Talking Active Citizenship: Framing Welfare State Reform in England and the Netherlands

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Review Article
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This article reviews how activation policies frame citizens as individual welfare agents. The analysis focuses on the framing of feeling rules employed by governments that encourage active citizenship, in this instance in the Netherlands and England. In England, encouraging voluntarism is central to the Big Society agenda; in the Netherlands, it is at the heart of the 2007 Social Support Act and more recent ideas on citizenship. Governments cannot compel their citizens to volunteer their time; they can, however, try to seduce people by playing on their emotions. Based on an analysis of thirty-nine policy documents and political speeches, we find that English politicians employ 'empowerment talk' calculated to trigger positive feelings about being active citizens, while Dutch politicians employ 'responsibility talk' conveying negative feelings about failure to participate more actively in society. Responsibility talk runs the risk that citizens respond with counter-responsibility claims, whereas empowerment talk can fail to incite sufficient enthousiasm among citizens.

The quest for active citizenship

Over the last two to three decades, promoting 'active citizenship' has become the 'ethical a priori' of neoliberal policy-making in Western welfare states (Rose, 2006: 159–60). Active citizenship has become almost synonymous with decreasing citizen dependence on social services and other welfare arrangements. Active citizens are expected to take personal responsibility for their employability, health and finances (Borgi and van Berkel, 2007: 413–14; Fuller *et al.*, 2008: 157–8; Perry 6 *et al.*, 2010: 427–30) as well as for the social cohesion, safety and 'liveability' of their communities (Marinetto, 2003; Newman and Tonkens, 2011). Through volunteering, citizens are expected to shoulder tasks formerly performed by the state, such as providing care and support to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Similar developments have been witnessed in Canada (Ilcan and Basok, 2004; Fuller *et al.*, 2008), the United States (Bloom and Kilgore, 2003), Sweden (Lundström, 1996), the UK (Acheson, 2001; Lindsay, 2001; Newman and Clarke, 2009), Italy (Muehlebach, 2012), the Netherlands (Verhoeven and Ham, 2010; Tonkens, 2011) and in some former Eastern European countries such as Hungary (Bruszt and Vedres, 2008).

Critics have argued that policies to encourage active citizenship instrumentalise citizens and effectively serve to undermine their motivation as volunteers, thus crowding out their citizenship (Ostrom, 2000). Others have pointed to how such policies, by enlisting the public to execute the government's agenda, encourage de-politicisation (Bruszt and Vedres, 2008: 142). In *The Moral Neoliberal*, anthropologist Andrea Muehlebach (2012) argues that this opposition between 'instrumentalised' and 'critical' citizens is too blunt. Governments want citizens to engage in volunteering and community-building, an agenda that attracts many citizens who believe that neoliberalism threatens to dehumanise society. How welfare state reform is framed, through a language of morality that contrasts itself to cold and calculating neoliberalism, is crucial here. Nevertheless, policies designed to encourage greater citizen responsibility are at the very heart of the neoliberal project (Muehlebach, 2012).

Muehlebach bases her findings on welfare state reform in Europe in general, and in Italy in particular. Building on her work, we analyse the framing processes governments use to promote welfare state reform. We review policy documents focusing on a comparison between England and the Netherlands as these governments are frontrunners in the implementation of policies aimed at 'active citizenship'. We compare England as part of the UK with the Netherlands as a country. This comparison was chosen because in the UK devolution is much further evolved than in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, local authorities generally operate within the framework provided by the (national) government. The governments of the other parts of the UK generally take a very different approach from the Coalition. For the UK, we therefore limit our scope to England.

In both countries governments actively appeal to volunteers and civil society organisations to shoulder responsibility for the common good. In England, encouraging active citizenship is central to the Big Society agenda launched by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government; in the Netherlands, encouraging active citizenship is at the heart of the 2007 Social Support Act (SSA). We focus on how both governments frame their policies in their efforts to appeal to people's sense of citizenship and community and move them to voluntary action. The state cannot force citizens to dedicate their spare time to care for and support others in the community; it can only appeal to citizens to engage in desired forms of behaviour. Policy-makers can try to make citizens want what they wish them to want, and to want it so vigorously that citizens will act spontaneously without the feeling that government is constraining or controlling them.

Framing is generally seen as a goal-oriented process of meaning production through which actors select, accentuate, characterise and increase the importance of certain aspects of observed reality (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow, 2004). Following Muehlebach (2012), we are particularly interested in the emotional aspects of these framing processes (cf. Gross and D'Ambrosio, 2004); namely, how governments speak to citizens' hearts and feelings to move them to action.

To grasp the emotional aspect of how governments frame their policies, we make use of Hochschild's concept of 'feeling rules'. Feeling rules 'define what we imagine we should and shouldn't feel and would like to feel over a range of circumstances' (Hochschild, 2003: 82). 'A feeling rule delineates a zone within which one has permission to be free of worry, guilt or shame with regard to the situated feeling' (Hochschild, 2003: 98). Feeling rules thus tell us whether our feelings are appropriate or inappropriate. Within Hochschild's

emotion management framework, feeling rules are embedded in framing rules: 'the rules according to which we ascribe definitions or meanings to situations' (Hochschild, 2003: 99). Framing rules thus point to the cognitive, meaningful and interpretive frame within which feeling rules are situated. The norm that citizens should engage in voluntary work is a framing rule, while the norm to feel happy about volunteering, or to feel guilty about failing to do so, is a feeling rule (cf. Tonkens, 2012: 199).

This article focuses on the feeling rules that governments employ to encourage active citizenship. We do not focus on how individual citizens use feeling rules, as Hochschild does, but on how collective actors use them to persuade citizens to volunteer (cf. Bröer and Duyvendak, 2009: 407–8). Our central question is therefore: what feeling rules do governments employ to encourage volunteers and civil society organisations to assume tasks formerly provided by the state?

In addition to the concepts of framing processes and feeling rules, we analyse policy language as forms of 'talk'. 'Talk' here refers to recurrent themes that are repeated time and again like a mantra, and which structure discourse in specific contexts (Eliasoph, 2011: x). Eliasoph (2011: x) gives the example of the 'empowerment talk' of a US-based youth programme calling for 'civic, participatory, open, inclusive, egalitarian and voluntary' engagement.

Our empirical analysis is based on thirty-nine policy documents and political speeches in England and the Netherlands. We analysed and coded the material with AtlasTi, focusing on similarities and differences in the framing of core concepts such as responsibility, power, empowerment, volunteering and devolution; who was held responsible for problems; who was addressed as agents of change; and how they were encouraged to act. Before we present our empirical analysis, we first give a brief overview of the political agendas of the Big Society in England and the 2007 Social Support Act in the Netherlands.

Overview of the Big Society and Social Support Act agendas

The Big Society in England

The Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition in England launched the Big Society programme in May 2010: 'We share a conviction that the days of big government are over; that centralisation and top-down control have proved a failure' (Cabinet Office, 2010a). The Big Society agenda has three core components:

1. Empowering communities: giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area.
2. Opening up public services: the Government's public service reforms will enable charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high quality services.
3. Promoting social action: encouraging and enabling people from all walks of life to play a more active part in society, and promoting more volunteering and philanthropy. (Office for Civil Society, 2010)

An important legal corollary of the first two aims is the Localism Act of 2011, designed to give councils, professionals and citizens more decision-making power to shape their communities and neighbourhoods. The Act aims to increase choice, accessibility and

control for service users, open up services to new providers and decentralise services to the lowest level. It includes the 'General Power of Competence' granted to local authorities to do anything they want provided that they do not break other laws (Department for Local Government and Communities, 2010: 7). The Act also includes the 'right to challenge', which allows citizens and civil society organisations to compete in bidding to provide social services, and the 'right to buy', which allows them to identify and bid for community centres, libraries and other assets that they deem vital to the community (Department for Local Government and Communities, 2010: 7).

The third key element of the Big Society agenda, 'promoting social action', includes promoting voluntary work in organisations and charitable giving, but also helping out sick neighbours and other informal acts of voluntarism, all in order to reduce citizens' reliance on the state. The government hopes to encourage a 'culture shift that makes social action a social norm' (Cabinet Office, 2010b: 4).

The Big Society agenda is not entirely new: it builds on New Labour's interest in voluntarism and in involving civil society organisations in the delivery of public services. The Big Society, however, is also a criticism of New Labour's high spending on public services and its adoption of New Public Management, including its intensified state control over the 'third sector', bureaucratic targets, and accountability and audit mechanisms that disempower citizens and service workers (cf. Department for Local Government and Communities, 2010: 4; Alcock, 2011). There has been extensive criticism of the Big Society agenda in England, mostly focusing on its outcomes (cf. Kisby, 2010; Civil Exchange, 2012; Corbett and Walker, 2012). This article does not, however, focus on the outcomes of the Big Society agenda. Instead, we want to understand how the Big Society has been framed to appeal to volunteers and civil society organisations.

The Social Support Act in the Netherlands

The agenda for the Dutch Social Support Act (SSA) has developed over the course of four predominantly conservative cabinets since 2002. It aims to recalibrate responsibilities between central and local government, between government and citizens, and between citizens themselves (Tweede Kamer, 2004–05). The SSA is often called the 'participation law':

> The goal of the Social Support Act is that everybody – old and young, handicapped and not handicapped, with or without problems – can join in social life. Everybody agrees that this is necessary. Many people can join without help but others need help and support, or a stimulating environment. Family, friends, social networks and organisations that citizens are a part of offer this help to a significant extent. (Tweede Kamer, 2003–04)

In the above passage, we can discern two of the three major themes in the SSA agenda: enhancing the social participation of vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, psychiatric patients and the elderly in need of care), and a call to all citizens to volunteer to provide informal care to these vulnerable groups. The third theme in the SSA agenda is the devolution of care tasks and social support from central to local government. The dominant reasoning behind this agenda is that care and social support are first and foremost the personal responsibility of citizens. If they cannot support themselves, then they have to rely on their networks of family, friends and neighbours. Where they cannot

help, volunteers outside their personal networks may do so. Government and professional support only enter the picture when all of these other options fail to deliver (De Klerk *et al.*, 2010: 23). The SSA combines social goals such as self-reliance, participation in society, active citizenship and social cohesion with administrative goals such as coherent policy-making, efficiency, custom-made services, increasing the influence of citizens on SSA policy-making at the local level, and freedom of choice (De Klerk *et al.*, 2010: 28–33).

Active citizenship has more recently received new impetus under the conservative and partly populist government of Prime Minister Rutte. Informed by unprecedented budget cuts, the government's call for active citizenship in all domains of public life has increased, particularly looking for ways to make citizens more self-reliant and less dependent on the welfare state. In this, the Dutch Minister of the Interior has referred several times to Big Society policies in England. This was initially a process of management by speech that did not lead to new white papers. However, the Ministry of the Interior has recently begun financing local experiments to establish mutuals, trusts and other forms of citizen-driven entrepreneurship that have been championed by the Westminster government for England.

Empowerment versus responsibility talk

Although the Big Society and the Social Support Act have some important similarities, there are significant differences in how their agendas are framed. Two types of 'talk' structure these differences: 'empowerment talk' in England, and 'responsibility talk' in the Netherlands. Empowerment talk aims to enable citizens, social service workers and civil society organisations to take over public services and to take community initiative. Responsibility talk focuses on the duty of citizens to take care of their fellow citizens and communities. We found the two forms of talk to differ in four ways.

Who is to blame: government or citizens?

The first difference between these two forms of talk concerns who is to blame for what has gone wrong thus far. They entail different feeling rules concerning towards whom one can legitimately feel negative emotions, and thus who is a legitimate target of criticism: citizens or the government. In England, the government is blamed for what has gone wrong:

> We are determined to make a clean break with the old big government approach of the past. For if ever a radical change of approach was needed it is now. 'Big Government' has not only failed to solve the problems of social breakdown and deprivation; it has frequently made them worse ... Centrally-driven, top-down government not only strips away the sense of ownership and responsibility from citizens who use public services, but disempowers the professionals who run them and alienates them from the communities they serve. (Maude, 2010)

English politicians thus tell their citizens that it is legitimate to have negative feelings about the government. In the Netherlands, in contrast, citizens get the blame:

> Citizens are increasingly put in the position of the consumer and client of public services and care, and less in the position of the engaged and responsible citizen. This contributes to a

climate in which the government is expected to solve all problems while creativity, engagement and ability to solve problems gets lost or is only expressed in criticism towards the government. This situation is unsustainable. (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2011)

It is legitimate to experience negative feelings towards other citizens. They are grumbling lazybones, expecting everything from the government rather than shouldering responsibility themselves. Citizens must change their irresponsible attitudes:

It is outdated that you as an inhabitant of this country only have to make a sound to get some government agency to solve your problem. (Spies, 2012)

The Dutch government thus opens the door to feelings of scorn towards other citizens, as the feeling rules prescribe: they are behaving as babies who think that other people will come to their rescue if they only make a sound. It is all right to dislike them.

Citizens' influence

A second difference between the two types of talk concerns the influence granted to citizens by the state. In England, the devolution of power to a host of local actors is framed as urgently necessary to give citizens power:

We will promote decentralization and democratic engagement, and we will end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals. (Cabinet Office, 2010a)

In the Netherlands, the powerlessness of citizens and civil society organisations is not as big an issue as it is in England. Instead, citizens and their organisations should just accept responsibility, as they presumably did before the heyday of the welfare state:

The Cabinet thinks that the individualisation of society has outpaced people and their civic associations taking responsibility. While in the past taking responsibility was the normal thing to do ... over the last years we have seen a shift ... But the Cabinet re-positions personal responsibility as the central issue. (Tweede Kamer, 2003–04)

Again, negative feeling rules are expressed concerning other citizens who fail to do 'the normal thing'. If you complain about such behaviour, you can trust the government to lend you a willing ear. Feelings in society, the Dutch government argues, must change:

It is important for the credibility of the system that a feeling exists in society that people must do themselves and together with others what they can do themselves and with others. (Tweede Kamer, 2003–04)

Apparently, insofar as people do not feel that 'people must do for themselves ... what they can do themselves', it is legitimate to feel bad about such people. To ensure that people want to do 'the normal thing', municipalities must 'only offer support in situations that everybody recognizes as logical and necessary' (Tweede Kamer, 2003–04).

It must be noted that Dutch responsibility talk does not completely exclude greater citizen influence. Citizens, for instance, should be more involved in local policy-making:

> The Cabinet thinks that it is of vital importance . . . that citizens and their organisations are engaged in formulating local policy [specifically of the SSA, the authors]. (Tweede Kamer, 2003–04)

While empowerment talk in England sometimes also refers to responsibility, it is not very often. Here is a telling example from a speech by David Cameron:

> To me, there's one word at the heart of all this, and that is responsibility. We need people to take more responsibility. We need people to act more responsibly, because if you take any problem in our country and you just think: 'Well, what can the government do to sort it out?', that is only ever going to be half of the answer. (Cameron, 2011)

Cameron suggests that responsibility is to be shared by citizens and government; in Dutch responsibility talk, the emphasis is all on the personal responsibility of citizens.

Pleasure versus duty

A third difference between English empowerment talk and Dutch responsibility talk is their tone: *energy and pleasure* in the former, *fatigue and duty* in the latter. Empowerment talk is energetic, optimistic and positive: it aims to seduce and enchant its audience. It paints an attractive picture on the horizon and points to a road leading towards it:

> When you ask people: how do you feel about this idea of playing a greater role, of communities having greater control over their lives? People say, 'Well, I like the idea, but I don't believe it's possible'. I think we have to show that it is possible, that actually there is a way. (Cameron, 2011)

The government not only devolves power; it also expects citizens to use this power and to give their time and energy. The texts we have analysed are loaded with positive feeling rules concerning this change. Giving your time and effort is not just something the government dictates. It is something you should feel great about:

> Giving time can make us feel good about ourselves too, while at the same time enhancing other aspects of life: socially, for instance, as a way of making new friends and building ties in your community; and professionally as a means to learn new skills. (Cabinet Office, 2010b)

Even when the contribution of citizens is framed as a duty, it is with the promise that in doing so, they will change society:

> We will campaign to make volunteering and philanthropic giving the norm, supporting the sector to mobilise an army of active citizens with which to change society. (Maude, 2010)

Dutch responsibility talk, on the other hand, is suffused with the duties of citizens:

> Ensuring social cohesion, engagement between citizens and social stability demand first and foremost active effort from citizens. (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2011)

It implies feeling rules that allow you to feel a certain fatigue towards your fellow citizens who still do not do 'the normal thing' and still 'expect everything from other people or the government':

> The voluntary effort of citizens, both informal and unorganised ... and embedded in organisations ... forms an indispensable part of 'civil society'. Volunteering is also an eminent vehicle for citizens to take responsibility and not to expect everything from other people or the government. (Tweede Kamer, 2004–05)

This fatigue contrasts with the British texts which convey feeling rules that citizens should feel passionate about the changes, which promise more than merely the retrenchment of the welfare state but something new and exciting:

> What is it I am really passionate about? It is actually social recovery as well as economic recovery. (Cameron, 2011)

You should feel great, as your prime minister does, for the government is creating nothing less than a 'humane and dignified society':

> We want these things not simply because we can no longer afford a Big Government approach, although that is certainly true. We want these things because a Big Society, a responsible and active society, is simply a better society – a healthier society, with a greater sense of well-being, a humane and dignified society. (Maude, 2010)

The Dutch government does not promise such an exciting future. It rather talks the language of necessity:

> Government should limit itself to its task: taking care of public matters, education, safety and law and order, but for the rest it will have to be more trusting and leave responsibilities to concerned citizens. (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2011)

The feeling rule conveyed here is that it is legitimate to not like welfare state reform, but that there is simply no other way. For the Dutch government, this is not a happy choice, but a serious, inevitable and necessary one. Given the growing need for care and the number of over-burdened informal care-givers, more volunteers are needed. A central part of the Social Support Act revolves around this issue of finding volunteers to provide informal care to vulnerable people. With the recent budget cuts, citizens are expected to assume responsibilities in many other areas of social life as well.

Communities versus individuals

The fourth, and final, difference we found between the two forms of talk appears in how governments situate citizens. In England, citizens are mostly framed in the context of communities, which emerge as the main targets and sources of hope. The government

wants to 'encourage people to play a more active role in their communities' (Cameron, 2010). It wants 'communities coming together to make lives better' (Cabinet Office, 2010a: 8) and 'make it easier for people to come together to improve their communities and help one another' (ibid. 29). To promote community action, the government 'will train a new generation of community organisers and support the creation of neighbourhood groups across England, especially in the most deprived areas' (Cabinet Office, 2010a: 29). Community groups and organisations 'bind local communities around common challenges' (Maude, 2010).

Dutch responsibility talk, on the other hand, is mainly about individual citizens:

> The Cabinet would like to see people behaving responsibly. This means taking responsibility according to one's own ability in a self-reliant way and with as much choice as possible: to be aware of the costs of services; care for fellow citizens; participation in civil associations and volunteering. (Tweede Kamer, 2003–04)

> Voluntary work is the pre-eminent vehicle for citizens to take responsibility and not to expect everything from others or the government. With his voluntary work the citizen is not only a consumer of public services, but he makes an active contribution. He not only designs his own participation, but also contributes to the participation of vulnerable groups. (Tweede Kamer, 2004–05)

The feeling rules clearly differ between 'we' who are in this together to take care of 'our' communities in England versus 'you' as an individual citizen who should 'make an active contribution' in the Netherlands. Empowerment talk makes you feel enclosed in a warm bath of community life whereas responsibility talk sets you aside as an individual.

Conclusion

Welfare state reform tends to centre on similar ingredients. First, there is an emphasis on the need for more active citizenship, mainly in terms of more voluntary work, informal care and support, and greater citizen responsibility and self-reliance in the place of 'dependence on the welfare state'. Second, power is devolved towards the local level, both in the hands of citizens as well as local government and civil society organisations. But when we look at the framing of welfare state reform, we see some major differences.

In comparing the feeling rules implicit in the framing of welfare state reform in England and the Netherlands we found different kinds of 'talk' dominating the discourse: what we called 'empowerment talk' in England and 'responsibility talk' in the Netherlands. English empowerment talk blames government, grants citizens more influence over local matters, radiates energy and pleasure, focuses on communities and civil society organisations, and conveys feeling rules that it is legitimate to have negative feelings towards government, that citizens should seize the opportunity to take power, that participation is joyful and that active citizenship is about 'we' and 'our' communities. In contrast, Dutch responsibility talk blames citizens, does not grant citizens more influence over local matters, sounds fatigued and dutiful, focuses on individual citizens, and conveys feeling rules that it is appropriate to have negative feelings about other citizens, that citizens should feel bad if they do not do the 'normal' thing, that participation is a duty, and that active citizenship is about 'you' and 'your' contribution to society.

The two forms of talk clearly convey very different 'emotional performances'. Empowerment talk is emotionally seductive with its appeal to the positive feelings of being an active citizen. Becoming engaged is joyful and part of what 'we' as citizens do. It is an emotional appeal comparable to Barack Obama's first campaign: 'Yes we can!'. As a citizen, you can jump on the bandwagon without experiencing emotional distress. Government is the culprit and we as good citizens are kind enough to step in and take over where we can. In contrast, responsibility talk appeals to negative feelings: we are bad citizens because we don't assume enough public responsibility. We should feel ashamed for being so passive and leaving too much to our already over-burdened government. The feeling rules in this form of talk focus on emotional distress, like a child being taught a lesson by her parents.

It is too early to tell, but it seems plausible that the empowerment talk of English politicians will be more successful in encouraging active citizenship than the responsibility talk of Dutch politicians. Opinion research by The Netherlands Institute for Social Research shows that the political message to assume greater responsibility is not deemed credible by Dutch citizens due to its accusatory tone (Dekker and Den Ridder, 2011: 21). This suggests that the emphasis in responsibility talk on negative emotions does not resonate with the cultural expectations of citizens on how they would like to be addressed. In this sense, responsibility talk by Dutch politicians stands the risk of suffering from performative failure: a mismatch between meaning production and its cultural context (Alexander 2006: 32–7). On the other hand, the more positive framing of welfare state reform by English politicians may lead to rising expectations: it tells citizens to feel excited about the change in relations between citizens and government. But if citizens do not feel this way, the performance of empowerment talk can fail as well.

The different forms of talk and their attendant feeling rules are not just symbolic politics. They reflect different strategies by the English and Dutch central governments to encourage active citizenship. The Big Society agenda in England is supported by substantial investments in the Volunteering Match Fund, the Volunteering Infrastructure program, the Local Infrastructure Fund, the Community First Fund, the Big Society Bank (with a £200 million fund) and the training of 5,000 community organizers. This is not the place to discuss whether these investments will be successful; we only want to point to the commitment of the English central government as it stands in stark contrast to its Dutch counterpart. In the Netherlands, the budgets for formal and informal care have been cut at the national level, and power and responsibility devolved to the municipalities under the Social Support Act. While Big Society-inspired ideas about self-management in the public services and self-government in arranging public spaces can be heard, these to date remain management by speech.

Acknowledgements

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