



Why the Dutch must win hearts and minds

By Jan Melissen



Geert Wilders, the far-right Dutch member of parliament who has made an anti-Koran film called Fitna (Arabic for chaos), is putting exceptional pressure on his country's political elite. Mr Wilders, who likened the Koran to Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf, is the Netherlands' best known politician throughout the Islamic world. Fitna has not yet been shown. However, burning Dutch and Danish flags in Afghanistan and crisis preparations in The Hague and Brussels indicate that this is already a big issue, and the film is a point of discussion at this week's European summit. The maverick politician is determined to broadcast his Islamophobic ideas this month. Jan Peter Balkenende, prime minister, has publicly acknowledged that he has a crisis on his hands. The Dutch government cannot be blamed for focusing on the immediate threat, but it must also reflect on the long-term issue of the Netherlands' international reputation.

The consequences of this affair will be different from those of the Danish cartoon incident, but this is hardly reassuring. Diplomacy is the art of smoothing out such matters, but it is hard to defend oneself against potential hate campaigns, violence against citizens overseas or a spontaneous boycott of products. The possible criticism by western opinion leaders of the "Dutch condition", a constant theme in political crises related to the country's climate of intolerance and tight integration policies in recent years, would also be politically damaging.

Film or no film, Maxime Verhagen, the Dutch foreign minister, needs to readjust policies on how the country is portrayed abroad, focusing on the potential of Dutch society. Maximising Dutch "soft power" has a different set of rules from traditional diplomacy. It is important for public diplomacy to intensify non-official relations with foreign countries, heed the cultural component of foreign policy and hold dialogue with one's own citizens. It is not about government to government relations, but about getting through to the nooks and crannies of other countries that official diplomacy cannot reach.

The problem with The Hague's public diplomacy is that, too often, government itself executes

policy at a time when there is decreasing confidence in government. Moreover, international cultural policy has not kept up with the times. Cultural diplomacy is not only about presenting a country's culture and improving its image abroad. It is, first and foremost, an instrument for deepening debates about society and culture at home. Insufficient attention is paid to this last dimension.

These are not just flaws in Dutch policy. European diplomatic services have been debating public diplomacy for years, but foreign ministries struggle to keep up with changing communication patterns. Even France, which has nurtured its image for centuries, finds it hard to relate to the concept of public diplomacy.

The Dutch and other European powers could involve their citizens more in discussions on international politics and foreign policy, transforming the ministry of foreign affairs into more of a domestic department. Consultations on foreign policy, using modern technology but also old-fashioned face-to-face diplomatic outreach to domestic constituencies, strengthen support for international efforts. Outside Europe, countries as diverse as Canada and Indonesia are far ahead in this regard. They

realise that domestic outreach and global reputation are connected.

In the Netherlands, the need for domestic public diplomacy occurs in a period of confusion about Dutch identity. In recent years, the Dutch have learnt a great deal from political upheaval surrounding the assassinations of politician Pim Fortuyn and film-maker Theo van Gogh, as well as debates about MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali's Dutch citizenship and the limits of her protection by government. But now, more than ever, fresh ideas are needed. Mr Verhagen should place more of the execution of public diplomacy with independent organisations and public groups, partly sponsored by companies.

Governmental bodies have a credibility problem: the public distrusts official information.

The commotion surrounding Mr Wilders' film will continue to test politics in the Netherlands for some time. But this affair also offers an opportunity for long-term investment in the country's international reputation.

*Jan Melissen is director of diplomatic studies at the Clingendael Institute of International Relations, The Hague, and professor of diplomacy at Antwerp University. His book, *The New Public Diplomacy* (Palgrave), was published in paperback last year.*

This *Clingendael Commentary* was first published on March 14, 2008 in the *Financial Times* and is also available on the Clingendael-website: <http://www.clingendael.nl/>