



PARLEMENT & WETENSCHAP

About Parliament & Science

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Parliament & Science

Since 2011, The Young Academy, KNAW, NWO, and the Universities of the Netherlands have been working with the Dutch House of Representatives to give scientific knowledge a more prominent place in the work of Parliament. After a pilot phase, this collaboration was enshrined in the Parliament & Science Agreement (1 October 2014) and as of 1 January 2019, it was stepped up. The number of science organisations has also been increased: TNO joined the partners in early 2019 and the Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres (NFU) in early 2020 ¹.

The challenge

'Fact-free politics is of no use to anyone. To build bridges across the swirling waters that divide these two worlds, we need solid bridgeheads with a deep knowledge base. This requires politicians to understand the workings and natural limitations of science, and to grasp its intrinsic uncertainties. Politicians must learn to have 100% faith in researchers who say they are 50% sure of something.

Researchers, in turn, need to realise how much pressure politicians are under to make choices and take decisions based on what can sometimes be very limited information and generalisations. This is where there is a gap between professional doubters and professional deciders.'

(President Robbert Dijkgraaf of the KNAW speaking at the inauguration of the Parliament & Science pilot, November 2011)

¹ KNAW. Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences; NFU: Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres; NWO: Dutch Research Council (NWO); UNL: Universities of The Netherlands.

Tools

- Network surveys: Survey of scientists with expertise on a current topic
- Science fact sheet: state of knowledge in a particular field
- Breakfast meeting: Informal get-together between MPs and scientists
- Parliament & Science mini-symposiums: A short meeting about a significant scientific development with potentially high impact, relevant to multiple House Committees
- Scientists' assessment: assessment of policy and legislative proposals based based on Article 3.1 of the Government Accounts Act (*Comptabiliteitswet*)
- Monitoring research news: The staff of the Analysis and Research Department (the 'Knowledge Coordinators'), who are responsible for providing information to House Committees, receive information about current scientific research on subjects that are relevant for the House of Representatives.

In many cases, a network survey provides the names of researchers who then write a fact sheet and are invited to a roundtable discussion or breakfast meeting.

By way of illustration

During the 2022-2023 session of Parliament, 26 network surveys were conducted. There were 21 roundtable and other discussions on the topics of these surveys. A total of 18 scientific fact sheets were written covering 12 of the topics. Eight scientists' assessments were completed or initiated and two breakfast meetings were held. The mini-symposium took place on 10 May.

New tools are regularly explored and trialled with the House of Representatives' Analysis and Research Department.

Working method

Since 1 January 2019, the science organisations have funded a full-time Parliament & Science liaison officer. They also invest in support for the liaison officer by staff from within their organisations. The liaison officer works with staff from the Analysis and Research Department, such as the knowledge coordinators.

The Analysis and Research Department (DAO)

The Analysis and Research Department was established on 1 September 2017, in line with advice from the Liaison Group on Reinforcing the House's Knowledge and Research Role. Each House Committee was allocated a knowledge coordinator and an information specialist, who act as information and knowledge brokers for MPs. DAO seconded the relevant members of staff to the Committees. Each Committee also has a budget for procuring knowledge and prepares an annual knowledge agenda specifying topics on which additional knowledge needs to be acquired. DAO organises, advises, and manages the knowledge budget.

At the end of 2021, the House decided to expand DAO by 10 FTEs so as to further improve its support function for MPs. EU advisers were added to DAO in 2022, with their number being increased in 2023. A new position was also introduced in 2023, that of policy lawyers to support the legislative rapporteurs.

Cases

Defence Policy Memorandum

At the request of the Standing Committee for Defence, three researchers examined the (then) new government's Defence Policy Memorandum. In just four A4s, the Memorandum was completely panned (with arguments): no relationship to NATO and EU policies, no relationship to national security policy, no measurable targets, etc. At the debate with the minister, 12 (!) parliamentary parties were present, all of them referencing the researchers' findings. During the debate, the minister was compelled to make various commitments: measurable targets, and comprehensive evaluation. Subsequently, a motion by the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) was adopted instructing the government to henceforth learn from the scientists' assessment when drawing up Defence Policy Memorandums.

Climate Policy Monitoring

The House of Representatives is briefed annually on progress towards achieving the climate targets, in particular the agreed reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. At the request of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, two researchers studied this method of monitoring. In their [scientists' assessment](#), they concluded that the House of Representatives needed to monitor *more broadly* (system transitions rather than emissions), *more frequently* (than just annually), and with a *longer time horizon* (2050 rather than 2030). In the light of these observations, the House Committee invited the researchers, along with a number of colleagues from various disciplines, to contribute ideas on how to implement these recommendations. The House Committee placed the topic of 'System transitions and climate policy after 2030' on the agenda for debate. In preparation for a debate with the minister, a breakfast meeting with scientists and a round-table discussion (with the authors of the scientists' assessment) were held on that topic in early 2023.

Long-term Approach to COVID-19

At the initiative of a university professor, and espoused by the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Sport, two scientists – including the professor – conducted a scientists’ assessment of the proposed long-term approach to COVID-19. The [result](#) was presented to a sizeable delegation from the House Committee on 12 May 2022. When asked about the findings, the minister [provided a response](#) and a large number of MPs made good use of it during the roundtable discussion on 16 May and the debate on 16 June. The media, including the *Volkskrant* newspaper, made multiple references to the scientists’ assessment.

Placement of children in care

At the request of the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Sport, two researchers produced a [fact sheet on the placement of children in care](#), i.e. removal from their parents (published in early 2022). The issue was simultaneously under discussion by the Standing Committee on Justice and Security, with members of that committee also drawing on the analysis in the fact sheet. After a journalist discovered the fact sheet, a wave of media attention followed.

Nuclear energy

Did it start with Arjen Lubach’s TV show? At a certain point, the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) placed the issue of nuclear power back on the House of Representatives’ agenda. Based on a network survey, three researchers were invited to each produce a scientific fact sheet on the [practical aspects](#) (construction, costs, waste); the [‘state of knowledge’](#); and the [place of nuclear energy in the energy mix](#). After delivery of the fact sheets, MPs Yeşligöz-Zegerius and Mulder submitted a [motion instructing the minister to carry out an investigation](#). That [investigation](#) appeared on 23 September 2020, shortly after attention to nuclear power had again been

called for in the Parliamentary Debate on the Speech from the Throne. A roundtable discussion took place on 2 December 2020, to which one of the fact sheet authors was also invited. On 9 December, the Montesquieu Institute organised a [current affairs debate](#) on the topic, in collaboration with Parliament & Science. The Coalition Agreement of the fourth Rutte government included the aim of constructing two new nuclear power stations.

National Growth Fund

In 2021, at the request of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, two researchers examined the government's intention to establish a National Growth Fund that, over a five-year period, would devote 20 billion euros to investment specifically in research, development, and innovation. The [scientists' assessment](#) was conducted in early 2021 and presented to MPs in early 2022. There was an interesting side effect: the assessment also proved very useful as a criterion for the numerous new funds that the government had announced in its Coalition Agreement shortly before.

Livestock farm buy-outs

In late 2020, two researchers examined the rationale for the buy-out scheme targeting livestock farms near Natura 2000 areas (a key element of the policy aimed at reducing nitrogen emissions). Their [scientists' assessment](#), carried out in a very brief period of time, was presented to the House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The researchers' [critical findings](#) have been widely embraced by MPs and are being used, among other things, as a benchmark for evaluating policy. The scientists' assessment received attention in a number of professional journals and on the [Argos radio news programme \(VPRO\)](#).

Article 68 of the Dutch Constitution

Article 68 of the Dutch Constitution states: *'Ministers and State Secretaries shall provide, orally or in writing, the Houses, either separately or in joint session, with any information requested by one or more members, provided that the provision of such information does not conflict with the interests of the State.'* In late 2019, the Standing Committee on Finance requested position papers on this article of the Constitution, given the government's reluctance to share information with parliament. Four authors were invited to provide their views on the issue. The four decided to produce a single joint [position paper](#). The document provided fuel for a truly fundamental debate with the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, which in turn led to unanimously adopted motions setting homework for the minister.

De Volkskrant, 12 January 2021.

'... Earlier this year, four constitutional law professors made short work of Rutte's interpretation of Article 68 of the Constitution, which deals with the duty to inform the Senate and House of Representatives. According to the professors, providing documents can only be refused if 'the interests of the state' are at stake. The fact that Rutte likes to prepare decisions in seclusion cannot be allowed to play any role at all.

The House of Representatives has also had enough of the reluctance to share internal documents. Two motions tabled by Christian Democrat MP Pieter Omtzigt requiring the government to interpret Article 68 less restrictively from now on were adopted unanimously in February....'

At the request of the Standing Committee on Home Affairs, the fact sheet was [updated](#) in 2023.

Nitrogen

After the [Council of State's ruling on the Nitrogen Action Programme](#) in May 2019, a network survey was carried out and three fact sheets were written. In October 2019 – precisely at the point when the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) came under fire in the media for its system for calculating nitrogen emissions – TNO launched its [fact sheet](#); this came at a very relevant time and generated a lot of publicity. The two other [fact sheets](#) on this issue (see under ‘Climate, environment and energy’) also backed up RIVM. Thanks in part to the network survey, a roundtable discussion with a balanced programme was quickly arranged by the responsible House of Representatives’ Committee.

Digital Future

On 4 June 2019, the House of Representatives adopted a motion by MP Kees Verhoeven et al. The motion was the prelude to the establishment of the Temporary Committee on the Digital Future. The Knowledge Coordinator immediately involved the science organisations in the (preparatory) work of this committee. A link was then established with the Digital Society programme of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), and discussions took place between the researchers involved in that programme and the House of Representatives’ Committee. Consideration was also given to a literature review, to the recruitment of a parliamentary historian, and to the composition of the external liaison group. A network survey was prepared on the topic and [scientific fact sheets](#) (see under ‘Digitalisation’) were produced. In October 2020, the House of Representatives decided to set up a Standing Committee on Digital Affairs, in line with the advice of the temporary committee.

European Central Bank

In March 2019, three researchers produced [fact sheets](#) (see under ‘Finance’) on the interest rate policy of the European Central Bank (ECB), ahead of a working visit by the Standing Committee on Finance to the Bank. One of these fact sheets formed a central feature in successive debates with the Minister of Finance: a request to press in the EU context for a review of the ECB’s monetary policy – something that appeared not to have been done previously. The author of the fact sheet was then asked to lead a group of ‘eminent professors’ advising the House of Representatives on ECB policy.

Climate Agreement

A common complaint about the Climate Agreement was that no scientists had been invited to join the ‘sector tables’. In the spring of 2019, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs and Climate Policy held six roundtable discussions on the draft Climate Agreement (five on the themes of the tables and one on horizontal topics such as finance and education) in which science was indeed given a prominent place. Of the 23 scientists invited to these discussions, 21 were nominated by us. The scientists were found to be convincing and lucid. Observation: the conversations with the scientists were particularly interesting because they interlinked themes.

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