

Dutch experience with government bicycle policy

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Summary

This contribution introducing the congress theme ‘Dutch experience’ mainly focuses on bicycle policy in The Netherlands. This policy is rooted in a culture that is almost one century old. Contrary to many other European countries, The Netherlands managed to hold on to this culture after the Second World War and even developed it further. The Bicycle Masterplan, which was initiated by the ministry of transport in 1990, was only a next phase in that development. It is too early for a final conclusion on the master plan. The presumption appears to be justified however that the plan has contributed to the fact that for another decade cycling in the Netherlands has been able to balance between the opportunities and threats that bicycle traffic is constantly exposed to in a prosperous country with a long bicycle tradition. There is still a lot to be said and discussed about those opportunities and threats in the coming decades. It is difficult to give a reliable prediction as to whether the sum will ultimately lead to a larger or smaller share of cycling in certain parts of the transport market.

1. Introduction

My contribution is about Dutch bicycle policy. So about policy that in one way or other should be noticed by people in the streets. And people do notice, but nevertheless there is only very limited interest in bicycle policy. With good reason: after all you cannot ride on policy.

And besides: for Dutch people, cycling is a very common and everyday thing. Apparently, bicycle policy is therefore taken for granted. Fine, that is the way it should be!

However, in many countries bicycle policy is something that is not taken for granted at all.

Supporters of bicycle use in those countries are sometimes envious of the situation here. They would like to learn from our Dutch experience. That may be possible, but in that case it would be advisable for those people to first cycle through our cities and villages themselves. Now, in June, but also in December, when it is wet and bleak. In the city centres, but also in the suburbs and during the morning rush hour as well as in the evening when it is dark.

While cycling around yourself, you will gain practical Dutch experience that in my view is necessary to be able to assess to what extent all those wonderful stories about bicycle traffic in The Netherlands are true.

For nearly ten years I have been involved in the Bicycle Masterplan. My introduction to the ‘Dutch Experience’ theme therefore concentrates on policy. The first part will focus on the history of bicycle policy in The Netherlands. This is followed by the Bicycle Masterplan period. I will conclude with some personal remarks about opportunities and threats related to Dutch bicycle policy in the near future.

My introduction will be followed by a speech by Bernard Ensink, chairman of the Cyclists' Union. I am sure that he will not agree with all my observations and opinions. Which is a good thing.

2. The history of bicycle use and bicycle policy in the Netherlands

History is important when it comes to transport and traffic. The present situation after all is the result of developments over many decades. This also means that the near future has for a large part already been determined by the past. I am emphasizing the importance of the past because we, as the Bicycle Masterplan project group, have had the history of bicycle use and bicycle policy in a number of cities in The Netherlands and surrounding countries researched. We wanted to know why we cycle more in The Netherlands than in those other countries and why there is more cycling in one city than in others. The results of this research will be presented on Thursday in workshop number 45. I sincerely recommend this meeting.

Anticipating this meeting I allow myself the following statement:

Bicycle policy can be effective, but it does require patience.

To explain this statement, I will first consider some frequently mentioned factors that influence bicycle use:

- The general impression is that we Dutchmen cycle a lot because we live in a flat country. This flatness of course plays a part, but apparently it is not the only precondition: inhabitants of flat areas outside the Netherlands cycle much less.
- Spatial structures are an influence. This may explain why there is little cycling in the USA and Australia, but in many European countries the average trip distances are completely comparable to those in The Netherlands: so just as short.
- Availability of alternative modes of transport is another factor. Mass motorisation got started quite late in the Netherlands. At this moment, the number of trips of 7.5 kilometres or shorter is the same for cars and bicycles. Most cities in the Netherlands are too small for profitable public transport to be an efficient alternative for the bicycle.
- Cultural historical values play a role. This is illustrated by the choice of transport mode of Dutch people of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinam origin. They cycle much less and use public transport more often. The differences with autochthonous Dutch people however seem to be decreasing per generation.

These four factors - morphology, spatial structure, available alternatives and cultural historical values – do not sufficiently explain the differences in bicycle use between The Netherlands and other countries and between the one Dutch city and a comparable other one. Neither do they explain why bicycle use during a certain period of time increases considerably in the one city while it sharply decreases in another city. We will get more satisfying answers when we also look at the influence of policy.

But, what is policy? What is bicycle policy?

In my view, policy comprises the government's intentions and actions.

Up to the Second World War there is not much positive to report in this respect. Between 1900 and 1940, the number of bicycles grew from 100,000 to four million. As a comparison: by 1940 there

were also 100,000 cars. The government considered all these bicycles primarily as a source of income. A major part of the road plans were therefore financed with the yields of bicycle taxes, which encouraged car traffic. The construction of bicycle tracks along some of the national highways could be regarded as bicycle policy. However, this happened mainly to decrease the hindrance caused by cyclists for car drivers!

After the Second World War, cyclists still dominated the scene, but there was hardly any attention for cyclists and their infrastructure. Policy makers were primarily occupied with cars, and the construction and widening of roads. Bicycle traffic was generally expected to be marginalized. The bicycle was old-fashioned, a vehicle for the poor. The car symbolised the future, mobility, and freedom.

But – and this is crucial! – cycling was recognised as a mode of transport ‘that is also part of life’, as a mode of transport ‘that also uses and may use public space’, as a mode of transport ‘that other traffic participants have to take into account’!

In The Netherlands, policy meant a pro-car policy, but in general not an anti-bicycle policy!

That was quite wise: at that time there were after all hardly any alternative modes of transport available for most of the Dutch. Mass-motorisation did not start until about 1960, and the role of urban public transport was minimal even then.

The attitude from the fifties and sixties facilitated the turnaround that took place in the seventies when the rapidly growing car monster started to bite its own tail. The annual number of traffic casualties increased very rapidly. Traffic congestion occurred more and more often and the space that parked cars were occupying formed an increasing problem in the cities. Care of the environment was growing, there was increasingly more attention for healthy exercise, there was an oil crisis and look: people rediscovered the bicycle as an efficient mode of transport. So a decrease in bicycle use changed into an increase. And in the cities, policy makers realised that the bicycle might contribute to solving the traffic problems that had arisen.

The central government supported this process in the form of subsidies for the construction and improvement of bicycle facilities by municipal and provincial authorities. The central government also financed pilot projects. Initially this concerned high-quality cycle routes, and at a later stage a complete network of routes in the town of Delft. Evaluations, however, showed that although a good infrastructure for bicycle traffic is functional, it hardly leads to an increase in bicycle use.

So bicycle policy should comprise more than the construction of infrastructure, much more. I will come back to that in a moment. At this point, I will confine myself to the observation that a bicycle-friendly attitude among policy makers in the cities and in the central government is a necessary condition for a good bicycle policy. In all the plans they make, they should also consider the interests of cyclists! This forms a permanent task for bicycle organisations and their local branches: keeping all those policymakers on the alert! Besides relevant knowledge, this mainly requires a lot of patience and constantly looking out for new social developments. The political discussion on this subject should lead to a different perception in society and ultimately also among policymakers. Those policymakers will subsequently have to develop new policies and implement new plans. All of this requires a lot of time, among other things because there are so many parties that are involved. Once the required measures have finally been implemented, it often takes years for the effects to become noticeable. Sometimes decades, as we have seen. We are still reaping the rewards for instance of

‘the recognition of the bicycle as a normal mode of transport’ in the fifties and sixties and of investments made in the seventies and eighties.

My conclusion: *bicycle policy can be effective, but it does require patience.*
But I mentioned that before.

3. The Bicycle Masterplan period: 1990-1999

The fact that a new bicycle policy was developed by the central government in 1990, was a logical continuation of developments in previous years. Logical, but apparently not taken for granted. If the Cyclists' Union had not actively participated in all kinds of social discussions, had not lobbied with their relevant knowledge among politicians and had not kept policymakers at the ministry on the alert, there would not have been any new bicycle policy at all. And as a consequence no Bicycle Masterplan project, with clear objectives and a decent budget. Fortunately the Cyclists' Union did their work properly and the project group was able to get to work.

A considerable budget was available for subsidising the bicycle traffic infrastructure. This was also necessary, because a good infrastructure is a precondition for any mode of transport and therefore also for the promotion of bicycle use. A good infrastructure requires permanent expansion and improvement. The project group established criteria for granting subsidies and the regional offices of the ministry subsequently allocated the budgets. After that, the project group concentrated on other ways of making cycling more attractive and safer.

Our primary objective was to make sure that bicycle policy would become an inextricable part of the plans and activities of municipalities, provinces, ministries, enterprises and public transport companies.

We realised that much more was needed than bicycle tracks and measures to reduce the number of traffic casualties. Much more so than in the past, attention was needed for bicycle parking, for bicycle theft and for the combination of bicycle and public transport. We wanted to influence the manner in which people select their mode of transport for various movements. So in fact we wanted to be concerned with the entire transport system, with the overall transport policy.

Manpower and time however were limited, which forced us to make choices. That is a good thing, because you can promote as much as you want, but in the end others will have to decide and act.

The realisation that bicycle traffic is a fully integrated part of the total transport system, also meant that we wanted to communicate with many parties involved. With people in municipal councils, enterprises and public transport companies, because they are the ones that actually take measures, or not. With people at various ministries, because they prepare policies that affect bicycle traffic. To reach all those decision makers and executors, we used as many communication channels as possible: various media, social interest organisations, consultancy agencies, etcetera. We tried to serve all those target groups with customised information as much as possible.

These target groups may of course appreciate the fact that you approach them, but in that case you will really need something to offer them. A story about how to improve the world will just not be enough. They have heard these stories before and they often do not believe them.

So what exactly should you offer them?

Quite simple: relevant knowledge based on facts, arguments that will influence decisions, and instruments that will enable these decisions to be carried out properly. You may think that this knowledge, these arguments, and these instruments had been there for years in a bicycle country like the Netherlands. Wrong, there wasn't. There was quite a lot of practical experience, but real knowledge was limited and moreover quite fragmented. In cooperation with our target groups we worked very hard therefore on expanding knowledge by carrying out research and experiments and by promoting innovation.

Do we know enough now about bicycle traffic and bicycle policy in the Netherlands? Can we afford to lean back complacently? Absolutely not, in my view. During the Bicycle Masterplan years, some steps have been taken in the right direction. There is a bit more knowledge, there are slightly better instruments. Cycling is more often given the recognition of a fully-fledged mode of transport. Based on the Dutch contributions to this congress however, I get the impression that practical experience, wishes, opinions and good intentions still very much dominate the scene. Contributions from the scholarly world are rare, too rare. That doesn't surprise me, because universities and other scholarly institutes give little attention to bicycle traffic. Apparently, their principals mainly need knowledge related to car traffic and public transport. Which is a pity.

I do not wish to conclude the Bicycle Masterplan period with this somewhat bleak observation. There are also positive developments. The bicycle now occupies a stronger position on the local agenda's than ten years ago. Planners can no longer easily ignore bicycle traffic. The Cyclists' Union is once more creating a distinct profile for itself now that the Bicycle Masterplan project group has been dissolved. Bicycle traffic infrastructure has improved and a process of strong quality improvements in bicycle parking facilities has been set in motion. Despite these favourable developments, there still remains a lot to be done. Attention should not be allowed to slacken.

For those who would like to know more about the Bicycle Masterplan, an evaluation report is available in Dutch, English and German.

4. Opportunities and threats for bicycle traffic in the Netherlands

A number of interesting observations can be made about the future of cycling in The Netherlands. It is tempting to consider these at length. I won't do that. I will restrict myself to mentioning some opportunities and threats and I will not look beyond a period of ten to twenty years.

- Opportunity 1: The Netherlands has a bicycle culture. Cycling has been passed on from one generation to the next for a century. Our infrastructure is also geared to the existence of considerable numbers of cyclists. Which is not something to be eradicated easily.
- Opportunity 2: The major part of all movements is short and can be covered by bicycle by many people. This is only changing slowly. And if traffic experts and land use and city planners continue to think, it will remain that way.

- Opportunity 3: High economic prosperity entails that we are often in a hurry. Time is a scarce commodity. Waiting for the bus or looking for a place to park causes irritation. Cyclists hardly have any waiting times. They also use waiting times at cross roads to rest.
- Opportunity 4: For many people prosperity means eating a lot and little exercise. The healthcare sector is discovering more and more that cycling is a good solution to keep in shape.
- Opportunity 5: In the longer term, the scarcity of fossil fuel will start playing a role again. The energy sector is beginning to find out that cyclists run on sandwiches.
- Opportunity 6: Less ideology and a more businesslike attitude could increase the influence of the cyclists' organisations.

Unfortunately it is not difficult to let the six opportunities be followed by six threats.

- Threat 1. The present economic boom is leading to a rapid increase in the number of cars. We also want to use those cars, also for distances that Dutch people would normally cover by bicycle. At this moment, variable car costs are often irrelevant.
- Threat 2. Increasing availability of the car is an irreversible process. A car obviously still represents status. People who start earning less will at the most change to a cheaper car.
- Threat 3. Cycling does not provide status. Although many policy makers – also at local levels – cycle regularly, they often speak only about the choice between car and public transport. While for many movements there is no choice at all.
- Threat 4. Our work gradually moves further away from home. Since, particularly among women, participation in the job market is increasing, this counts double. Two working parents in a family increases the chance that their children are taken to school by car. In that way, the younger generation gets used to the bicycle increasingly less.
- Threat 5. The interests of cyclists are poorly represented. The Cyclists' Union cannot do it alone. Until now, the bicycle industry and bicycle trade believe it is enough to say what the government should do. If they continue to deny their own responsibilities, they will eventually damage their own interests.
- Threat 6. The central government decentralises tasks and considerable budgets to provinces and municipalities. That is a good thing, an opportunity even, because that gives more 'power' to regional and local governments that are more in touch with practice. Over the past few decades it has also become clear that they pay much more attention to the bicycle than the central government. The other side of the coin is however that consequently all coordination of research, innovation, experiments and exchange of best practices threatens to disappear. In addition, a platform for developing visions and strategies and translating them into policy is lacking. Also in national policy!

So far some of the opportunities and threats that I have observed. And there are probably many more. Just as you, I have no idea what the final outcome will be. But there is plenty to discuss on that subject. I suggest that we start doing that. Thank you for your attention.