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Wilfred Scholten

Mooie Barend

Biografie van B.W. Biesheuvel

2012

SUMMARY

This biography is about the life of Barend Willem Biesheuvel, leader of the Antirevolutionary Party (ARP) and Prime Minister of the Netherlands (1971-'73). His well-known nickname was 'Handsome Barend' because of his height (1.97 meter) and his good looks.

Biesheuvel was born on April 5th, 1920 in the Houtropolder, a typical Dutch polder (reclaimed land) between Amsterdam and Haarlem. His ancestors had settled in that area after leaving an island in the southern part of the country, called Land of Heusden and Altena. Barend was the second youngest child of Arie Biesheuvel and Johanna Margaretha Troost. He had two brothers (Aart and Leendert) and two sisters (Maartje and Steintje). Just like his grandfather and great-grandfather Barend, his father was a cashcrop farmer. On the farm 'Westhoff' Barend had a happy carefree childhood. He raised rabbits, went to school in Spaarndam and enjoyed his life on and around the farm. His favorite hobbies were chess and soccer.

He had inherited his love of politics from his father, who in turn had inherited it from his father, both of whom had been active in the ARP, the oldest political party in Holland. The majority of this party were members of the Christian Reformed Church, an orthodox group which had split from the State Reformed Church. Arie Biesheuvel was an alderman and active in many public organizations, for example the Christelijke Boeren- en Tuinders Bond (CBTB), which organized the Christian farmers. In the 1930's Barend accompanied his father to election campaign gatherings, such as that of ARP leader Hendrikus Colijn, who at that time was also Prime Minister. This made a deep impression on him and from that time on, Barend took sincere interest in issues regarding politics and religion. During secondary 'MULO' school in Haarlem, he met his future wife Wilhemina (Mies) Meuring, a girl of strong conviction who knew what she wanted. To further his education Barend attended a pre-university school (gymnasium) where he was a good but not a brilliant student.

During this period he attended churches in search of the faith that suited him most, not too orthodox, nor too strict or narrow minded. Barend seemed to be somewhat of an introvert, preferring to read books. Neither was he a member of any Christian youth organization. In 1940, taking his father's advice, he went to study law at the Free University in Amsterdam, which was a Christian Reformed University, established by the founder of the ARP, Abraham Kuyper, his role-model. When the university closed during the war, he secretly followed classes at his professors homes and later went into hiding on his father's farm, thus avoiding the German Arbeitseinsatz. Strangely enough, he did not join the resistance as most everyone else around him did. He continued studying seriously and intently, and eventually received his degree in 1945. That was also the year he married Mies.

Through his father's connections, he obtained his first job as a clerk for the Food Commissioner of the province Noord Holland. In that region of the country he had to so-called 'cleanse' the farmers to determine if they had collaborated with the German occupier or not. His boss, Johan de Veer, taught him how important presentation was: one achieve a lot with charm and flair. After two years Barend left this job and joined the Foundation for Agriculture where he became the foreign secretary. He had to advance this organization's agricultural interests into the political arena and encourage international contacts as well. Thus he was involved with the Marshal Aid Plan and initiating the early stages of the forming of the European Common Market (EEG). In 1952 Barend Biesheuvel became secretary of the CBTB, in which his father was active at a regional level. This was the smallest Farmer's association. However it was very active and through this organization Biesheuvel became part of the so-called Green Front, the powerful lobby group for agriculture in the area of politics and corporate business.

In 1956 he was chosen as a member of the Dutch Parliament, de Tweede Kamer. The ARP had always had a farmers representative in their midst. Three years later Biesheuvel became chairman of the CBTB and member of the Board for Agriculture ('Landbouwschap'), which advocated the agricultural cause in politics. So he wore three hats during these years: as the association's chairman he strived for the interests of 'his people', as a representative of the Board for Agriculture these interests were again discussed and passed on to the government, and third as a member of Parliament he also-passed judgments over the same issues. Thus Biesheuvel became influential. As a member of Parliament he drew attention to himself as a sharp debater with headstrong points of view. Biesheuvel also became member of the European Common Market Parliament where he noticed that collaboration between the divided Christian Democratic parties functioned pretty well.

Biesheuvel was the party's spokesman for the precarious issue regarding New Guinea which was putting a strain on the relationship with Indonesia. After a trip through India he advocated for more Developmental Aid. He was even in favor of creating a special tax to help the poorest people in the world. Within the ARP party there was a strong debate with regards to the parties direction; Barend was on the side of the modernizers. The party moved in a progressive direction, mainly due to the idealism of the party's chairman W.P. Berghuis. He recognized Barend's talent and in 1963 made him one of the three party leaders at the election. Even though the party lost at the election, Barend Biesheuvel became Minister of Agriculture and Deputy Prime Minister (in charge of the relations with Suriname and the Dutch Antilles) in a cabinet with Christian Democrats and liberals.

As minister he effectively established much authority, especially during the negotiations in Brussels to form a common agricultural policy. He appeared to be a clever and dynamic strategist, rather than being a visionary politician. He was very knowledgeable in regards to the problems he had to cope with. So after the government fell (because of the failure to make commercial television possible), he remained minister and Deputy Prime

Minister of the centre left government, led by the catholic politician named Jo Cals. Biesheuvel got along well with the socialists as well as the liberals. Due to various incidents (such as provocations of the younger generation and the controversial wedding of Princess Beatrix to her German fiancé, Claus von Amsberg) as well as a declining economy, the government fell before finishing its term; the direct cause being a motion from the leader of Catholic Party (KVP), Norber Schmelzer. This infuriated Biesheuvel but nevertheless he had an important role in creating the next cabinet. Eventually an interim government was formed with the KVP and ARP in which Biesheuvel again participated.

During the election of 1967, Biesheuvel became party leader after a harsh internal struggle with his rival, Bauke Roolvink. The ARP had a rather progressive program and called itself 'evangelical and radical'. Many young people and intellectuals could relate to the ideals of the party. Also due to the popularity of the interim Prime Minister, Jelle Zijlstra, the ARP won two seats and Biesheuvel was charged with forming a new government. But due to the fact that he was unable to find capable ministers and as he himself lacked the necessary self confidence to pursue, he failed in his attempt. As well, some of the politicians in his own party worked against him.

Disappointed, he returned to Parliament and became chairman of his party. In spite of his doubt regarding leaving politics in The Hague, he set about his task conducting himself as an independent, authoritative critic of the centre right government. A number of progressive young people of the ARP had called themselves 'Spijststemmers (remote voters)'. They, together with other critics who supported a more progressive policy, organized themselves as 'radicals'. Biesheuvel was quite successful in his objective to keep unity in the ARP party in the turbulent 60's and was also able to keep the critical radicals on board. Radical members of the KVP resigned from the party in 1968 and formed the Political Party Radicals (PPR). At one stage Biesheuvel suffered a scornful defeat. He disagreed with the level of the inflation adjustment, for which the liberal VVD were so drastically in favor. During a debate in November 1969, Biesheuvel yielded at the last moment to the influence of the Minister of Finance. He had overplayed his hand and profoundly experienced the limitations of his power. From that moment on he was determined to bring KVP, ARP and CHU (a more or less conservative Reformed Party) together in one organization. Above all he had to move carefully since the radicals felt little empathy for this idea. They were afraid that this cooperation would result in a conservative, non-appealing centre party.

Biesheuvel's efforts for this Christian democratic unity finally resulted in him becoming Prime Minister. In a secret meeting in a hotel bar in London in 1970, he was offered this post and a year after the election he was successful in forming a cabinet. To obtain a majority in Parliament, a new party had to participate in the formation of the centre right coalition: DS'70, a rightwing split for the Labour Party (PvdA). Leader of this party was Willem Drees jr., son of former Prime Minister Drees and treasurer-general of Finance. Biesheuvel demanded a strong reduction of the expenditure due to the decline in the economy and the increasing inflation rate.

It was very difficult for Prime Minister Biesheuvel to get the ministers to see eye to eye on important issues. Due to internal discrepancies they were unable to work as a team. The nightlong budget meetings for 1972 and the continual pleading from DS'70 to adopt an income measure to stop inflation, lead to tension. The intentional release of three German war criminals ('Three of Breda') in February 1972 also created political problems. Biesheuvel denied that all these difficulties lead to a bad atmosphere in the cabinet. However in that summer, his team dissolved because these internal quarrels. DS'70 resisted the extra budget cuts for the departments of their two ministers. Besides that, they demanded cabinet assurance to step in and reduce wages. ARP minister Jaap Boersma absolutely refused to comply. He wanted to achieve a voluntary agreement between the social partners (employers and trade unions). Biesheuvel dared not attempt to put more pressure on his minister as Boersma had the ARP party's support. The party unity was not worth a crisis to him. The DS'70 ministers felt they were being forced into more isolation and refused to take responsibility for the wage cuts. They handed in their resignations. This resulted in the Prime Minister blaming them for the crisis and he initially refused an attempt to restore the cabinet. He accused them of negatively affecting the atmosphere in the cabinet and found them "impossible to work with". After repeated urging from the VVD and CHU, they again tried to get DS'70 back on board (one reason being the sudden discovery of extra budget). However, the inflation issue remained a subject of controversy. Briefly they considered forming a minority government with the remaining four parties, but the KVP and ARP were dead set against this step. They wished to change over to a cabinet with the progressive parties PvdA, PPR and D'66. Biesheuvel was not happy about this, as these parties had taken a radical standpoint on some issues and had also criticized his cabinet.

When asked again to lead the party, he had some reservations about working together with the PvdA. He stated that it could be a reason for him to leave politics. Even so, at the election held on November 29th, 1972, he did become leader of the party, including two lower ranking - but nevertheless influenced - candidates who were in favor of working together with the socialists: Willem Aantjes en Jaap Boersma. In a captivating election campaign, the ARP presented a divided vision: Biesheuvel defending his cabinet's policy, while the other two criticized the VVD and dallied with the PvdA. Nevertheless the ARP won a seat, not in the least thanks to the fighting spirit of Biesheuvel.

The following formation of a cabinet was one of 'macabre beauty' according to a later remark by VVD leader Hans Wiegel. The progressive parties refused to negotiate because before the election, the Christian Democratic parties had not wanted to agree to an electoral pact. Mediator Ruppert (ARP) and cabinet formateur Jaap Burger (PvdA) cleverly avoided the formation of a centre right cabinet with support of most members of parliament of the ARP and KVP. In the complex and longstanding formation, Barend Biesheuvel lost the support of the majority of his party. This was caused by a deadlock where Boersma was persuaded to become a minister in the new cabinet without asking the party's leader's, thus Biesheuvel's, permission. He was severely accused by the ARP of this betrayal. But after party associate De Gaay Fortman stated he was willing to become a minister, formateur Burger was able to continue working on establishing a leftwing cabinet. Due to constitutional criteria, after three months Biesheuvel had to choose between becoming a member of Parliament - and thus negotiator during the formation - or becoming the Prime Minister. He chose the latter and therefore lost control of the formation of the cabinet. His successor, Aantjes, was in favor of a cabinet with the leftwing parties and was able to come to an agreement with the KVP. On May 3rd, 1973 a cabinet was formed under the leadership of PvdA leader, Joop den Uyl.

Biesheuvel kept his word and left the political arena as he did not wish to be held accountable for the result of the formation. Despite several attempts by mostly ordinary party members to convince him to return to politics, he stood by his decision and became involved in positions in trade and industry. He achieved several commissionerships and also took on a number of odd jobs for the government. For instance by advising to improve procedures within the European Common Market. Occasionally he was still involved in politics such as during the formation in 1994 when the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), of which the ARP was now part, for the first time ever was threatened not to be part of the government. He critically followed the course of the party, which he accused of being too pragmatic. A surprising reproach, since Biesheuvel was thought of by others as a 'modern pragmatist'. He himself thought that he had practiced Christian principles in politics but had used pious words sparingly.

After much written advice on a variety of subjects, amongst which his beloved Dutch Antilles, Barend Biesheuvel became ill in 2000. He died from cancer in a hospital in Haarlem on April 29th, 2001. He was remembered as a politician who had served the (Christian) democracy with heart and soul. Handsome Barend was the last party leader of the ARP. In a time of secularization he had kept the party alive and kicking. But his leadership, although beloved by all ranks, had its limitations. At decisive moments, Biesheuvel was negatively influenced by his fiery character (he often threatened to resign) and his insecurities. His political influence was therefore limited in spite his impressive presentation as a good looking and charming politician. He can however be praised for striving for more sincerity and candor in public administration, and also pleading for increasing the influence of the voters in decision making for example by establishing a referendum. For this and his commitment-to Developmental Aid, he will especially be remembered.