
Economic Fluctuations and Government Policy in the Netherlands in the Late XVIth Century

Charles Verlinden
Emeritus, University of Ghent

In the second half of the XVIth century there were two major cyclical harvest crises in the Netherlands, occurring between 1556-7 and between 1586-7. In the first case the government reacted with considerable delay, introducing measures only in 1561, whereas in the second they intervened more rapidly in 1588-9. In 1561 the government attempted to reduce wages by an ordinance (known as a *placard*), but in the end this was not issued. In 1588-9, on the other hand, the ordinances were promulgated but never applied. The papers collected in the series 'Papiers de l'Etat et de l'Audience' in the General Archives of the Kingdom in Brussels contain much important material for the understanding of the policy adopted by the central government. These documents have been published (C. Verlinden & J. Craeybeckx, *Prijzen- en Lonenpolitiek in de Nederlanden in 1561 en 1588-9: Onuitgegeven adviezen, ontwerpen en ordonnanties* - Commission Royale d'Histoire, 1962). In the present paper they will be examined for the light which they throw on collective attitudes and behaviour.

In 1561 the Estates of Brabant wanted to persuade the central government to reduce wages throughout the Netherlands. Wages had risen so steeply that the farmers were complaining that they could not even take on farm-lads. Although the price of food had returned to normal, the wage-earners continued to use the earlier shortages as an excuse for keeping wages high. They were able to succeed in this because the heavy mortality of the previous years had badly affected the labour market. The mortality was due to the fact that the rural workers had been requisitioned for digging trenches, repairing the roads and carrying out other construction work during the hostilities which preceded the peace of Cateau-Cambresis. At the time poverty was

widespread, and infectious diseases had made great ravages. As a result the land ceased to be worked and the labourers preferred to spend the day amusing themselves:

'... they work for one or two days after spending some three or four in the ale houses and taverns, nor will they accept common beer such as other good men and even many rich citizens are content to drink, but they too drink more than they did some years back by half and more, and still do they demand that they be given double beer and other benefits or else they will do no work'.

In short, if the proposal can be believed, the workers wanted the tavern to be placed near their work-place and at the employer's expense. In order to put an end to the situation, the Estates of Brabant proposed that there be a maximum wage of 2.5 *patards* a day in winter and 3.5 *patards* in summer for all labourers, reapers, haymakers and woodcutters, and 'other similar crafts'. In the towns, wages would be increased by one *patard*. The skilled workers in the towns would have to be content with the same wages that 'such workers and mechanical folk have been accustomed to earn over the past ten, twenty and thirty years'. The project put forward by the Estates had clearly been the work of the permanent deputation of the clergy, nobility and magistracy of the four leading towns — the landlords, in other words. The guilds were not consulted, so we cannot tell what was the attitude of the wage-earners.

Margaret of Parma, the governor-general, put the proposal to the Privy Council, and the latter pointed to the great regional variations in the cost of living. For this reason the central government decided to take advice from the local authorities. The Estates of Artois argued that wage rates should be set by the individual town and rural authorities, and that a single uniform standard would bear little relation to the realities of local situations. There was need for measures to counter both shortages and luxury, and it was also necessary to restrain begging and vagabondage, both of which would increase the available labour supply. The Great Council of Malines, which acted as the provincial council in this lordship, considered that the wages proposed by the Estates of Brabant were too low, and raised them by one *patard*. After consulting the city magistrates, they also recommended that wages be considered in terms of specific jobs and by the year, which clearly had the interests of the urban craftsmen and town officers in view. The lieutenant-governor of Lille proposed that prices should be controlled, rather than wages. This official seems to have been motivated by a quite exceptional sense of social welfare. He expressed himself in the following manner:

'... although I stand to be corrected, it seems to me that whereas we are at present about to limit the wages and workdays of the aforementioned workers of the districts of Lille, Douai and Orchies, in other times of high prices such wages have not proved adequate to meet the needs of the workers, their wives and their children, so that they are forced into poverty and to beg for their bread

from the upright citizens and live on their charity, and those of an youthful age may not thereafter prove capable of breaking this habit of mendicity...'

The lieutenant-governor also believed that limiting the workers' daily wages would cause them to work only on a piece-work basis, and also to make arbitrary demands for payment. The Court of Utrecht believed that the crisis should be allowed to work itself out, and said that it was simply 'the work of the Lord'. But the town notables also expressed particular concern over the hostile attitude of the workers due to the influence of Anabaptism. They proposed that the employers' control over their workers should be increased by means of a system of work permits. Certain towns also stressed the need to limit wages in the countryside, whereas it was often the case that the rural authorities demanded action in the towns to prevent rural labour being drawn off there.

In the end the Privy Council drew up a project which was less rigorous than the one proposed by the Estates of Brabant, set different standards for the towns and the countryside, but left the controlling of prices to the town authorities. The Privy Council did, however, insist on the 'brutal' and 'indecent' nature of the workers' demands, and openly took the side of the employers who were quite unable, it believed, to meet the demands of the farm labourers and workers. The latter were believed to be holding the farmers to ransom. In fact, they were really adopting the social attitudes of the Estates of Brabant, which had started the whole business. But when it came to wage levels, the Council slightly increased the limits which the Brabanters had put forward. Should one interpret in the same way the proposed prohibition on workers leaving their masters or a job without their employers' permission, and the threat of imposing arbitrary and unspecified punishments on them? Vagabonds were to be whipped and forced to work on public construction projects or could even be sent to the galleys. Where? There were none in the Netherlands, but it is clear that the King of Spain could well have made use of such a measure in times of need! Able-bodied beggars were also to be whipped, unless they could provide acceptable excuses. The alms-houses were forbidden to accept any but the genuine poor, while anyone caught stealing fruit or produce in the fields was to be severely punished. Strong or expensive beers were no longer to be sold, at least not in the rural areas. One really does get the impression that the Privy Council tried to quiet the social animosity contained in these privileged demands which the Brabanters had made. This may well in the end have been why the King did not promulgate the *placard*.

In general, then, the landowners seem to have been deeply preoccupied by the rise in wages which had occurred in the first of these cyclical crises. A mason, for example, who earned 27 Brabant *gros* in 1556 was receiving 45 by 1561, and there are many other similar examples. In fact, the Brabant Estates in 1561 were proposing a return to wage levels of 1513, which meant

that not only the fact that the cost of living had increased twofold in the meantime, but also the massive rise in bread prices since 1556-7, was completely overlooked.

The ordinances of 1588-9 followed the economic and demographic slump which had accompanied the reconquest of the southern Netherlands by Alexander Farnese, and which also coincided with the cyclical crisis of 1586-7. This time the initiative was taken by the central government. A *placard* issued on 6th April 1588 ordered all the main towns to take steps to reduce wages and prices. On 21st April the government turned to the provincial Estates, to the royal councillors and officers of Flanders, Brabant, Artois, Hainaut, Luxembourg, Namur, Valenciennes, Tournai, Lille, Douai, Orchies, Malines and Gueldre — in other words, of the reconquered Netherlands, rather than to the whole country. The local authorities were ordered to establish rates for prices and wages. Wages had to be set at two-thirds of the 1588 level. On this occasion, the government's reasons were drawn solely from the economic situation, without any reference to the workers and farm labourers being to blame, as had been the case in the Brabant proposals of 1561. 'As on the occasion of the widespread failures and small harvests affecting nearly every type of grain and fruit of the soil which have occurred in the past years, causing such shortage of the same and consequently of all other things, it has been forced, both out of tolerance and through political ordinance, to allow prices to rise, together with rates and wages, and all things including the days of work and toil of the people, so that they might have the means to live'. The government was aware that things had been allowed to go as the economic situation dictated, but they now claimed merit for this, and clearly when they referred to 'political ordinances' they did not mean a *placard*, since we know that no such edict was made during the crisis of 1561, but rather their own good political sense and humanity (their 'toleration'). But since prices had fallen in 1589 'not only by half but by three-quarters and more of their former value' — which seems to have been highly optimistic when one looks at things other than land and land-rents — there was now cause for lowering 'wages, days of work, and fees' and reducing them to their former levels.

'However, we are led to believe that as each follows his avarice and seeks to maintain the price and rate of his gains, and will only be obliged by the necessity hereafter described, and concerning which diverse remonstrances and petitions have to us been made, and to remedy which we have found it fitting to impose policy and controls in both the towns and the countryside with regard to the generality of foodstuffs, crafts, machinery, wages and labour, so that all artisans, craftsmen, field labourers, drivers, waggoners, bargemen, and other workers, together with inn and tavern keepers, and those who sell food, drink and other commodities in public, may become accustomed to take restricted wages and profits and to be content with a just and reasonable gain such as is not in any way excessive, this being the only manner by which may be maintained the poor

and the rich, the rentier and the craftsman, the farmer and his labourer, the shop-keeper and the artisan, the traveller and the innkeeper, and thereby to preserve between each that correct and civil proportion which is due'.

One can see that the government, which had nearly lost the whole of the Netherlands, was concerned to seem to be moderate towards the part which was left. It was also encouraged by Alexander Farnese, the man responsible for the reconquest of the South — the 'lieutenant, governor and captain of our country in these parts'. This time it was a matter of trying to keep all the social groups as content as possible in the hope of rallying them. This at least was the intention, but when it came to specific measures none other could be found than those already proposed in 1561 — that is wage cuts, although this time only by one third. It is also true that this time some prices were included as well, but only those of a small range of foodstuffs: 'It is also required that care should be taken by bakers, brewers and other similar tradesmen to see that they do not sell their bread or drinks at unreasonable prices, nor that the bakers should alter the weight of their loaves, either by increasing or reducing it, as they have done in the past when grain has been cheaper than at present, and this is for the relief of the people, and similarly the brewers must produce the same quality of beer and drinks, be they strong, medium or light, and we charge our officers and magistrates to see that they do their duty'.

It was the price of the peoples' food that had to come down, then, that was seen as essential if wages were to be reduced and to bring 'relief to the poor people', whom they had learned to fear in the years which had preceded Farnese's reconquest. The conclusion of the *placard* is quite explicit on this: 'And with regard to what is demanded by the artisans, the labourers and other craftsmen, who have acquired a taste for the exorbitant gains which they are at present making, it would seem that they desire to form a conspiracy or a monopoly (a thing of the greatest prejudice in any republic, execrable in the name of law and contrary to all principles of good justice)'. There does then seem to have been a move towards what we might, at the risk of committing a grave anachronism, describe as a sort of trade union action. As one would expect, however, this came from the urban guilds, not from the rural labourers, although the latter were the ones mainly affected by the edict. This can be seen from the fact that the magistrates were ordered 'to seek out in particular the authors, be they the doyens or masters of the guilds, who are responsible for the aforementioned evil'.

On the 6th May wages were controlled in Brussels, but no mention was made of prices. In Antwerp on 30th June the same happened. The city magistrates had been informed by a preliminary inquiry of wage levels in Antwerp and in Lierre, Herentals, Turnhout, Hoogstraten and the flat country side. Ghent followed on 21st July. On 15th July the Council of Flanders made a move, after issuing 'provisional' ordinances for Ghent, Bruges, the Franc de Bruges,

the Pays of Waes, Alost, Ninove, Menin, and Wervicq. On 2nd September a regional ordinance for Flanders was issued. Douai and Orchies showed greater concern over prices, as did Artois on 5th September.

But the government had few illusions as to how these measures would be applied. In the summer of 1589 it began thinking of other measures. On 6th July the Council of Namur reported that in Namur the *placard* of 21 April 1588 was not being applied, and proposed a new set of wage rates. On 5th December the government agreed that wages had not fallen and again ordered that they be reduced by one third. Nevertheless they did in fact continue to follow prices until the end of the century. The statement issued on 5th December again shows that the government left the economic situation to follow its own course. During the cyclical crisis which had given rise to the vain efforts at control in 1561, the government had tried to influence grain prices by importing cereals from the Baltic. But on this occasion it only spoke of 'the providence and liberal hand of God' which had seen to it that 'various types of foodstuffs have returned to a just and reasonable price, in particular all forms of grain, vegetables and fruits of the soil; from which the people preserve and nourish themselves'. But the important thing, in order that 'the poor should be preserved together with the rich' was that wages should fall. One could even say that as far as the government was concerned increasing wages was the only cause of inflation. But, they added: 'it is to our great regret that we learn that the negligence of our officials and magistrates (even though some have begun to put their hand to this matter) has meant that our objective has not been attained and that the rates of wages and recompenses, and the gains of the labourers, the craftsmen, servants and other mechanical folk have remained at the same level as during the aforesaid shortage of grain, and in some places even increased, to the great harm of the generality of our peoples, and that they will increase even further if they are not yet again constrained by the application of our aforementioned *placard*' (referring to that of 6th April 1588). The objective in renewing the order reducing wages for labourers and domestic servants seems rather astonishing in view of the wording in which it was couched: 'in order to observe and maintain some degree of civil proportion and equality':

The government's action in both 1561 and 1588 did not prove effective, but the attitudes of the central government and of the social classes which found expression in local reactions are clearly revealed in the documents which reached the Privy Council.