

*A discourse outlining the best and surest form and frame of government to be established in the Netherlands in these times, 1583*

Introduction: This discourse was written shortly after the duke of Anjou's unsuccessful *coup d'Etat* on January 17, 1583. The text is from E.H. Kossmann and A.F. Mellink, eds., *Texts Concerning the Revolt of The Netherlands*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974, pp. 243-46.

Though there can be no form of government in the world which is without disadvantages, and which may not be abused, yet it is clear that no more efficient or lasting form of government may be devised or established in these evil times than aristocracy combined with democracy, that is government by the best nobles and the wisest commoners. Under such a system the most suitable and capable inhabitants and citizens are chosen to govern their fellow-citizens on certain conditions and for a fixed period of time. The citizens obey their chosen masters readily and loyally, but retain the power and the freedom to dismiss the members of the government whom they find incapable of governing or not behaving as they should in government, and to fill the vacancy properly. After shaking off the yoke of the tyrants, the Swiss, to their honour, established such a government and so far have honestly kept it. It is clear that our fatherland which endured under the Spaniards a tyranny incomparably more savage than the Swiss ever suffered and which recently experienced the murderous and treacherous disloyalty of the French [the fury at Antwerp on January 17, 1583], has much more reason, ability and opportunity to establish such a government or a similar one, than the Swiss have ever had. Indeed, the duke of Alva, Requesens, Don John of Austria and the prince of Parma are now conscious that our Netherlands have the ability and opportunity to establish a fine government of this sort and that we have many forces and strongholds ...

It is not only the chronicles that testify that our fellow-countrymen themselves have strong hands and feet. Recently this was made abundantly clear in Holland and Zeeland and there would have been more such examples if our nation had been allowed to bear arms and train in the use of them and had it not been considered better to enlist foreigners. For as a result our countrymen were unable to discover their own strength and allowed themselves to be treated only as milch-cows. In fact the inhabitants of Antwerp recently proved (the eternal credit be to

God alone) that when necessary they could behave like men. Others could do this too, if they were well-drilled and well-commanded and not hindered and obstructed. Therefore the author of the dialogue in which Ernest and Emanuel [a dialogue of 1580, which makes a strong plea for accepting the duke of Anjou as the sovereign] hold a discussion should feel ashamed of despising all the inhabitants of our country as if they were all drunkards, tipplers and misers and as if no brave man was to be found. His fellow-countrymen the French will convince him of the contrary. This author would better have used his tongue and pen (which for so long he has hired out, nay sold for money) for a better purpose, but he will surely get his punishment.

Now it is time for us to stop looking and hearing with foreign eyes and ears; it is time to stop protecting ourselves by means of foreign hands; we should open our own ears and eyes and use our own hands and people for our deliverance and protection, provided we have God's paternal help. For what are we short of? Do we not like other countries also have strong men to bear cuirass and lance and to use the arquebus? Does our country not excel above all others in experienced sailors, mariners and seamen? We have listened far too long to counsellors who took advice from Marciovelli [Machiavelli, in fact, argued the opposite in *The Prince*] and wished everything done by foreign soldiers so that ignorant of our strength we might be fleeced to the bone. Men who aspired to become tyrants have always used such methods of warfare but all who strive for the deliverance and liberty of the country and the people provide the inhabitants of the country with arms. Men fight best for the protection of their own wives and children, houses, land and property, and for their own lives, much better than soldiers called for money from foreign countries ...

The government just described should not seem new or improper to us, Netherlanders. It was only a generation ago that we came under a monarch or chief and to this very day the marks of our ancient freedoms are still manifest in our right to convoke and summon the States and the members of the provinces. No better form of government can be devised because by it the magistrates are obliged to govern prudently and wisely and with all humility for otherwise they are dismissed and disgraced. Thus the subjects are induced to love, honour and obey their government, for it is the government they have chosen themselves and which they have sworn to obey. This form of government is no rebellious disorderly ataxia or confusion, as the flatterers of

tyrants are wont to call it, but a just isonomia, as the Greeks call it, that is an equality of justice, because in such a government law and justice are to be enjoyed equally by everyone without favouritism and irrespective of rank. In all free imperial towns in Germany a very similar form and frame of government is to be found. We might well follow the German example and as far as the privileges and old freedoms of every province and town permit, unite and ally into one body to resist together the common enemy sharing costs if he attacks or harms any one of us. Thus we might relieve and free our allies in the way that was devised and decided at Utrecht... [the treaty of the Union of Utrecht in 1679]

If the form of government described above is established, it is to be hoped that the provinces, which broke away from us [the Walloon provinces with the Treaty of Arras] to satisfy the ambition of some individuals, will again unite with us to resist the common enemy and to protect and champion the freedom of the common fatherland. They have reason to do so. They find themselves reduced to the greatest poverty, a poverty that will get even worse because they gave in to the passions and aspirations of some of them and allowed the Spaniards to establish themselves firmly. They now know what is to be expected from the Spaniards, should they get the upper hand again and become masters of the country. It is true that there are as yet no proper ways to introduce the exercise of the true religion into the alienated provinces; but should they be willing to allow freedom of conscience and permit those who have other and better feelings, to depart elsewhere, whenever it suits them, with goods and chattels, we may with a good conscience conclude a civil alliance with them for the protection of the common fatherland and in the hope that God will open their eyes and give them the knowledge of His Word as by His Grace He has done in other provinces. For this is still happening daily in Germany and Switzerland and the afore-said provinces agreed to such an arrangement in the Pacification framed at Ghent. and will therefore have no objection to what is being proposed here.