

Government schools or Free schools? Abraham Kuyper addresses a long-standing controversy in the Dutch parliament

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The Netherlands experienced a struggle for educational freedom between 1840 and 1920. Although this freedom was guaranteed in the Constitution of 1848, the ruling elite insisted for many decades that only public schools, which were operated by the government and consigned to religious neutrality, qualified for public funding. Private, religious schools were excluded. This meant that parents who used a private Christian school in fact paid double for the education of their children: first as taxpayers for the public school, and then for their own school. Christian parents in the lower classes thus faced a dilemma: either education for their children in the spirit of home and church, involving expensive tuition fees; or education in the religiously neutral public school, which was free of charge; or else no school attendance at all for their children (school attendance was not compulsory). A foremost champion of parity treatment of both types of schools was the journalist-theologian Dr. Abraham Kuyper. For many years he and his followers campaigned against the inequality, particularly since it jeopardized freedom of conscience. They challenged the claim that education could be religiously neutral. Kuyper spoke often about the issue, both as a member of parliament and from 1901 to 1905 as prime minister. He did that so eloquently that a selection of quotations from his parliamentary speeches is worth taking note of. The struggle was ultimately resolved when both public and private schools were accorded equal funding from the public treasury.

Key terms: educational freedom; Dutch schools struggle; Dutch parliament; Abraham Kuyper; Jan Kappeyne van de Coppello; pluralism; pillarization.

Introduction

The pleasure of being involved in translation projects, as has been my good fortune since retiring from teaching, is that you come across fascinating texts

that you might otherwise have missed.¹ I was recently asked to comb the 223 published works of the scholar-statesman Abraham Kuyper for texts in which this nineteenth-century figure had expressed his thoughts on pluriformity in education. That I came across many such texts was not surprising, since the anti-revolutionary movement and the Anti-Revolutionary Party,² of which Kuyper was the undisputed leader and spokesman, owed its origin and longevity to what is often referred to as “the eighty-years’ war for freedom of education.”³ In the end I focussed on two main sources: Kuyper’s speeches in parliament, published (i) in a single volume covering his first term as a member of the Second Chamber or lower house (Kuyper 1890), and (ii) in a set of four volumes covering his years as a member and as prime minister (Kuyper 1908). Perusing these volumes impressed me with the oratorical skill displayed there in the tone and logic – and, yes, passion – of the debates. The intent of this essay is to give translated extracts from some of the more characteristic speeches delivered by Kuyper on the subject. They offer a window into Dutch parliamentary proceedings of over a century ago and provide a taste of the style and level of argumentation used at the time.

Setting the stage

Let us first listen to an exchange between two leading champions in the debate as they address a chronic bone of contention since the middle of the 19th century: *Should elementary schools be public or private? Next: Should schools be paid for from the public treasury or from the private purse?* Implicit is the question: Should private school supporters pay twice for schooling, first with taxes that support the government schools, then with their own money for their own schools?

The champion of private schools is Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). He is trained as a theologian and his decade as a minister in the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (‘Dutch Reformed Church’) has established his reputation as a consummate pulpiteer. He has recently given up his status as a clergyman in Amsterdam for a seat in the Second Chamber. He is editor-in-chief of the daily

¹ This is an expanded version of a paper read at the annual meeting of CAANS, Brock University, 28 May 2014.

² “Anti-revolutionary” in this context meant opposition, not to revolutions, but to the specific set of ideas or ideology popularized in the Age of Enlightenment and implemented in the French Revolution of 1789. Today we call it “modernity”. See Kuyper (1879, § 5; 2015, xii, 1-3).

³ This name, alluding to the Eighty Years’ War for Dutch independence from Spain (1568-1648), was often used by proponents of free, non-government schools to designate the *schoolstrijd*, i.e., their struggle for equal standing with public schools, a struggle that began with the first alternative schools in the 1840s and ended in victory by the so-called Pacification of 1920.

newspaper *De Standaard* ('The Standard') and the church weekly *De Heraut* ('The Herald'). Bram is also very much a family man, the father of six children. He hails from the middle classes and prides himself on being a spokesman for the common man, the *kleine luyden*.



Figure 1. A portrait of Abraham Kuyper. Source:

http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/rome002erfl01_01/rome002erfl01_01_0032.php.

The champion of the public school is the barrister Jan Kappeyne van de Coppello (1822-1895). He prides himself on being a progressive liberal.⁴ Jan is a confirmed

⁴ Dutch liberalism in the early part of the 19th century favoured small government, private initiative and free enterprise. By the 1870s, as the Netherlands began to industrialize in earnest, more liberals were found, especially among the younger members, who leaned toward granting government a larger role in trade and industry, socio-economic affairs and public education.

bachelor and has the reputation of being one of the keenest debaters in the house. Though not of aristocratic stock, he does belong to the ruling elite and many expect him to become government leader after the next general elections.



Figure 2. A portrait of Jan Kappeyne van de Coppello. Source: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/alqr001disp03_01/alqr001disp03_01_0015.php.

Kuyper and Kappeyne have both earned a doctorate at Leiden University and are personally on good terms with each other (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 962). But in politics they square off like fighting cocks. Kappeyne looks forward to enlightened action by the central government that will at last establish a definitive elementary education system for all children in the land. Kuyper is the anti-revolutionary who is intent on preserving alternative, Christian schools available to children from all parents, at the latter's choice, even from the poorest families that can ill afford tuition fees.

Throughout, however, liberals held to a pragmatic and secular approach to politics in which religious principles were not supposed to influence public policy.

In the lower house, on December 8, 1874, Jan Kappeyne broaches the education question with a visionary statement: “The ideal for us progressive liberals is: tuition-free elementary education in religiously neutral government schools for the entire population. If I were told that if this is your wish you will oppress the minority, then I would almost say: then that minority will have to be oppressed, because then that is the fly that spoils the ointment and has no right to exist in our society” (Kuyper 1890, 243).

In the evening session of the same day, Kuyper, stung to the core, asks the floor and unburdens himself: “Mr. Speaker, should the day ever arrive that a minister of the Crown announced this member’s program as the program of the Government, saying that if need be he would oppress the minorities and kill the fly that spoiled the ointment, I would say to him: Then also remove the lion from the Dutch coat of arms, proud symbol of liberty, and replace him with an eagle, a lamb in its claws, the symbol of tyranny” (Kuyper 1890, 244).

This exchange certainly set the stage. The choice was clear: would Dutch children, many of whom did not attend any school or at best for a few years only,⁵ be educated in public, secular schools operated by the government, or in private, religious schools? Government schools would be funded from the public treasury, to which all contribute through taxes. Would private schools share at all in public funding? Not on your life, said the ruling majority. And thus arose the *schoolstrijd* (‘schools struggle’) of the nineteenth century.

On December 7, Kuyper had outlined his own vision for Dutch elementary education: “What education system,” he asked, “is best suited to our country?” In a long speech he outlined a system in which all schools would be free, independent, self-standing corporations, free from church and state, run by locally elected school boards. The State has rights, he conceded – for example, to regulate academic standards, to inspect schools, and to issue teacher certificates – but therefore it also has duties: regardless of which school was attended, the State should compensate parents financially for tuition fees, prorated according to a family’s income (Kuyper 1890, 221-29). Kuyper continued with a nasty insinuation that may actually have been plausible for the time: “Members opposite may object by saying they would then lose the privilege they enjoy at present of drilling Kantian deism into the children’s heads. But I sincerely hope they will not say this, otherwise they will confirm the definition that Groen van Prinsterer once gave of the government school: ‘the privileged school of a specific religious sect’” (Kuyper 1890, 226).⁶

⁵ The Truancy Act, or *Leerplichtwet*, making school attendance compulsory, was not enacted until 1900.

⁶ G. Groen van Prinsterer (1801-76) was the founder of the anti-revolutionary movement. Historian, publicist and parliamentarian, Groen had argued throughout his career that a

A religious sect? The designation was highly charged. How could advocates of religiously neutral education ever be convinced that they somehow represented a specific “religious” choice? It would be many decades before “neutralists” agreed that their position, too, implied a choice for some ultimate commitment held with conviction – for a set of non-negotiable values and assumptions that were on a par with the fundamental convictions of religious folk.

In any event, on December 7, 1874, Kuyper had pleaded with the Minister to inform the house with a clear, unambiguous declaration of his intended policy with respect to elementary education. “The public would like to know where he will take us... The issue is weighty enough to warrant the installation of what the English call a *royal commission*. The nation ought to be consulted about the issue. At present, discussions in the land are unfocused: people don’t know what to support or what to oppose. Will the Minister let us know what his political intentions are?” (Kuyper 1890, 236-37).

The request fell on deaf ears. The government was reluctant to deal with this hot potato. The Constitution of 1848 stated in Article 194 that educational instruction was free, but it added that the government had to see to it that elementary education was provided “throughout the country”. However, did this proviso imply that only public schools would meet this requirement and that private schools were not eligible for government support?

Nine years later came the answer. The Education Act of 1857 said: Yes! The government school was to be the common school, religiously neutral, serving Protestant, Catholic and Jewish children alike, instructing them in “civic and Christian virtues” (though teachers were forbidden to invoke the Bible or explicit Christian teachings) (Van Essen 1990, 62-63). The expression “civic and Christian virtues” was a legacy from 1806, when the Dutch education system was first set up. At that time, Bible readings, prayers and the singing of psalms and hymns were recommended parts of the curriculum, but by mid-century these Christian elements were considered sectarian and therefore unsuitable in a common school (Feringa 1878,⁷ 2). Now the expression essentially stood for a creed that has been fairly summarized as the generic religion of the “brotherhood-of-man, fatherhood-of-God”.⁸ The common school enjoyed wide

religiously neutral education was not possible and that consequently a government school – the common school intended for all children – could not avoid basing its instruction on a set of values indifferent if not hostile to Christianity. See Van Essen (1990a, 1990b).

⁷ This slim volume contains all the official documents related to the People’s Petition of 1878 (see below).

⁸ The popular expression BOM-FOG denotes the attempt to amalgamate beliefs held by Christians, theological modernists and humanists.

support in the hope that it would defuse sectarian differences and promote national unity and tolerance.

However, one reaction to the Act of 1857 was a rush toward establishing private religious schools, which were not hard to fund for the well-to-do but posed a financial burden for the lower middle classes and were virtually out of reach for the working classes, unless they could use parochial schools paid for by the church, or had access to a private school paid for by a local lord or endowed by a philanthropist. Lacking these, they would often have their children attend the public school, but with a burdened conscience.

A whole year later, on December 13, 1875, Kuyper again tried to hold the Minister's feet to the fire. In another lengthy speech he urged that a revision of the Elementary Education Act of 1857 should not be delayed any longer because the common school "was introduced to prevent confessional wrangling but has only inflamed confessional quarrels" (Kuyper 1890, 275). Anticipating an oft repeated claim that "the nation is attached to the common school," he pointed out that private schools, "the more they are suppressed, the more they grow in number." He concluded his speech by stating that people were attached to the public school "not from a bond of love but by a financial tie, not from the heart but because of the law and the silver cord" (Kuyper 1890, 282-83).

This last remark sounded like a low blow, but it was probably an honest assessment. Up until this time, public schools were funded by the municipalities, which often demanded no tuition fees, in part to defeat potential competition from private schools which as a rule had no choice but to levy fees from the pupils and their families.

From local government to central government

The schools struggle entered a critical phase in 1877. The conservative government of Jan Heemskerk tried to pass a compromise education bill, which satisfied neither liberals nor anti-revolutionaries: the former felt that the concessions to private schools were too generous, the latter that they were too little. Kuyper at this time was living in southern France; he had suffered a nervous breakdown after working too hard as a novice member of parliament, and he now sought healing in a prolonged period of non-activity and rest. His friend-foe Kappeyne was devoted to the parliamentary system, so he sent Kuyper a letter in which he expressed the hope that Kuyper would be restored in time to come home and join him in the house to attack the Heemskerk bill, even

if on opposite grounds. We need to have this debate, he added, “for whichever principle triumphs, it is desirable that each be powerfully defended.”⁹

When the government fell, new elections were held and the liberals won and formed the government. Now Kappeyne got his chance. As leader of the Cabinet he tabled an Elementary Education bill that brought some much needed reforms: (1) school buildings had to have windows, large ones, for fresh air, as well as decent toilets away from the back of the classroom; (2) the central government in The Hague would establish Normal Schools where teacher training could be seriously taken in hand; and (3) class size had to be reduced to a maximum of 40 (down from 70). Obviously, all this would cost a lot of money. However, “The Hague” would reimburse the municipalities for up to 30% of the increased costs. The catch: all schools, public and private, were obliged to meet the new standards, but private schools would not be reimbursed, as that was said to be unconstitutional.

Kappeyne’s aim was to settle the schools question once and for all, in line with his progressive, modern vision. He realized that his bill, if approved by parliament, would price private schools right out of the market. He honestly believed that would be best for education and for the country. Many years later, on May 31, 1905, Kuyper reminisced: “It would be a mistake to think that Kappeyne, when he proposed the law of ’78, was motivated by cruel intentions, that he acted as it were from a pure delight to suppress the minority. Far from it. The matter is this. Kappeyne was a man who held to a religion of sorts, a religion that can best be described as the apotheosis of the power of the State. He knew no higher power than the power of the self-creative, self-sufficient State. It was his firm conviction that this State alone fulfilled its duty toward the nation by guiding the people according to its principles.... But this doctrinaire stance, which I just now called his religion, this State which he almost worshipped, could also turn into the Moloch that could demand the sacrifice, if need be, of those children whose parents did not agree with him” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 962-63).

Kappeyne’s bill ran into heavy weather. When the bill passed parliament, private school supporters immediately mounted a “People’s Petition”, to be presented to the King. Redacted by Kuyper, who was back at work, it asked His Majesty to act in the spirit of the House of Orange and veto a discriminatory measure that would violate people’s freedom of conscience. The petition as such was a great success; within two weeks in mid summer, local action committees collected 305,000 signatures of concerned citizens, representing 114,000 school-

⁹ Kappeyne to Kuyper, 18 Oct. 1876; Kuyper-archieff, no. 971; Historisch Documentatiecentrum voor het Nederlands Protestantisme (1800-heden), VU University, Amsterdam.

age children. The ruling elite were surprised by the depth and breadth of the protest, and the King felt cornered and asked his minister for advice. Kappeyne's *Report to the King*, published for all to read in the official gazette, the *Staatscourant* of August 13, 1878, stated that citizens were free, of course, to use their constitutional right to establish private schools; but when they then asked the State to help fund such schools they were embracing "the rankest Communism." Reality dictated, the Minister concluded, that private schools could never be more than "a luxury for the well-to-do and a form of charity for the needy." King William decided he had no choice but to carry out his constitutional duty and sign the controversial bill into law.¹⁰

Kuyper used the occasion of the successful mass movement to organize the local committees into a nation-wide political party with an articulated program – the birth of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, the first political party in The Netherlands to adopt an organizational structure. Membership and voting constituency were chiefly composed of members of the Reformed or Calvinist churches.

Kappeyne's law and the People's Petition had another ramification as well. Henceforth, on the date the bill was signed, a fundraiser was held every year throughout the country in support of private schools. When the mayors of the towns of Alblasterdam, Gorinchem and Delft forbade a door-to-door collection, Kuyper sent a complaint to the government. Kappeyne wanted to be a liberal of fair play; he wrote Kuyper to inform him that his staff had found Orders in Council of 1824 and 1841 dealing with public fundraising and on that basis he had instructed the mayors to cease their obstruction.¹¹

The power of numbers

The liberals continued to be an informal grouping in parliament, sometimes labelling themselves the "anti-clericals". By 1887 they felt that the time was ripe for a revision of the Constitution to allow an extension of the franchise. Any revision required a two-thirds majority in parliament. The "clericals", now consisting of the Anti-Revolutionaries and a majority of the Catholic members of parliament, when combined, controlled more than one third of the votes. Conscious of their power, they let it be known that they could not in good conscience support a revision of the Constitution unless the article on education would also be revised in order to clear the way for public funding of religious

¹⁰ This paragraph is based entirely on Feringa (1878).

¹¹ Kappeyne to Kuyper, 28 July 1879 and 16 Aug. 1879; Kuyper-archieff, nos. 1702 and 1720; Historisch Documentatiecentrum voor het Nederlands Protestantisme (1800-heden), VU University, Amsterdam.

schools. Interestingly, the political standoff was resolved when the two sides next came to an informal understanding: leading liberal voices spoke up saying that the Constitution did “not necessarily” prohibit some public funding for private schools. Their opponents now felt free to help achieve the required majority for a constitutional revision (Wirtz 1926, 71).

And so it was done. The right to vote was extended to include the lower middle class. That class counted many church-going voters. Predictably, the “clericals” won the general elections and were mandated to form the next government. The resulting Calvinist-Catholic coalition government, led by Aeneas baron Mackay Jr., shepherded a revision of Kappeyne’s law through parliament in spite of vehement opposition by (now senator) Kappeyne and some of his fellow “anti-clericals”. The Elementary Education Act of 1889 in principle signalled a fundamental step toward parity treatment of all schools. It contained two reforms: (1) the national government would partially subsidize private schools to cover teacher salaries; and (2) public schools were required to levy a minimum of tuition, to mitigate their financial advantage over private schools (Wirtz 1926, 77).

Kuyper as Prime Minister

The next decade saw the liberals back in office, but by 1901 the Calvinist-Catholic coalition regained power and Kuyper became prime minister. In the intervening years, school attendance had been made compulsory by the *Leerplichtwet* of 1900 (30 years behind Ontario and British Columbia, 130 years behind Prussia). Overnight, a growing number of lower-class families faced a dilemma: should they send their children to a private school of their choice, which would entail tuition fees they could scarcely afford, or to a public school which inculcated values and an outlook on life that were out of harmony with the teachings in church and home? In one of his last speeches in parliament, on May 31, 1905, Prime Minister Kuyper spoke on their behalf by summing up the heart of the issue in these memorable words: “To be forced to send one’s child to a school where it will be nurtured in a spirit that is opposed to that of its parents is an evil that must not be perpetuated any longer. The rich can afford to choose private schools, but the poor cannot. They too must have the opportunity to give their children an education that is in harmony with their basic beliefs.... There is no neutral education that is not governed by a spirit of its own, and the very spirit of the religiously neutral school is the antithesis of all positive belief” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 987, 989).

But that summary came at the end of his time as government leader. The story is much longer, with some very interesting details. For example, in my study of Kuyper’s parliamentary career I saw much evidence that he made it a

rule to completely master the minutiae of legislation that interested him, often quoting figures and statistics in his speeches as well as drawing comparisons with neighbouring countries. When the liberal government had introduced its truancy act in 1900, it had promised the opposition that private schools would be reimbursed for any new, additional costs. But on May 2, 1901, Kuyper – this was shortly before he became prime minister – informed the Chamber that he had discovered that “the Minister’s arithmetic is wanting.” Quoting precise guilder amounts, he explained that when he had gone over the promised subsidies for hiring more teachers and enlarging school facilities or building new ones, he had discovered that the cost of maintaining private schools had actually increased, and increased significantly. At the level of these subsidies, he calculated, private schools would still depend for the greater part on private funding. And he reminded his hearers that “we have few capitalists among us; tuition fees and donations come largely from the common people.” However, he concluded, “we will not act like beggars in this Chamber. What we want is a revision of the entire regulation of elementary education so that it may at last become *healthy*” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. I, 701, 705). In this way he reminded one and all that his party’s ultimate aim was to have subsidies replaced by equity, charity by equality.

When the elections of 1901 brought the Coalition to power, Kuyper began by taking the schools struggle from the elementary to the tertiary level of education. One of his first acts was to introduce a Higher Education bill that gave private universities a place under the sun next to the state universities. It sparked acrimonious debates, especially in the Senate, so he asked the King to dissolve the upper house, calculating that new elections would make it more representative of the electorate. And indeed, the subsequent elections resulted in a more cooperative Senate and the bill was passed.

Kuyper defended his proposal by referring – he was years ahead of the sociology of knowledge – to the inevitable role played by presuppositions and personal worldviews in the practice and pursuit of scholarship. This shows, he argued, that it is possible to have a bona fide university based on religious principles. As examples he cited many universities in the United States, a country he had toured in 1898 (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 948). Moreover, he contended, it is not up to the State to determine which principles are acceptable and which are not in the universities of the land (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. III, 50).

Shortly before the vote, the opposition in apparent desperation stooped to painting the Free University in Amsterdam¹² as “a cramming school where

¹² The Free University opened its doors in Amsterdam in 1880. It was an initiative by Kuyper and his followers to have a university that was “free of church and state” yet based on the “Reformed [read: Calvinist or neo-Calvinist] principles.” In 1905 it had 3 departments, 12 professors, and 180

students are drilled in predigested, long outdated views” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. III, 71). On another day they referred to it as an institution governed by nepotism in its appointments (Kuyper’s son Herman had recently been appointed there). At this, the prime minister bristled. Not only do members opposite “insult the serious academic work done at the Free University,” he retorted on May 19, 1905, but they also “cast a slur on the scholarly qualities of my son. Members opposite may insult me here as much as they wish, but they have to keep their hands off my children!” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 941).

At last Kuyper tabled a revision of the Elementary Education Act. Its provisions were fourfold: (1) all teachers, in public or private schools, were eligible for the same civil service pensions; (2) all teachers were placed on an improved salary schedule, for which all school boards, private or public, would be reimbursed by the central government; (3) teachers must be hired on the basis of a written contract (ending some abuse in the private sector); and (4) all schools must submit a *leerplan* (‘curriculum’) to ensure quality of instruction (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 395).

Although the bill was simply an enhancement of the policy adopted in 1889 and reaffirmed in 1900, this time opposition was fierce. No doubt its sponsor’s personality and posture was no help; his self-confidence and intransigence only goaded them into resistance. The prime minister tried to win over the opposition with an historical overview. On January 30, 1903, he argued that the grave difficulties his generation faced in the area of education, also in the Netherlands, stemmed chiefly from the fact “that the nineteenth century began with a more or less unified worldview so that all of education was organized in the same spirit.” But times have changed: “it has become clear that this unity of worldview is beyond recall. At every point it has fractured.... Today we are dealing with several worldviews, which sharply oppose each other. That being so, the power of the State must not be used in favour of one of them. The contest between the worldviews must be decided in a free grappling of the spirits – provided the terms of the tournament are equal – so that at last both sides can clear the air and make it possible to reach a compromise, a certain *modus vivendi* that satisfies both sides. I believe we have begun to arrive at such a happy *modus vivendi* in the area of elementary education and that we will eventually be able to complete it” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 732).

The opposition was not persuaded. Members warned that private schools were responsible for an erosion of national unity. Kuyper’s rejoinder drew on his

students. It was operated by the *Vereniging voor Hoger Onderwijs op Gereformeerde Grondslag* (‘Association for higher education on Reformed principles’) which in 1905 had 10,020 dues-paying members contributing 25,465 guilders, supplemented by the proceeds of voluntary collections worth 13,742 guilders. Figures in Roelink (1956, 118, 126, 127).

long-standing grievance against the spirit of modernity that privileged sameness over otherness (see Kuyper 1869, cited in Bratt 1998, 19-44). The differentiation in our national culture, he held forth, has been a good thing: "When we had a uniform public education system the spiritual temper of the nation was down. But struggle ensued and a rich life blossomed forth in the fight for schools where one's principles and beliefs are propagated.... We are told that this has taken place at the price of national unity. I dispute that. One should not entertain erroneous notions about the unity of national life. Unity must not be sought in uniformity" (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. II, 658). Kuyper envisioned a unity of national accommodation and compromise, collectively borne up by the several "pillars" that made up the nation's population.¹³

One of his toughest opponents to hold out the longest was the aging senator Samuel van Houten. Kuyper addressed his position on February 1, 1905 in the following words: "The honourable member from Friesland and I appear to disagree very little on the meaning of justice, but not on what freedom means. His freedom leads only to State tyranny. He wants the government to operate schools that teach young people to practice critical thinking even if it goes against their faith. In other words, it is to be a school that satisfies Mr. van Houten and his like-minded friends and with which those who think like him are content. That school, he says, must be financed from the public treasury, hence must receive favoured treatment, because that is the only real school. Everybody else has full freedom to establish other schools, provided they do not ask for money from the public treasury. You are entirely free, but you will have to pay for it yourself. Thus the honourable member first takes from the purse of those who do not support public education the money needed for the government schools that he supports, and when the non-supporters have spent all they could on education he says to them: Now that I have pumped you dry you are welcome to establish schools with your own money" (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 902).

After this pointed attack, Kuyper continued: "That is not what I understand by freedom. As a minister of the Crown I refuse to endorse for one minute the view that one citizen can claim more rights than another. I do not wish to abridge the rights of Mr. van Houten and his adherents. I do not seek a single privilege for myself and my adherents. But what has to stop is that there is

¹³ "Pillars" is the sociological term for the institutionalized worldview pluralism that characterizes Dutch society to this day: not only education but also the media, trade unions, farmers' organizations, hospitals, sports clubs, etc., are divided over separate organizations committed to Catholic, Calvinist, or secular humanist principles. Attempts at "depillarization" after 1945 have been only partially successful. The pillars have to share the country, its space, its economy, its social services, so they are forced to work together. Together they hold up the one national culture – a state of unity in diversity, with a level playing field from which no group is excluded.

a political party that says: we and our adherents have a right to all the benefits of the public treasury, and those who do not agree with us will just have to wander about in the wilderness and live off wild honey and grasshoppers. That leads to dividing our people into two parts: one that lives off the State, the lucky ones, and another that is deprived, left out. There must be equality in the Netherlands, both for those who hold to the Christian and for those who hold to the modernist worldview” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 902–03).

A few months later, on May 31, 1905, the prime minister put into words what may be the simplest yet most fundamental issue in this entire controversy about schooling in a nation with a religiously diverse population. Facing Van Houten, he remarked: “The honourable member assumes that elementary education is the responsibility of the government.... We maintain that the first responsibility lies with the parents, not the government” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 982). This echoed what he had said when he first introduced his bill, back in December of 1902, using an historical analogy. In answer to a question from a member who belonged to his own party, he replied: “The member for Zierikzee points out that compulsory school attendance has resulted in a painful loss of income for low-income families. I agree that in those cases municipal poor relief is called for. I do not agree with Mr. Troelstra [leader of the social democrats] that the solution is to provide school meals and school clothing. It is the primary responsibility of parents to feed and clothe their offspring.... The ancient philosopher Plato wanted to shift child-rearing from the parents to the State. Some circles today are already starting to say that all births must take place in a state hospital, that newborns must be put in daycare centres, toddlers in kindergartens, and young children in elementary schools where they will be fed and clothed. That would end in putting the State in charge of child-rearing and so destroy the family. This Cabinet, by virtue of its principle, cannot and will not support this trend” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. II, 314).

On April 5, 1905, the prime minister once again addressed the reputed threat to national unity. He stated with some emphasis: “National unity is absolutely not promoted by a common school. Amsterdam from the beginning provided separate schools for Jewish children with Jewish teachers. One would think that Jew-baiting must have been rampant in that city. There is a lot of that in Russia, in Vienna, in Berlin, but I never noticed any of it in Amsterdam.” Next, Kuyper tried to turn the tables on the opposition by arguing that it was the common school that had brought division in the nation: “Under the common school tolerance was so sparse that after 1834 the Seceders¹⁴ were jeered and scorned; and in 1853 we even had no-popery riots! After the common school

¹⁴ A reference to the *Afgescheidenen* who seceded from the national church to preserve orthodoxy.

was reinforced in 1857, it did so little to foster toleration that the liberal press never tired of fanning the flames of discord between Catholics and Protestants.¹⁵ So what remains of the claim that separate schools break the unity of the nation and that the common school unites all? Nothing. It is an assertion that cannot pass the test.... National unity is in danger precisely when justice is denied, when liberty is abridged, when our citizens are hurt I do not say in their material interests but in their deepest convictions. That is what sows bitterness and that is what divides a nation” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 407-08).

Partisan though he was, Prime Minister Kuyper could also act the statesman. He ended this last speech with an appeal to the common interest: “Let us rather join hands and resolve together to raise the formation and development of our people to ever higher levels. That cannot help but heighten people’s sense of unity. The entire nation will benefit, and that is what this Government expects from the passage of this bill” (Kuyper 1908-10, Vol. IV, 409).

A national legacy

With these last quoted words Kuyper gave expression to a spirit that has been a hallmark of Dutch politics in the twentieth century: a genuine and generous accommodation of differences.

The bill of 1905 passed, and in 1920 the long saga of the schools struggle came to an end when all parties agreed to full parity for public and private schools, without exception. Today, the majority of Dutch families use private schools – without financial penalty. Professionally staffed and regularly inspected, all schools – secular, Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Montessori, Waldorf, and still other varieties – enjoy equal funding. To be sure, in our century, the growing presence of non-western cultural groups in the Netherlands has raised questions among some people whether the education system will continue to fit the fabric of Dutch culture. Nonetheless, public policy continues to honour the spirit of mutual respect and tolerance. It is the fruit of more than a century of principled political debate in that low country by the sea.

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¹⁵ They were divided over the use of the Bible in the common school.

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About the author

Harry Van Dyke was born in Rotterdam and moved with his family to Canada at the age of twelve after having completed six years of Christian elementary school. He attended five years of public high school in St. Catharines, Ontario, after which he earned a B.A. in history at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. He returned to Holland to attend the Free University in Amsterdam where he earned a D.Litt. He returned to Canada to teach history at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, from which he retired in 2005. Since then he has been involved in translation projects featuring Abraham Kuyper and the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd.

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Écoles laïques ou écoles libres: Abraham Kuyper intervient au Parlement néerlandais dans une controverse de longue date

La lutte pour la liberté éducative aux Pays-Bas dura de 1840 jusqu'à 1920. Bien que cette liberté fût garantie par la Constitution de 1848, l'élite gouvernante insista pendant de longues décennies que seules les écoles laïques, opérées par le gouvernement et astreintes à la neutralité en matière de religion, avaient le droit aux deniers publics; les écoles privées, d'obédience religieuse, étaient exclues. Cela faisait que les parents qui envoyaient leurs enfants à une école chrétienne privée payaient deux fois: d'abord comme contribuables, pour les écoles laïques, et ensuite pour

leur propre école. Les parents chrétiens des classes pauvres se trouvaient donc devant un dilemme: ou bien éduquer leurs enfants dans l'esprit du foyer et de l'église, mais c'était coûteux, ou bien les envoyer à l'école laïque, neutre en matière de religion, mais gratuite – ou bien ne pas les envoyer à l'école du tout (ce n'était pas obligatoire). Le docteur Abraham Kuyper, journaliste et théologien, était un champion important pour le traitement égalitaire des deux types d'écoles. Pendant de longues années, lui et ses adhérents firent campagne contre cette inégalité, surtout parce qu'elle menaçait la liberté de la conscience. Ils n'acceptaient pas que l'éducation puisse être neutre en matière de religion. Kuyper prenait souvent la parole sur cette question comme député et, de 1901 à 1905, comme premier ministre, avec une telle éloquence qu'un choix de citations de ses discours au Parlement ferait une anthologie intéressante. La lutte fut enfin résolue quand le Trésor accorda une subvention égale aux deux systèmes éducatifs.

Overheidsscholen of Vrije Scholen? Abraham Kuyper's uitspraken over een langlopende controverse in het Nederlandse parlement.

Nederland heeft van 1840 tot 1920 een schoolstrijd doorgemaakt om vrijheid van onderwijs. Hoewel deze vrijheid in de Grondwet van 1848 was vastgelegd, werd door leidinggevende kringen decennia lang volgehouden dat alleen openbare scholen voor financiële steun in aanmerking kwamen. Bijzondere, confessionele scholen zouden hiervan uitgesloten zijn. Dit betekende dat de ouders die van een bijzondere school gebruik maakten, voor onderwijs feitelijk dubbel betaalden: eerst als belastingplichtigen voor de openbare school, en daarna nog eens voor hun eigen school. Lagere inkomensklassen van kerkelijke huize stonden voor de keus: onderwijs voor hun kinderen in de geest van gezin en kerk, waarvoor schoolgeld op tafel moest, dan wel onderwijs aan de religieus-neutrale openbare school, dat kosteloos was, dan wel géén schoolbezoek voor hun kinderen (leerplicht kwam pas in 1900). De journalist-theoloog Dr. Abraham Kuyper en zijn volgelingen streden jarenlang tegen deze ongelijkheid, te meer daar zovelen hierdoor in gewetensnood kwamen. Als kamerlid en later ook als premier sprak Kuyper vaak over de kwestie, zó welsprekend, dat een verzameling van citaten de moeite van kennismaking loont. De strijd is uiteindelijk geslecht door voortaan beide schoolsystemen – openbaar en bijzonder – in gelijke mate door de overheid te laten financieren.