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Monarchies, States Generals and Parliaments: The Netherlands in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

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Some years ago, in the introduction to a paper given to the Low Countries Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, Professor Koenigsberger was described as being probably the only historian who had worked in every major Habsburg archive in Europe. It is this impressive range of historical experience that is brought to bear in this book, which builds upon his extensive research and writings on the constitutional and institutional history of the Habsburg monarchies. The synopsis of the book on the dust jacket comments that ?this book charts the history of the States General ? the parliament ? of the Netherlands and its relations with two phases of monarchical rule?. It goes on to add that by 1600 ?the United Provinces became a parliamentary regime, governed by the States General?. However, this is not a close study of the mechanics of the institution or of particular meetings, like some of the research on French representative assemblies, such as that of J. Michael Hayden and J. Russell Major, although parallels could be drawn with the latter?s *Representative Government in Early Modern France*, (Yale University Press; New Haven and London, 1980). Rather, it is a study of the evolving political system within the Netherlands during the early modern period and the role which came to be assumed by the States General.

At the heart of the book is the theme of *dominum politicum et regale*, the subject of Koenigsberger?s inaugural lecture to the chair of History at the University of London in 1975. This is the balance in terms of power between the ruler and the representative assemblies, which developed in different ways in Europe from the fifteenth century -- when Sir John Fortescue coined the phrase -- to the eighteenth century. In France, the crown assumed more extensive powers, becoming a *dominium regale* and it came to be perceived that the crown could tax at will; elsewhere in Europe the *dominium politicum et regale*, where the crown did not possess such rights, was more common. It was a limited or mixed regime, in which the ideal was for the representative assemblies and the monarchy to co-operate for the common good. Privileges were won and defended, as the means by which to maintain that balance between the prince and his subjects. But it was not a relationship that went unchallenged. Charles the Bold?s policy of conquest and subjugation in relation to the Duchy of Guelders demonstrates that the rights of a province could be simply set aside by a strong prince. Even more powerfully, the relationship could be seen to collapse, as during the period of the Revolt when the Duke of Alva was governor-general in the Netherlands.

Dominium politicum et regale was also a system that was easily adapted to the multiple monarchies of early modern Europe. The prince swore to uphold the privileges of particular constituent parts of his realms and could in this way easily add to his territories, while retaining this balance between the representatives and the government within each component. Koenigsberger comments in the prologue that ?a comprehensive comparative history of states generals would therefore approximate to a comprehensive comparative political history of early modern Europe?. In the absence of such a study, Koenigsberger has decided to concentrate on the evolving relationship between the rulers of the Netherlands and its representative assembly over a two hundred year period.

Koenigsberger traces the development of the States General from its beginnings in the fifteenth century to the end of the sixteenth century, when two separate institutions had emerged as a consequence of the Revolt of the Netherlands. In the north the States General was the governing body of ?a parliamentary regime?, whereas in the south the States General fell into abeyance in the early seventeenth century and was subject to the wishes of the Habsburg monarchy. In some ways this is a traditional Whiggish account of the rise of a parliamentary institution, with the future importance and implications of concessions and privileges being emphasised.

Although representatives from the provinces had in earlier times met to discuss matters relating to the coinage or trade, the origins of the States General itself are traced back to the meeting of January-February 1464. It was this meeting which first dealt with political matters, mediating in the dispute between Duke Philip and his son Charles. It was not, however, a role performed again at subsequent meetings during his reign, but in 1465 the States General was asked directly for a financial grant: no doubt as a matter of convenience, rather than resorting to the more usual method of approaching individual provincial assemblies. At this stage the body was not called the States General and only consisted of the representatives of certain towns of the Netherlands. The most complete meeting of the States General was not held until 1476, with delegates from Brabant, Flanders, Limburg, Outremeuse, Artois, Lille-Douai-Orchies, the Somme towns, towns of Picardie, Ponthiue, Hainaut, Holland, Friesland, Namur, Luxembourg and newly-conquered Guelders. It was not merely the comprehensive character of this meeting that was important; it was also marked by opposition to the spiralling military and financial demands of Charles the Bold and his hectoring approach. As a consequence the States General, while protesting their loyalty, rejected the Duke?s demands.

It was the turn in the tide of events that gave this act of defiance and resistance to princely authority its significance and precedence. Following the defeat of the Burgundian forces and the Duke?s death at the battle of Nancy in January 1477, ?men with totally different motivations would look to the States General as the instrument to achieve their aims and as the one fixed and acceptable institution in a suddenly fluid and frightening situation?. In the wake of the French invasion, the States General were granted, in the Great Privilege of Mary of Burgundy, the right to assemble without ducal summons and their permission was required for any defensive or offensive war. As Koenigsberger points out, few of the articles of the Great

Privilege were unprecedented or unusual but what happened in 1477 was that these rights were extended to all of the provinces. In sum, the Great Privilege marked a shift in the balance of *dominium politicum et regale* , although in reality the States General were not able to capitalise and assert these rights, in particular the right to self-assembly.

Further developments on the road towards a parliamentary regime took place under the Habsburgs. In order to obtain a financial grant in 1512, Margaret of Austria responded to concerns about the waste in military expenditure by agreeing that in the future, the Council and Estates should appoint, supervise and reform the *gendarmerie*. In 1557 the government, with their experience of the Spanish Cortes, argued that the delegates to the States should be kept together for discussion and should have full powers to discuss relevant issues and make binding decisions. But this was a policy which backfired for the government, as the States General now provided a forum in which rights and privileges could be discussed, and in which matters of state were also beginning to be debated. At the same time the States General ventured into the arena of foreign affairs and defence and, by agreeing to the ?novennial *aide*?, into financial administration. These were positions that came to be developed during the course of the Revolt.

A sense of common purpose and identity is another theme that comes through in this monograph. Koenigsberger argues that few monarchies in early modern Europe were national or unitary, but were instead usually composite states, that could often be linguistically and ethnically divided. In this sense the Netherlands was little different from other states. In the wake of the events of 1477, ?it was the estates of the provinces which, for all their preoccupation with their local interests and privileges, wanted the Netherlands, the *pays de pardeça*, to survive as a political entity?. It was shared anti-Habsburg interests that brought the Netherlands together again in 1576, but it is perhaps this sense of common purpose that was ultimately destroyed by the Revolt.

It was in the area of religion that the relationship between the monarch and the States General came under stress and the mutual trust required for *dominium politicum et regale* foundered. Philip had made it clear in dismissing the complaints of the estates of Brabant in 1562, that he regarded it as possible for privileges to be set aside, on the grounds that ?cum summa sit ratio quae pro religione facit? and ?salus populi suprema lex sit?. With the king?s uncompromising religious stance, such views had serious implications and this was why, Koenigsberger argues, the conflict with the States led to war and made compromise impossible. For, ?those Netherlanders who believed in the fundamental nature of their privileges, even if they shared the same religion, could not accept a ruler who claimed powers of omnipotence. However much he protested that, in his actions, he was representing God and his church, he could no longer be trusted? (p. 204).

And yet the religious factors that characterised the outbreak of the Revolt and the subsequent course of events tend to be marginalised. The complexity of issues and motives which lay behind the outbreak of the Iconoclastic Fury is discussed but the radicalism of the image breakers is downplayed: ?they were not revolutionaries like the Huguenots in France?. While it is true that many did not support the revolutionary stance taken by the city of Valenciennes, the Calvinists' direct action in seizing churches for worship, including Antwerp, can not be lightly dismissed. It is this radical agenda that alienated sympathisers with their cause and led to the movement?s ultimate failure in 1566-67. It is the political paralysis that the events created which is at the heart of Koenigsberger?s analysis. Certainly, Margaret of Parma faced calls from the States of Holland and the Knights of the Golden Fleece for the inquisition and the placards to be suspended and States General to be assembled, but the author does not consider the more radical constitutional claims being made at the time; for example, the Protestant Nicholas de Hames reasserted the right of the States General to convene itself. Instead we have a picture merely of inertia in central government, whereas at a local level routine business continued relatively unimpeded.

Yet it was religion that made the return to the *dominium politicum et regale* of Charles V ultimately impossible. As the delegates at the Conference at Breda in 1575 came to realise, Philip?s opposition to any form of religious co-existence between the Catholics and the Calvinists meant that a return to princely sovereignty could not be contemplated by the Calvinist sympathisers among the Estates. The actions of the Spanish troops at Aalst, and then at Antwerp, led to a united front being taken against the Habsburgs in the

1576 Pacification of Ghent, in which the States General assumed a central role in government, with the king?s council of state in effect being subordinate to it. However, it was the practical failure of the religious clauses of the Pacification and the rejection of Orange?s policy of religious co-existence (*religionsvrede*) that ultimately wrecked the united front of the provinces and led to the demise of the traditional form of the States General. The emergence of a ?Closer Union? with the Union of Utrecht, with its own war council and executive, following on from the Union of Arras, symbolised the fragmentation of the combined front against Habsburg authority. The ?merger? of the Union of Utrecht with the States General in 1580 coincided not merely with disappearance of the last vestiges of trust between the crown and the States General, but also marked the demise of the old representative institution. With the Act of Abjuration the States General assumed sovereignty over ?The United Provinces of the Netherlands?. By concentrating on the political twists and turns that led to this outcome, there is a tendency for the religious factors ? such as the Calvinist regime in Ghent ? to be dealt with cursorily, while Groningen and the Rennenberg revolt are not covered at all. As a result only part of the wider picture is established.

Monarchies, States Generals and Parliaments provides us with the first detailed study exploring the complex emergence and development of the States General. It offers an institutional overview of the political development of the Netherlands as it evolved from a composite monarchy during the fifteenth century into two separate states by the beginning of the seventeenth century. But the monograph also reflects Professor Koenigsberger?s breadth of research, in that this is an institutional history told against the background of not only the changing political circumstances in the Low Countries, but also within the wider context of the Habsburg monarchia. This is therefore an important scholarly contribution, not only to the study of the Low Countries in the early modern period, but also to Habsburg government in general.

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