

The Impact of Expats

The Dutch system of consensus-building allows room for the expression of opinions in the public domain in a way that is unique to the Netherlands. For instance, the xenophobic discourses of the past few years have created the impression that the nation has experienced a radical shift away from its traditional reputation of tolerance. It seemed to many that foreigners, including expatriates, were no longer welcome in the Netherlands.

However, the loudest voices in this debate masked the growing realisation by others that, economically, the country is dependent on an international workforce. As the debate over immigration, integration and tolerance raged in the media, policies were shifting towards improving conditions with the aim of attracting workers from abroad. In other words, 'expats' - in the widest sense of the definition - are currently the flavour of the day.

The vociferous debate on tolerance and the place of foreigners in the Netherlands has abated somewhat recently with the change in government and as specific social problems within particular immigrant groups were addressed. Some restrictive rules were put into place, such as the requirement for immigrants to pass a Dutch language and culture test before migrating to the Netherlands. At the same time, however, the larger immigration policy saw a quiet shift towards increasingly flexible immigration rules for work migrants. From Eastern European construction workers to highly educated 'knowledge migrants', foreign workers are being stimulated to come work in the Netherlands.

The extent to which work migrants are desired in the country became clear at a conference in Amsterdam entitled 'The Impact of Expats'. The goal of the day-long event was to provide information to companies that are looking to hire expatriates for their national workforce - known in the Netherlands as *impats* (expats are the Dutch nationals that they send abroad).

One cause of the changes in regulation is the European Union's push to increase the movement of people across borders. However, even more pressure for a change in Dutch policy is being exerted by economic forces within the country. Many Dutch companies in various sectors are currently scrambling in their search for employees with either the education or experience they require. Business for international recruitment agencies is booming.

One example of the more flexible regulation in the Dutch immigration policy is the recent 'knowledge migrant' ruling which speeds up the visa and permit processes for companies who wish to bring non-European staff to their Dutch operations. The sessions on taxation and work and residence permits highlighted the tedious formalities involved in admitting expatriates into the country for the purpose of working here. However, the

message was clear: while it is not yet an 'easy' or a 'quick' process, the intent and long-term goal of current policy is to facilitate these procedures.

Internal Competition

One of the main themes to emerge from the seminar on expats was the awareness of the fact that the future success of the Netherlands depends on its ability to maintain an internationally competitive edge.

Interestingly, it is at the city level that the rush to improve its international profile is most clearly expressed: The Hague has been defining its image as the international city of peace and justice for some time now; Rotterdam is the gateway to Europe and is an international trade hub; and Amsterdam plans to develop its profile as a centre of excellence in the international knowledge economy, particularly through the construction of modern facilities in the city's southern sector.

However, in their determination to achieve their goals, the municipalities are in fact competing against each other. For example, Mayor Cohen of Amsterdam described his plans for the creation of an Expat Centre during the conference. This will be a 'one stop shop' for all permit procedures for foreign workers and will provide the information expats need on all the required paperwork, housing, education issues, etc. The city of The Hague established its Expat Desk two years ago, and Rotterdam is also drawing up plans for a similar set-up which should open this year.

Each desk is independent, separately striving to alleviate the bureaucratic processes necessary for expats. From an international perspective this competition seems peculiar; together, these three cities are the equivalent in size to some of the world's larger international cities such as London and Paris. Wouldn't their goals be better achieved in cooperation?

During the Expat conference, Mayor Cohen and Mrs. Hankie van Baasbank, the General Director of Amsterdam's Chamber of Commerce made their commitment to these plans absolutely clear. There is support for the city of Amsterdam's vision of economic development and internationalisation at the highest level of the city's government.

However, in this consensus-minded country, this commitment is not enough to ensure success. "If Schiphol airport is not allowed to grow, if plans for the fifth landing strip are put on hold, we can just forget about being a major player in the world of the future!" said Mrs. Baasbank during the conference. Her statement came one day before the statement of the provincial government of North Holland which refused to reserve space for the expansion of Schiphol airport.

Outward-looking, economically-driven forces will continue to challenge inward-looking, protectionist pressures both in policy and public debates: nothing is straightforward in the Netherlands.