

SUMMARY

AT VARIANCE WITH A WOMAN'S VOCATION THE POLITICAL REFORMED PARTY AND WOMEN SUFFRAGE

In the Netherlands parliamentary democracy was introduced in 1848, with a very limited form of male suffrage. From around 1870 onwards the struggle for the introduction of general suffrage developed. In first instance this only meant a less limited form of male suffrage, the criterion being ability. Under the influence of the women's movement, which unfolded during this same period, the call for female suffrage grew. It took the Netherlands about fifty years: in 1919 all adult men and women were granted passive suffrage (the right to be elected) as well as active suffrage (the right to vote). In 1922 Dutch women were granted the same constitutional civil rights as men.

In this process the protestant political parties took a conservative stance, being no exception in this respect. Also many liberals and catholics expected no good to come from fullscale emancipation and equality of women. Within the protestant parties questions were raised concerning biblical teaching and the specific duties of men and women. Anti-revolutionary thought, specifically as developed by Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper, founder of the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP, in Dutch: Anti-Revolutionaire Partij (ARP)), rooted in European Conservatism. Anti-revolutionary leaders sought the restoration of the social structures as they were before the French Revolution. While accepting parliamentary democracy Kuyper rejected the revolutionary individualistic suffrage. He wished for an organic suffrage and thereby for a head-of-family-suffrage for the House of Representatives. The ARP proved unable to elaborate this concept far enough for it to become, in a period of changing social structures, a reasonable alternative to individual suffrage.

During the suffrage struggle the antirevolutionaries, appealing to biblical teaching on the position of women, rejected female suffrage. In 1919 they nevertheless immediately accepted active female suffrage in practice. The ARP called on women to vote, but only in 1934 their foundational program was brought in accordance on this specific point. Their own women would even have to wait some decades longer for passive suffrage. It lasted till after World War Two, till 1953, for women to gain the right to become nominees, and it took more than ten years longer still, till 1967, before women represented the party in practice. In her dealing with this issue the ARP proved more conservative than the other greater political parties. However, those also had to cope with resistance that wore off only gradually.

For three protestant parties female suffrage was not an issue. Firstly the Christian Historical Unionists (CHU, in Dutch: Christelijk-Historische Unie (CHU)). When the suffrage struggle reached its end the CHU declared, in Parliament, itself supportive of general suffrage. It was the emancipation of women that led to this party's acceptance of female suffrage already in this stage of the suffrage struggle; several prominent party members even heartily accepted. The cause of this was their different way of dealing with Scripture, different than was usual among anti-revolutionary people; and also that the daughters and female followers of the women that were involved in politics already during the Réveil in the nineteenth century, had found their political home within this party's circles. The founder of the CHU, the lawyer A.F. de Savornin Lohman, considered suffrage a matter of efficiency.

The Reformed Political Alliance (RPA, in Dutch: Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond (GPV)), that was founded after the Second World War as a secession of the ARP, and the still later founded Reformed Political Federation (RPF, in Dutch: Reformatorische Politieke Federatie (RPF)), both did not officially object to female suffrage. That would not have been opportune any longer, and out of date in respect to its rank and file. Practically however they did lag behind to the secular political parties in the actual acceptance of the participation of women, but that was characteristic of all protestant parties, due to a conservative outlook on male/female relations in marriage and society. Between the protestant parties there no longer remained any significant difference on this issue, the Political Reformed Party (PRP, in Dutch: Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP)) being the exception.

The revision of the constitution in 1917 provided the reverend Gerrit Hendrik Kersten with an opportunity to found a political party specifically for the reformed-pietistic part of the population: the PRP. After the introduction of female suffrage in 1919 he made the rejection of it into an identity mark of his party. Nevertheless, women of his rank and file did also exercise their right to vote, and through the years the PRP relied on them for its Parliamentary chairs.

In the early 1980's the PRP chairman, the reverend H.G. Abma, took the initiative to modernize the women standpoint of the party and to bring it somewhat in accordance with the opinions and practice of the rank and file. In 1989, after a long period of deliberation the party

banned the rejection of active female suffrage from its foundational program. With respect to the other political parties there still remained officially two points of difference: the rejection of female membership of the party and the passive women suffrage.

From 1984 onwards a small number of women had already become members of a local branch of the party. When this became known at the national level, the board of the party had to find a solution, it being not in accordance with the party's tradition. During the 1990's the PRP proved to be deeply divided on this issue. In 1993 it led to the most serious crisis in the party's history, partly due to a lack of effective leadership. In 1996 a solution was implemented – a form of extraordinary membership for new female members. Women were allowed to participate in debate, but were excluded from actual decisionmaking and government. This compromise proved to be satisfactory to no one.

Both the official acceptance of active female suffrage as the introduction of the extraordinary membership was influenced by the rejection of discrimination of women in the Netherlands: women had the right to equal treatment. In Parliament the PRP was questioned on its women standpoint and the women movement began actively to oppose it, among other things by conducting lawsuits.

In 2003, surveys among the rank and file of the party showed that a substantial part was no longer opposed to female party membership, the same for political representation by women. For the party leadership this was the occasion to expound afresh the official party standpoint in the form of the publication of a brochure. In this process they came to realize however that the bearing surface for its standpoint had become insufficient and that a revision was inevitable. This led to the decision of the party in June 2006 to grant women the right to ordinary party membership. The argument was that a political party belongs to the private and not to the public domain, as was the opinion formerly. Women were not granted passive suffrage. The party leadership did not wish to propound this possibility to the party, notwithstanding a substantial minority favoring it. Government is male, not female.

During the preparation of the party decision the party leadership was confronted in 2005 with a judicial pronouncement: the Dutch government was no longer allowed to subsidize the PRP because of her discrimination of women. This pronouncement hit the party in all its parts, influencing the decision making, rendering it all the more urgent. The party leadership declared that the decision made was the end of it, among the rank and file there was talk of it being merely an intermediate position. Supporters of passive female suffrage perceived it as a provisional compromise.