when targets are not met. That struck a chord with me. These Charters could be a way out of the Three-Front dilemma. With these Charters the government, the mother organisation, forces the daughters to look outward, towards the citizen as customer. What also struck me as very important, was the idea that agencies would set their own standards. Responsibility would be theirs, not that of the lawmaker. In Britain they had started talking about quality as the driving force for independation, not the law. That struck me as of extreme importance.

So I wrote an article about the Charter Initiative. A short one, just to inform readers about this new and interesting development. I expected this to be one article in many about this new 'Charter-idea'. I also expected the trend-setters of Dutch public administration to start using the concept in conferences and seminars. I expected the political pundits to start writing about this new initiative of John Major. Did our government not have the same problems he had?

Nothing happened. No reaction what so ever.

Well, this gave me the time to find out what the Charters were really all about. So I asked for a copy of the White Paper that had just been published. One thing struck me; the way it looked. Fantastic! It came to me how important the element of communication is behind the whole Charter-idea. I would explain the principles of the Charter to other people and they would do their best to understand what I said to them. But when I would show them the White Paper, before they had read a single word their eyes would light up and they were hooked. Often there were remarks about the 'glossy, superficial, empty' way of promoting a 'political gimmick' that 'wouldn't work here'. But it worked with everybody.

Better informed than before, I continued writing about the concept of Charters and it's possibilities for the Netherlands. After having met Ms. Diana Goldsworthy of the Citizen's Charter Unit, I got a better idea of the way the Charter Initiative was managed. I was impressed by the speed with which they had implemented the initiative. Of course there had been accusations of playing it too much like politics, but on the whole I was impressed by the sincere way in which they tried to introduce the Charters.

I must admit I did not care much about the 'main principles' (openness, choice, etc.), they were too much of a good thing. What I liked about the Charters is the very simplicity of the idea behind it. Organisations tend to make things complex, that way they can hide from the consequences of what they are doing. Government organisations are very good at complexity. If they are to work, Charters have to break through the complexity. Just a few standards on which the organisation commits itself by offering compensation or otherwise. Wonderful. The crux of Charters is their commitment to quality for customers as individuals. And there are only so many things a customer can remember. A Charter should be the governments equivalent to a KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid!).

Slowly getting attention, and resistance

In the Netherlands things stayed quiet until the autumn of '93. Then, a small success. Somewhere in the back of a white paper about the need for more independation, Citizen's Charters were mentioned. A first sign of recognition. Slowly the word spread around. A caroussel of lectures and seminars started to turn.

In the beginning, my story was all about the 'British example'. Soon I started working on a Dutch version of the Charter. I also tried to make a good translation of the words 'Citizen's Charters'. That did not work out so well. I am still not satisfied about the new name, and there is still a bottle of champagne out for the person who thinks of a better name.

Then, two things started to happen.

The first thing was a mounting criticism of the concept. On the whole I welcomed that, true evidence of people starting to take notice. The criticism took three distinct forms. The first form had and has to do with the country of origin. Anything coming from Britain just can't be good. For instance, the Dutch railroads refused to look at the idea of the Passengers Charter because they would rather be found dead than take an example from British Raildissaster.

The second form of criticism rested on the argument that Citizen's Charters were a political solution for a political problem and have nothing to do with real reform. And anyway, anything coming from John Major cannot be taken seriously.

The third argument states that the Dutch system works in a different way. The continental system of laws and jurisprudence already provides in rules and regulations what the British system tries to provide with crude instruments like the Charters.

Only the last form of criticism has merit, it certainly is a criticism that has to be addressed. The other two forms only provided me with an opportunity to turn the mirror on Dutch society and government.

Other quality approaches

Apart from the criticism, something else was happening. I soon found out that I could not talk about Charters in isolation from other quality approaches. Apart from ISO, other approaches became more important.

One instrument was the so-called 'Qualitymonitor', an instrument to measure the internal and external experience of quality for services rendered to citizens. This instrument was developed by order of the Ministry for the Interior, and especially meant for local government and the police. Because customers tend to equate the quality of the service with the result of the service, the Monitor compensated for that by following the customer through the whole process of service delivery.

The other, ultimately more important approach, is that of the Dutch Quality Award. This Award is an adaptation of the European Quality Award, which in turn is influenced by the American Baldrige Award. The Award compensates for some of the defects of ISO 9000, by bringing into focus fields like 'leadership', 'policy and strategy' and 'end results'. It does not set specific requirements, but offers for every field a number of questions that relate to five specific stages of organisational development. At stage five you have achieved 'total quality management'. The answers to the questions at this level should show that the organisation, for instance, is aware of its responsibilities towards society as a whole, and not just to the goal of a maximum profit.

As such the Dutch Quality Award, which is rightly called a 'self-evaluation model', offers an approach to quality that is far more sophisticated than ISO (which is near level three).

Though the Dutch Quality Award has been developed with industrial companies in mind, it soon became apparent that, with adaptations, the system of the Award is also relevant for the 'not-for-profit' sector. So a separate version was developed. Through my work as quality co-ordinator I became familiar with the Award and did the first auditor course for the not-for-profit version of the award. Afterwards the people who were part of the course were not completely satisfied with the fields that have to do with 'end results'. Therefore we have continued to meet and talk about ways to make this field more suitable for applications. Of course, the standards that are part of any Charter are the kind of indicators that are also used to determine 'end results'.

First indications of actual audits (a number of hospitals and parts of the police have adopted the model) show that not-for-profit organisations have, as a rule, more qualitative information available than industrial companies, but it is much harder to determine which indicators are of use for an organisation and which are not. A bottomline is not the same as a budget, so what determines whether an organisation is having 'good' results or not? Even less indicators are suitable for use in a Charter, as a way of giving customers a say in which results are satisfactory and which are not.

The right indicators for the right Charter

Given the difficulty of finding the right indicators for measuring end results and the setting of standards for Charters, it looks to me like there is nothing more important than finding those indicators that have maximum impact on the organisation. Few indicators are then better than many indicators. Indicators that bring the customer into focus are then better than indicators used for internal purposes. So it is not important to find many and sophisticated indicators, it is important to find few but clear indicators, and then become as 'hard' as possible on these indicators.

In the method I have developed for possible Charters in the Netherlands, nothing more is required than a maximum of nine standards, of which three lend themselves for possible compensation, three have to do with more qualitative statements about the level of service, and three have to do with the way the people are informed about the activities of the organisation.

In these last three standards I hope to include statements that have to do with the democratic responsibilities of the organisation. What I lack in the main themes of the British Charters, is an awareness that we are speaking about organisations with a public responsibility. I believe Charters will have more chance of being accepted, both by the public and the politicians, if the organisation uses more than market-criteria and shows something of the public responsibility the organisation has.

I have developed this model in conjunction with two other organisations, one specialised in quality measurement (they developed the Qualitymonitor) and one communication bureau. Together we form a 'virtual organisation' that aims to support the government and specific organisations that are interested in the Charter and other quality approaches. Waiting for the government to do something would take too much time, so we have started to preach the gospel of quality to anyone who would listen.

Breakthrough and disappointment

Coming back from the '94 summer holiday, I caught up with the Dutch newspapers. Almost finished, my eyes fell on a small message. I nearly fell out of my chair. The message was about the small print of the new draft for the 'Government Contract'. In May there had been general elections. The outcome of this election was a complicated puzzle, with four parties who each got about 20% of the votes. Three of these parties were to form the government. They do this by negotiating a Government Contract. This Contract is the solid policy basis for anything that will happen in the next four years, or for as long as the coalition holds. Because of the importance of the Contract negotiations can go on for months. The draft of the Contract is usually the first thing that comes through the wall of silence that surrounds the negotiations. And the two pages that were dedicated to the internal organisation of the government contained two sentences about the quality of services, one of them mentioning Charters as a way of doing so. Breakthrough!

Before the summer I had send a message to the person responsible for the process of negotiation, advocating the use of Charters. I did not expect him to do anything with it. I did so because the simple fact of a letter to the negotiators could influence the policymakers in the Ministry of the Interior, my main objective at that time. Getting it into the draft Contract was more than I could hope for. Still, I wasted no time in announcing the breakthrough to the world.

I was a bit worried though. The wording of the Contract showed to me that they had not entirely understood the idea of the Charters. The Contract spoke of Charters that would contain the 'rights' citizens would have when service was not adequate. I dreaded the word 'rights' because it is a legal term and I wanted to stay as far away from the law as I could. I also think that Charters do not contain rights. I think Charters are a one-sided statement of a government organisation in which they set specific standards for service within the broader standards of the law. It is the standard of the organisation, not that of the law or, when it comes to it, that of the citizen.

With a fax I tried to correct the wording of the draft, but I was too late. In the final draft of the Contract the word 'Charters' was no longer there. The text still stressed the importance of good service quality for the citizen, but instead of mentioning Charters, a reference was made to our General Law of Administration. This is a wonderful new law, containing general and specific criteria for the proper way in which a government body should act and offering redress for any wrongdoing. But I did not want quality by law! I wanted quality by commitment. The text of the Contract still allowed for Charters, but I felt like I had lost from the lawyers.

Charters in a fractured land

Of course I did not stop with talking about Charters. Fortunately an increasing number of organisations showed themselves interested in the concept. Around forty agencies and government bodies, many in local government, but also in fields like healthcare, police, the prison-system and the organisations responsible for the integration of immigrants told us they wanted to go for a quality system with Charters as one of the results.

Over the Ministries, especially the Ministry of the Interior, a blanket of silence fell. They were all waiting for indications of the plans of their new ministers and for the cutbacks that would inevitably come. So we had to move things ourselves. We? Until the middle of December '94, we were no more than three consultants, loosely representing three different organisations. With no formal contract, with no formal mission and no money, just patience and drive. We were the Dutch Charter Initiative. Compare that with the way the Brits went about it.

A painful comparison

There have been many times I thought with envy of the way in which the British Governments went about to create the Citizen's Charter Initiative. I saw:

- a clear and personal commitment from John Major, the Prime Minister;
- support from the largest political party, one with a clear majority in Parliament;
- support from the business community;
- a separate minister responsible for the Initiative;
- a good project organisation, carried by motivated people;
- a clear philosophy and general strategy;
- connected to other strategies of public sector reform, especially to the independence strategy;
- aiming for specific results;
- a good communication strategy;
- supported by documents, magazines, conferences and what not.

In short, everything you should do according to the classical theory of implementing a quality system. Of course, mistakes were made and

not everything went according to plan. But certainly from a distance it looks very impressive. No wonder people from all over the world were taking an interest in the Charter Initiative. A model for public sector renewal!

Compare that with the Netherlands:

- a Prime Minister who is only 'first among equals', with no formal power to direct other ministers in their activities;
- no real commitment of the main political parties to a specific strategy for improvement of the public sector;
- a Government Contract that is not specific on the way it wants to achieve a better quality;
- a Ministry of the Interior that should have formal responsibility for policy issues connected to civil service reform, but has in practice no real power or budgets to make other ministries move;
- a legal system and tradition that does not really allow space for a philosophy based on quality approaches;
- a distrust of large scale strategies or communication efforts.

In short, all the classical elements are there to turn any quality project into a failure.

The way to go

Comparing it that way, it looks like the non-existing 'Dutch Charter Initiative' is a child that should not be borne, something that is simply not worth the trouble. Of course, I do not believe that.

In fact, I wonder which country will at the end of the century have the most Charters in place. Charters that really make a difference.

On balance, I am not convinced that the British approach is the way to go for the Netherlands, or that I should mourn the lack of political commitment. I do miss a sort of tidal wave that impresses civil servants with the idea "that we got to do something with these Charters". And it is a fact of public life that politicians making statements can set things in motion. But that is mostly meant for those organisations that are slow on the uptake and need the symbolism of public policy. Political support is a mixed blessing, support from the Ministry of the Interior quite often a disadvantage. I prefer an approach that builds on the need of the individual organisation and the people involved. A bottom up approach, in stead of a top-down approach. I prefer an approach that is tailor made for the specific needs of a public organisation, on the way to independation or not.

I believe the instrument of regulation is at a dead end. Each new law has less surplus value. Inspection or control offers no compensation for what does not work in the first place. Legal instruments or instruments of control do not change organisations, people do. Then what are the needs of the people in these organisations, especially the managers?

Coming back to my experiences independation as a struggle on three fronts, I believe that it is in the interest of many managers within government organisation to find a way to let the organisation turn outward. If charters are an effective way to do so they will start using them. Then they will also need a way to build or improve their internal quality system.

The more people within organisations are inclined to take the initiative and to set their own standards, the better they will do within a quality system and the less resistance they will show towards the publication of standards. And I must say, in this respect I am more optimistic about the Dutch civil service than about the British. For too long having worked within a hierarchical culture, I do not believe new con-

cepts like Charters can compensate for the British tradition of waiting for Whitehall. I have a bias. I think that the Dutch culture, which is based on the seeking of consensus between parties from whom superior behavior is not accepted, has resulted in an undisciplined bunch of critics called civil servants, who are better able to go the whole way. Their attitude offers a little better perspective of progress. At least, when they see their own interest in doing so. Our job, my job, is to make them see their own interest.

A mission

In the last month of the year '94 we had a meeting with the top civil servants of the Ministry of the Interior. Without much expectations we told them about our progress. We knew they were a sympathetic audience, but we also knew that they were in the middle of severe budget discussions and that their senior civil servant was about to leave for a new post. What we needed was a clear commitment and some financial support to go through with the organisations that had shown themselves willing to try new approaches. We also wanted to have entry to the responsible politician, Secretary Kohnstamm, and tell him our views, but given the situation we did not expect much. We showed them the organisations that were willing to begin quality approaches like the Charters. We gave them reasons for going through. And then it was their turn.

We got a pleasant surprise. Whatever the situation, we shared the same policy objectives and they were willing to back that up with a mission to publish at least ten Charters before the end of '95. We were asked to do an interviews with interested parties and organise a seminar, led by the Secretary, with the aim of setting specific goals. At last!

And at the same time, independent from the meeting at the Ministry, a number of organisations came to us asking us for our advice on how to implement a quality system and a working Charter. Great!

The last thing I heard in '94, before going to my Christmas Tree, was that Secretary Kohnstamm had made a speech in which he mentioned the need for Charters. What a present.

What is the real next step?

So it looks like we are finally in business of making Charters. The year '95 will be the year to start working in the organisations. It should also be the year in which we will see a formal policy on Charters. We are ready for it.

But will it work? Will there be Charters for every government organisation? Will every citizen know what kind of service he or she can expect? No. Not in the foreseeable future.

It takes too long. Like bloodcells that attack any strange organisms that enters the bloodstream, dangerous or not, critics will attack the concept of Charters for being British, being outside the legal system, being a businessconcept, being impossible and what not. Even though we now have a real breakthrough, I do not believe we have more than three or four years at the most, before the critics do their work or new gurus come along with new concepts for old circles. Even with clear support from the government, I do not think we will succeed within that narrow window of time. Charters are ultimately no more than a way of changing the culture of an organisation, and that takes time. I dare not believe we will get enough time for that.

Is that important? Should it really be the goal to change the working of the whole government? No, not really. But what will happen is, that it will be again the organisations that are already successful who

will profit from the Charters, and the organisations that need it the most will let it pass by. I do not mind working for successful organisations, but I am idealistic enough not to wish for a public sector that for decades on end is seen to be not able to deliver the kind of service the citizen expects and is entitled to. There must be some way to get their confidence back in the workings of the public sector. What is the price of not succeeding? What will happen to the organisations that fail to implement a working quality system? Maybe nothing. Good service does not guarantee good budgets. The public often does not expect good service from a government organisation, so it changes nothing if all quality efforts are in vain. But I believe that at the end the axe is waiting for the organisations that do not see the signs of the time. And then there may come the boogymen of quality approaches. It is a new concept called 'process re-engineering', and it aims for a complete rebuilding of organisations without regard for the past. The result needs to be a complete rebuilding of the organisation, a discontinuation of tasks no longer worthwhile and usually the dismissal of a lot of people, mostly in the middle layers of the organisation.

Quality is a relative concept. What was quality in the past may not be the quality of the future. Quality arises in large part from the comparison of one kind of quality with that of another. When it comes to service in the public sector, the comparisons most citizens make is not with other organisations in the public sector. I believe the comparisons are most often made with the kind of service they receive at their bank or insurance company. These are organisations that have many bureaucratic characteristics in common with government organisations. In the past two years I have closely followed several re-engineering efforts of these kind of organisations. The improvements in the standards of quality I have observed are impressive. With the aid of modern technology they have made a jump in their client-orientation, while at the same time decreasing the size of their organisations. These are big changes.

When banks and insurance companies are improving their service, organisations in the public sector will have to follow. I believe re-engineering is the real next step for organisations in the public sector, certainly if the other quality approaches are not adapted in time.

Peter Noordhoek works as programme director at De Baak Foundation, the Centre for Management Studies of the Federation of Netherlands Industry.