

MA THESIS

# Fuelling Transition:

Assessing the private-public relationship of Royal Dutch Shell in the energy transition of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the Netherlands

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## Abstract

This research will explore the role of oil companies in the formulation of an energy transition policy discourse within the Netherlands in the twenty-first century. To adequately conduct this research, a theoretical framework shall be constructed from the studies of discourse and hegemony, the political economy, and socio-technical transitions, which will then be applied to the case study of Royal Dutch Shell's political engagement. Upon comparing the main energy transition policy discourses of both the Dutch government and Shell three rather similar key points were found: the importance of cooperation of multiple actors within society to achieve the transition, the emphasis on the commercial viability of new and renewable energy projects, and a persisting future role of fossil fuel in the energy system and transition (especially for natural gas). Oil companies, and Shell specifically, have participated in the political arena through lobbying and private-public secondments, but also through direct participation in energy transition policy process. By placing the findings of the research in light of the theoretical framework the firm impression is given that the discourses communicated by both the government and Shell are linked and represent the vested interests of both actors in the energy transition process and future.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The debate surrounding the issue of climate change knows many facets, angles and actors. A specific critique has been the growing role of large emitters in tackling this growing problem the world is facing. Some of the largest emitters, both in consumption and production, have been identified as big (multinational) oil corporations. These corporations, however, have not been left out of the conversations on climate change governance. They are often attributed the role of adversary when it comes to pro-active climate change regulations and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The oil and gas companies find increasing pressures on the role they have in the formation of current energy systems and their position within society and politics. The companies are incumbent actors in the current energy transition (a shift to low-carbon energy production), which in turn is considered as necessary to tackle climate change.<sup>2</sup> For this research specifically, the region of focus is the Netherlands, as it was one of the first countries to adopt the ideas of ‘transition management’ in energy transition policy.<sup>3</sup> Transition management looks at the socio-cultural factors essential to changing set energy regimes and systems. Such regimes develop over-time and create socio-technological ‘lock-ins’. As societies remain reliant on the forms of energy production that have historically produced prosperity, such as fossil fuels, of which the negative externalities have become a more pressing issue. A socio-technical transition refers to the society-wide set of components that are employed in the shift from one regime to another. Not just technology here develops and changes, but also politics, the economy and parts of the society experience change in such transitions.<sup>4</sup>

The Netherlands is an interesting country to investigate because of its apparent society-wide approach to energy transitions. Such an approach includes a large variety of actors, which brings with it its own complications as well. Though in policy concerning energy transition the Netherlands is not lacking, the numbers describing share in low-carbon and renewable energy sources are lagging behind many other European Union countries. The formulation of the energy transition arising from important actors within the energy system seems to mainly be focused on complementing the current fossil fuel-based energy production with more ‘green’

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<sup>1</sup> Naghmeh Nasiritousi, “Fossil Fuel Emitters and Climate Change: Unpacking the Governance Activities of Large Oil and Gas Companies,” *Environmental Politics* 26, no. 4 (July 4, 2017): 621-622.

<sup>2</sup> International Energy Agency, *The Oil and Gas Industry in Energy Transitions*, Paris: International Energy Agency 2020, Accessed 7 January 2021,3-5.

<sup>3</sup> Erik Laes, Leen Gorissen, and Frank Nevens, “A Comparison of Energy Transition Governance in Germany, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom,” *Sustainability* 6, no. 3 (March 2014): 1129.

<sup>4</sup> Derk Loorbach, Niki Frantzeskaki, and Roebin Lijnis Huffenreuter, “Transition Management: Taking Stock from Governance Experimentation,” *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* 2015 (June 1, 2015), 49.

alternatives. Contrary to a sweeping and more extreme change of the system, in which fossil fuel would be locked-out.<sup>5</sup> This research will try to uncover the role of the oil companies within the formulation of energy transition policy in the Netherlands. The following research question will be answered doing so: How do oil companies participate in the formulation of a specific energy transition policy discourse in the Netherlands in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and what influence did this have on policy?

To adequately answer this research question and accompanying sub-questions, a case study will be employed. The case study for this research will be the oil and gas company Royal Dutch Shell. This multinational is of Anglo-Dutch origin and its headquarters have been located in the Hague since 2005.<sup>6</sup> Public sources provided by the company itself show that Shell actively concerns itself with the debate surrounding climate change and energy transitions, including that of the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) the total energy consumption in 2017 consisted 41.2% of natural gas, 38.5% of crude petroleum, 12.1% of coal (products) and 8.2% of renewable and other energy sources (as for example nuclear). Not just oil, but also natural gas is thus an important energy source, and unlike oil, gas extraction is mainly done on Dutch soil.<sup>8</sup> The concessions to various Dutch gas fields are held by three key actors, Royal Dutch Shell, ExxonMobil and the Dutch state. Shell and ExxonMobil are both owners of the Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij (NAM), which is the largest producer of natural gas in the Netherlands. These two companies, together with the Dutch state own both GasTerra and Maatschap Groningen. The latter of which is directed towards natural gas extraction in the Groningen region in the north of the Netherlands. Once, both the companies were also involved in the Gasunie, which is now completely owned by the state and concerns itself with the transportation of gas.<sup>9</sup> As is evident by this short energy profile of the Netherlands, Shell has an important role in the production of energy in the Netherlands. In addition, their productive activities are intertwined with that of the state. This, in combination with the company's Dutch origins and the current location of its headquarters

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<sup>5</sup> Rick Bosman et al., "Discursive Regime Dynamics in the Dutch Energy Transition," *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 13 (December 1, 2014): 46.

<sup>6</sup> Keetie Sluyterman and Ben Wubs, "Multinationals and the Dutch Business System: The Cases of Royal Dutch Shell and Sara Lee," *The Business History Review* 84, no. 4 (2010): 804.

<sup>7</sup> Shell Netherlands, "De Nederlandse energietransitie en Shell," accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.shell.nl/energy-and-innovation/energietransitie.html>.

<sup>8</sup> CBS, "Energy | Trends in the Netherlands 2018 - CBS," accessed February 9, 2021, <https://longreads.cbs.nl/trends18-eng/economy/figures/energy>.

<sup>9</sup> NAM, "Gasgebouw," accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.nam.nl/over-ons/gasgebouw.html>.

makes for an interesting case study of Royal Dutch Shell when researching energy and energy politics within the Netherlands.

The literature review that can be found in a following chapter will combine the concepts of the political economy of energy transitions and the multi-level perspective literature to reconstruct the societal context in which private actors (oil corporations specifically) move and influence the debate and policy surrounding energy transitions. It will highlight the different literature on energy transitions and the theoretical approaches taken before by other academics. The sub-questions that will follow and support the literature review and the research question are: What is the (hegemonic) discourse surrounding the current energy transition in the Netherlands? This first sub-question will conceptualise the concepts of discourse in policy and the term 'hegemonic discourse', as relevant for the analysis within this research. Following this, the concepts will be applied to the state of energy transition policy in the Netherlands in the years 2000-2020. Thus, the hegemonic discourse of energy transition policy in the Netherlands shall be identified as well.

The next sub-question to be answered is: How do private actors, oil companies especially, influence energy transition policy discourse in the Netherlands? This sub-question will try to uncover the possible processes through which the private actors concern themselves with politics and policy formation. As additional sources to answer the question, I will use Dutch media, such as newspapers and news platforms. To see how they evaluate the influence of private actors on politics in the Netherlands.

The following sub-questions shall be employed to examine the case study of Royal Dutch Shell: What is the attitude of Royal Dutch Shell to the energy transition according to their business reports? And how do they participate in public platforms and institutions? The third sub-question will evaluate how the company positions itself in the debate surrounding the energy transition and how this is reflected in their public participation. To fully understand the attitude and behaviour of Shell, the gas extraction companies they are involved in will have to be evaluated as well. The NAM is an important example of this, and how they participate in public platforms can be an important topic of study when answering this sub-question.

The final question to be answered is: what role Royal Dutch Shell does play in the formulation of the discourse on energy transition policy in the Netherlands? Here the case of Shell will be further explored, to see what its specific role was in the Dutch policy formulation.

## Main Theoretical Concepts

### **Private actors and Public actors**

Throughout this thesis the term ‘private actors’ is meant to refer to those actors and institutions that are non-state. These entities can act as separate from the state, though not necessarily wholly uninfluenced by it. Meaning, the private actors have their own intentions and goals, following their own agenda’s. But they can act in cooperation or within limits of the state.<sup>10</sup> For this thesis, the private actors focused on will be those within the corporate sector. Thus, companies (mainly oil and gas companies) that are directed towards producing private profits.<sup>11</sup> Public actors will then be those institutions that are part of or representatives of the state, such as the government, its departments and all its subsidiary governing bodies. These actors see to the provision of common goods. An example of a common good is the minimising of environmental and climate damage for present and future generations, to which the sustainable energy transition can contribute, but this can be in conflict with another common good, like economic development and welfare.<sup>12</sup>

### **Innovation and Energy Transition**

Energy transition is a wide concept that can include many definitions but can also be defined very simplistically. It can simply be seen as the switch, or transition, of the reliance on one (category of) energy resource to another. Accordingly, the current energy transition can be defined as the transition from fossil fuel modes of production to renewable resources of energy production. The increasing pressures of both the depletion of oil as a resource, and the damage to the global climate and environment make for consideration of switching to different energy productive resources.<sup>13</sup> Innovation can be explained, very shortly, as the translation of an invention. The process in which an invention is practically carried out. Though there are different drivers as to what makes an innovation come into being, one important driver has been identified by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950). Schumpeter theorised that economic and financial incentives are important in causing an invention to

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<sup>10</sup> “Nonstate Actors,” in *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* ed. Craig Calhoun (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Nigar Hashimzade, Gareth Myles, and John Black, “Corporate Sector,” in *A Dictionary of Economics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Jale Tosun, Sebastian Koos, and Jennifer Shore, “Co-Governing Common Goods: Interaction Patterns of Private and Public Actors,” *Policy and Society, Co-governance of Common Goods*, 35, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 2.

<sup>13</sup> Barry D. Solomon and Karthik Krishna, “The Coming Sustainable Energy Transition: History, Strategies, and Outlook,” *Energy Policy, Asian Energy Security*, 39, no. 11 (November 1, 2011): 7422.

progress into an innovation.<sup>14</sup> The current energy transition towards more sustainable energy production misses a clearly structured economic incentive for the innovation on both individual and collective levels. It requires a different form of innovative transition, as the motivations for it are not purely economic. Energy efficiency can be both cost and environmentally effective.<sup>15</sup> But new and non-fossil fuel technological initiatives have to compete with already established modes of energy production, ever so often carbon-based. This can cause innovative barriers to the current energy transition.<sup>16</sup>

### **Discourse and Policy Discourse**

The scope of the concept discourse for the thesis is rather wide. It is not just organised around the linguistic aspects of it, but rather the role of discourse for social and political organisations and actions, and in the creation of policy. Specific discourses and language used in policy formulation processes can represent societal and political ideas on what socio-technical systems should be and look like. The term can also refer to a more active form of discourse, as ‘discursive structure’. Such structures not only represent dynamics within society or a community that are described by the discourse, but also has the power to formulate and articulate certain social relations.<sup>17</sup> Politics and language become intertwined as well, as language can be seen as an instrument of power exhibition. Political scientist Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014) found that as certain decisions were instituted, power over others was exerted, and specific socio-political relations were formed. The decisions made and formulated within policy means the exclusion of other possible conclusions. The politically instituted resolution becomes the hegemonic idea within politics, and as a result can shape certain social identities, as these rules can be formative for certain ways of life.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the discourse itself becomes more authoritative as those who participate within the discourse hold the authority or power. In such a sense discourse is inherently hierarchical as some hold more authority than others.<sup>19</sup> In addition, policy decisions can point to greater social questions and demands. Policy, and

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<sup>14</sup> Jan Fagerberg, “Innovation: A Guide to the Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Innovation* ed. Jan Fagerberg, David C. Mowery and Richard R. Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 4-6.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Fri and Maxine Savitz, “Rethinking Energy Innovation and Social Science,” *Energy Research & Social Science* 1 (March 1, 2014): 184.

<sup>16</sup> A. D. Sagar and J. P. Holdren, “Assessing the Global Energy Innovation System: Some Key Issues,” *Energy Policy* 30, no. 6 (May 1, 2002): 466.

<sup>17</sup> David Howarth, “Power, Discourse, and Policy: Articulating a Hegemony Approach to Critical Policy Studies,” *Critical Policy Studies* 3, no. 3-4 (April 28, 2010): 311.

<sup>18</sup> Howarth, “Power,” 317.

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Wodak, *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989), xv.



specifically the hegemonic discourse within policy, can link up different social and political demands by instituting political decisions that mirror societal issues.<sup>20</sup>

My goal is not to apply discourse analysis to Dutch policy. It is merely to formulate the general hegemonic consensus between private and public actors in the formulation process of energy transition policy. The (hegemonic) discourse identified following this is the representation of the course policy concerning energy and the environment is taking. An example of this can be the framing of the economic and financial benefits of a certain (energy or environmental) policy, such as saving costs or producing revenues.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Howarth, "Power," 318.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald Berger et al., "Ecological Modernization as a Basis for Environmental Policy: Current Environmental Discourse and Policy and the Implications on Environmental Supply Chain Management," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* (July 14, 2010): 59.

## Sources

The sources employed for this research vary greatly in nature and provenance. To commence the research, the main sources used are those similar to the sources that can be found in the literature review. That is, mainly secondary and academic sources. The literature review is mainly comprised of academic articles. These vary in nature and discipline. Sources on technological transition and innovations that include the effects on society as well are often interdisciplinary. Such articles combine different disciplines such as economics, social sciences but also studies of technology. The academic secondary literature can clarify the field in which the upcoming thesis shall academically be embedded in. These sources provide information on the wider scope of the research, and a more general analysis. Different sources will be used for more in dept and specific research of the topic and case study of the thesis. Primary sources will be employed to study the relationship between business and public institutions in the Netherlands. Reports of both private actors, such as Royal Dutch Shell, will be investigated next to reports and policy briefs of governmental organs such as ministries. Information published by these actors themselves needs to be investigated in a specific manner, keeping in mind who the writers of the documents are and what their interests and objectives are. To attain information of public institutions in the Netherlands it is possible to submit a ‘WOB’-request. WOB in Dutch stands for Wet Openbaring Bestuur and entails that by specific request governmental information can become public.<sup>22</sup> Because of time related issues, and additional delays with such requests due to the current Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, I will not personally be submitting a WOB-request. However, there already have been a large number of such requests submitted and information publicly published by the government relevant for this thesis. Information that has been already published is on interplay between public and private actors concerning the current energy transition.<sup>23</sup> Documents that have been published contain for example emails, determinations and parliamentarian debates on the energy transition and the role of private actors (including Shell, NAM and Exxonmobil). This will present me with a clearer view on what goes on behind closed doors, so to say. In addition, a number of Dutch media sources can be employed, such as newspapers and platforms. Some newspapers have written on the role of Royal Dutch Shell in the energy system and transition,

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<sup>22</sup> “Wet openbaarheid van bestuur (Wob) - Rijksoverheid.nl,” Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, Accessed 6 January 2021, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/wet-openbaarheid-van-bestuur-wob>.

<sup>23</sup> “Documents – Government NL,” Ministerie van Economische Zaken en Klimaat, Accessed 6 January 2021 <https://www.government.nl/documents>.

and example of this is the newspaper *De Volkskrant*. It is important to keep in mind that such sources are not academic, and that some newspapers do have certain political colours. But using media sources will possibly highlight different dynamics than the academic sources on how private actors position themselves in the public debates concerning sustainability.

## Methods and Methodology

The research question demands for analyses of the actions of private actors and the dialogue between private and public actors and institutions, a large number of the sources will consist of qualitative data. To commence, secondary sources, such as academic articles and monographs will be and have been consulted. The sources in the literature review exemplify this. The data these sources present is helpful in analysing the field of research the thesis will be embedded in. In addition, such academic research can help to clarify which components of the field of research need to be explored further, and which areas have already received significant amounts of attention. Secondary academic sources can also be very helpful in the analysis part of the research, as supportive knowledge and theoretical information to the analysis of primary sources. For analysis of the research question, sources like the WOB-requests (mentioned in the preceding chapter on sources) and governmental and business reports will be employed. Such information can clarify the discourse and possible intentions of both private and public actors, and the communication between the two. When using such data, it is important to keep in mind who the writers or creators of the sources are, what their interests are, and what their intended audience might be. As for instance, a business report published by a company itself, most likely will not strongly highlight their deficits in regard to the current energy transition. This can perhaps become a challenge for the thesis, to what extent can you truly trust the information published by certain institutions themselves. Though analysis of what these sources include and what they leave out, can also prove to be valuable information.

The analysis with qualitative sources can be complemented with quantitative data. This data can come from institutions and businesses themselves. Here the same issue arises as before, what would these actors want to display and what would they rather leave out these documents. Therefore, this data can be complemented with sources from other research institutions. An example of this is the International Energy Agency (IEA), who hold a large database concerning countries worldwide and their sustainability efforts.

Many the sources (as mentioned in the preceding chapter as well), have an interdisciplinary nature. To follow this approach, the methods will be of an interdisciplinary nature as well. A large variety of sources, business and public reports, qualitative and quantitative data, secondary and primary sources, will be employed to construct a clear image of the private-public relationships concerning the current energy transition.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review will describe the academic field this research will be embedded in, and what the conflicting and agreeing views of this field are. The process of innovation and technological transition will be described from a socio-technical point of view, through a Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and the role of private actors within this process. This theory will be linked to the industrial sector under investigation for the complete research, namely the petroleum refinery sector. The Multi-Level Perspective is one way of examining energy transitions, another approach is through examining the political economy of energy transitions. These two views shall both be explained and connected to the current Dutch energy transition and its particularities. The central idea up for investigation in the literature review is clearly described by International Relations scholar Peter Newell in his article *Trasformismo or transformation? The global political economy of energy transitions*:

“The ‘incumbent’ regime of existing actors and interests, that benefit from on-going reliance on a fossil fuel economy and that have played such a decisive role in the development of capitalism over the last century and beyond, will not give up their position easily.”<sup>24</sup>

Thus, this chapter shall present the theoretical background to how certain energy actors have embedded themselves in political processes, specifically in the Netherlands.

There are a number of ways to look at how innovation and change comes into being. A prominent way of studying innovation is not to see it as a purely technological phenomenon, but to look at the wider scope in which the specific development takes place. Thus, societal factors like economics, politics and culture are considered incremental when studying technological transformations. To study the broad dynamics in which innovation happens one can use the Multi-Level Perspective. This perspective evaluates structural socio-technical transitions on different degrees, namely: regimes, niches, and landscapes.<sup>25</sup> This inclusive and more encompassing view makes for popular analysis of transitions towards more sustainable technology. The levels are intertwined and interrelated, as developments within the individual levels can cause a transition of the entire system. The article *The Structuration of Socio-Technical Regimes — Conceptual Foundations from Institutional Theory* by innovation

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Newell, “Trasformismo or Transformation? The Global Political Economy of Energy Transitions,” *Review of International Political Economy* (November 13, 2018): 27.

<sup>25</sup> Raimund Bleischwitz, Paul Welfens, and Zhong Xiang Zhang, *International Economics of Resource Efficiency: Eco-Innovation Policies for a Green Economy* (New York: Springer, 2011), 189.

academics Lea Fuenfschilling and Bernhard Truffer quote innovation scholar Frank Geels on the matter:

“The socio-technical regime forms the ‘deep structure’ that accounts for the stability of an existing socio-technical system. It refers to the semi-coherent set of rules that orient and coordinate the activities of the social groups that reproduce the various elements of socio-technical systems.”<sup>26</sup>

A regime can be seen as the set of written and unwritten rules and the structures along which different actors in a system navigate themselves and their actions.<sup>27</sup> In the article *Typology of sociotechnical transition pathways* by Geels and Johan Schot the differences between regimes, niches and landscapes are further explained. Sociotechnical regimes are the levels which are created and reproduced by the dynamics between different actors and institutions. The tangible and intangible socio-technical structures created here can influence (and are influenced by) technological knowledge of a certain system. The actors active at this level consist of a range of different institutions like universities, but also from political platforms or specific interest groups.<sup>28</sup> Technological niches are small scale spaces where innovations can be carried out and implemented to test their success. They are micro-level approaches to technological innovation. The landscape is the more large-scale approach, focusing on the greater environment in which regimes take place. These are the indirect influences, like economic, political or cultural environments which indirectly shape the regimes and transitions.<sup>29</sup> As this research focuses on the interplay between policy and private actors, the regime level will be the main point of focus when discussing the Multi-Level Perspective approach. Both policy creators and private actors and their interaction can be found within this level of socio-technical transitions. This is not to say that neither landscape nor niche level are of influence on the interaction between the two. However, the regime level entails the actions and interactions between the different actors, such as public figures and institutions, consumers, producers, and business.<sup>30</sup>

The existence and persistence of specific socio-technical regimes can be further explained by the concept of ‘path-dependency’ of technologies. Path-dependency offers an explanation as to why a certain (technological) evolution takes a specific dominant trajectory

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<sup>26</sup> Lea Fuenfschilling and Bernhard Truffer, “The Structuration of Socio-Technical Regimes—Conceptual Foundations from Institutional Theory,” *Research Policy* 43, no. 4 (May 1, 2014): 773.

<sup>27</sup> Fuenfschilling and Truffer, “The Structuration,” 773.

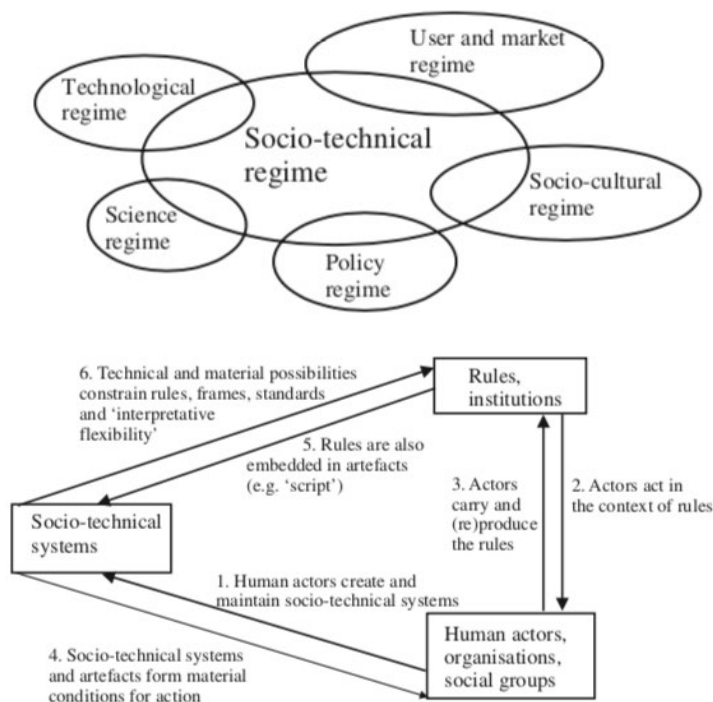
<sup>28</sup> Frank Geels and Johan Schot, “Typology of Sociotechnical Transition Pathways,” *Research Policy* 36, no. 3 (April 1, 2007): 399–400.

<sup>29</sup> Geels and Johan Schot, “Typology,” 400.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Lawhon and James Murphy, “Socio-Technical Regimes and Sustainability Transitions: Insights from Political Ecology,” *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 358.

course. As the adoption of one technology or innovation creates a process and path that excludes the possibility of other possible innovative paths. A socio-technological community then becomes reliant on these forms of technology and the positive returns this brings with it. Not just people or productive actors can become locked into this path-dependency, it also accounts for other institutions and organisations. The focus on one certain technological trajectory can cause for other innovations and developments to become overlooked, which leads to the established socio-technological forms to become entrenched in society.<sup>31</sup> Geels in his book *Technological Transitions and System Innovations* mentions that for instance in the energy sector path-dependency shows in the reliance on oil as a productive resource. This dependency is again reinforced by social factors such as consumption patterns.<sup>32</sup> According to Geels there are different actors and groups responsible for the creation of a socio-technology system, he visualises this as the following:

Figure 2.1: *Regime Dynamics as Visualised by Geels*



Source: Geels, Frank. *Technological Transitions and System Innovations: A Co-Evolutionary and Socio-Technical Analysis*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2005, [17](#).

<sup>31</sup> Frank Geels, *Technological Transitions and System Innovations: A Co-Evolutionary and Socio-Technical Analysis* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2005), 7-8.

<sup>32</sup> Geels, *Technological Transitions*, 8.

Geels sees markets and productive decisions as embedded in wider sociological and societal conceptions. Economic factors and objectives are important in shaping socio-technical systems and regimes. The actions of markets and corporate actors are in turn embedded in and partly shaped by their particular socio-cultural environments. This, however, goes both ways. As business decisions, made to accumulate resources and returns, can in turn also influence the socio-cultural and socio-technical environments or regimes.<sup>33</sup>

The research approaches of the multi-level perspective and the broader societal context in which energy transition happen and are shaped, is receiving increasing attention by politics. In different regions, such as the US and the EU, there seems to be more recognition for policy to be directed society wide, instead of a focus simply on technology. The policy scope has been widened to include economic variables important to energy transitions, as for instance discussing solutions as more sustainable production and well directed investments. The way politics, policy and society interact with energy transitions is geographically specific. This makes for regionally varying relationship between politics, economy and energy.<sup>34</sup> A more geographical outlook is taken in the article by Gavin Bridge and Ludger Gailing *New energy spaces: Towards a geographical political economy of energy transition* as they find that the socio-technical innovation theorem as formulated by Geels has not been paid sufficient attention by politics. Geels' analysis of transitions shows how these happen not linearly but through constant adaptation and influence of many factors within society. Another research method is that of political economy, which starts not from socio-technical premises, but more from ideas of economic inequality and power dynamics within politics and society. This results in a focus on politics, power and economic development, or political economy, when speaking of transitions.<sup>35</sup> Geels sees that the multi-level perspective has somewhat overlooked concepts of power dynamics in the formation of energy transition policy. In addition, he argues that the political economy approach is a helpful tool to enrich this perspective. The actions and interests of both public and private (incumbent) actors are heavily intertwined, which is emphasised by the political economy approach.<sup>36</sup> Both views on energy transitions agree that the process of transition is an uneven one that continuously changes and is influenced by a large variety of actors and exogenous factors. The perspective of political economy leans towards a more

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>34</sup> Gavin Bridge and Ludger Gailing, "New Energy Spaces: Towards a Geographical Political Economy of Energy Transition," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 52, no. 6 (September 1, 2020): 1038.

<sup>35</sup> Bridge and Gailing, "New Energy Spaces," 1039.

<sup>36</sup> Frank Geels, "Regime Resistance against Low-Carbon Transitions: Introducing Politics and Power into the Multi-Level Perspective," *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 5 (September 1, 2014): 26.



material or tangible analysis of the development of energy transition, but also considers phenomena like path-dependency and environmental factors as important when studying technological change.<sup>37</sup>

The political economy perspective can further explore the power relationships that are inherent to governance in general, and to those of energy transitions specifically. The power dynamics active in certain public institutions are non-negligible for the research area of energy transitions. To understand why certain policy paths are chosen, it is important to understand the different political dialogues present with the energy's system incumbent actors. Public actors and institutions in turn play a facilitating role, as they provide policy platforms that can guide socio-technical shifts. A political economy approach, with a focus on power dynamics, can unveil the persisting relationships that have embedded themselves in the energy regime, through processes such as path dependency. This can be done by identifying which actors prefer the set ways of energy production, as opposed to the energy system the transition aspires to become.<sup>38</sup> This view of processes in society questions the autonomy of the state and public organs. For a state whose economic activity is largely reliant on carbon modes of production, the providers of these productive forces hold an influential position to those concerned with economic growth, of which the state often is one. Thus, energy providers, such as oil and gas companies, can hold strong political and economic power. Because of the state's interest in both economy and the energy which fuels it, the autonomy of policy makers from economic actors can be questioned in light of the political economy approach to energy transitions.<sup>39</sup> As of late, the diversity of private actors concerned with energy production has only grown, and it no longer suffices to consider all their efforts of creating (or opposing) a low-carbon energy system the same. Very general differentiations can be made between social and economic actors that desire different and sustainable energy regimes, and others who aspire to the carbon-based modes of energy production. In addition to, naturally, a variety of actors in between the two.<sup>40</sup>

Globally, there has been resistance from fossil fuel companies to the institution of climate related policies and carbon restrictions. A number of companies from different industries have created organisations to lobby against large scale policy measures that do not align with their interests. One example of this is the Global Climate Coalition, in which

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<sup>37</sup> Bridge and Gailing, "New Energy Spaces," 1040-1041.

<sup>38</sup> Newell, "Trasformismo," 26-27.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>40</sup> Caroline Kuzemko, Andrew Lawrence, and Matthew Watson, "New Directions in the International Political Economy of Energy," *Review of International Political Economy* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 10.

companies from polluting industries have grouped together. Many of the participating businesses are American, but not all, as Royal Dutch Shell is a member as well. The lobby focusses on the economic damage that these companies expect the climate change mitigating policies will have. On a national level other additional measures have been taken to pursue company interest. In the case of the Netherlands a coalition of different industry businesses, Royal Dutch Shell included, have used protest in the form of relocation threats if new energy restrictions would be enforced, with success.<sup>41</sup> This is an example of the influence and power business can hold over public decisions. In Peter Newell and Matthew Paterson's article *A climate for business: global warming, the state and capital* they state that from ideas of political economy, the role of the state is complicated by its capitalist nature. Increasing wealth and capital accumulation is an important goal, in which businesses are incremental. These businesses gain an influential position in society, as both generators and accumulators of capital, and providers of employment.<sup>42</sup> In turn, companies are dependent on governments and public institutions as well, as these form the rules and regulations by which business must operate. Public institutions are also key actors in the creation of specific economic circumstances in certain industry sectors through for instance taxation, loans, patents and public investments.<sup>43</sup>

*The Palgrave Handbook of the International Political Economy of Energy* compares the insights from both the Multi-Level Perspective and political economy research in the chapter *Analysing Energy Transitions: Combining Insights from Transition Studies and International Political Economy* by Florian Kern and Jochen Markard. Energy transitions that can be seen throughout history were often directed to the novel utilisation of different energy providing resources. One example of this is the exploitation of coal as an energy resource in the nineteenth century, which was a crucial factor in the development of the Industrial Revolution and technological innovation that were made in this time.<sup>44</sup> The current energy transition differs somewhat from its predecessors. It does focus on the transition from certain energy sources to new and different ones, and a shift in technological innovations to aid the energy production. However, Kern and Markard mention it to be a 'purposive transition', meaning it has a certain objective to which the innovations are directed. In this case, it is in

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Newell and Matthew Paterson, "A Climate for Business: Global Warming, the State and Capital," *Review of International Political Economy* (February 8, 2011): 683-684.

<sup>42</sup> Newell and Paterson, "A Climate," 691-692.

<sup>43</sup> Geels, "Regime Resistance," 26.

<sup>44</sup> Florian Kern and Jochen Markard, "Analysing Energy Transitions: Combining Insights from Transition Studies and International Political Economy," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the International Political Economy of Energy*, ed. Thijs van de Graaf et. al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 297.

general the creation of more sustainable and low-carbon emitting ways of life and economic prosperity. The purposive nature or goal-oriented nature of the current transition makes for a high importance of organisation and policy.<sup>45</sup>

Kern and Markard also mention the Netherlands as holding a specific place in energy transition studies. The Dutch approach to energy transition within politics is known as transition management. This approach combines a number of socio-technical studies and sees society as evolving and existing of intertwined components that are all incremental in the transition to sustainability. The Dutch transition management approach, however, encountered numerous obstacles. The writers mention that the case of the Netherlands showed how policy formation concerning energy transition is not inherently political, but largely influenced by interest groups and economic motivations.<sup>46</sup> A different article by Kern in cooperation with Adrian Smith named *Restructuring Energy Systems for Sustainability? Energy Transition Policy in the Netherlands* state the Dutch attitude towards energy transition policy:

“Various Dutch programmes on sustainability and innovation in the 1990s already showed that non-technological factors such as institutions and cultural factors are important preconditions for sustainability (Vergragt, 2005). It was increasingly acknowledged that although technology is pivotal, ‘there is a need for a goal-oriented, strategic, co-evolutionary, systems perspective, which stresses the dynamic interrelation between cultural, structural and technological innovation’.”<sup>47</sup>

Further analysis of the Dutch transition management approach is provided by the article *On inclusion and network governance: The democratic disconnect of Dutch energy transitions* by Carolyn Hendriks. She puts forward that the current mode of energy transition policy making in the Netherlands is primarily based on the ideas of transition management but lacks in democratic inclusion on the whole. That is, though the importance of networks and their inclusive nature is recognised, there are a large number of demographic and social groups not included in the process of policy creation.<sup>48</sup> Hendriks describes that the public platforms created are often chaired and dominated by power and expertise emanating from research institutions and business. They are not widely accessible to all layers in society, but mainly inhabited by a small group of elites.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kern and Markard, “Analysing,” 299.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 295-296

<sup>47</sup> Florian Kern and Adrian Smith, “Restructuring Energy Systems for Sustainability? Energy Transition Policy in the Netherlands,” *Energy Policy*, Transition towards Sustainable Energy Systems, 36, no. 11 (November 1, 2008): 4094.

<sup>48</sup> Carolyn Hendriks, “On Inclusion and Network Governance: The Democratic Disconnect of Dutch Energy Transitions,” *Public Administration* 86, no. 4 (2008): 1026.

<sup>49</sup> Hendriks, “On Inclusion,” 1017.

Energy transition policy in the Netherlands in the beginning of the twenty-first century was of neo-liberal nature. Placing the economy central in the narrative of transition and changes concerning sustainability. Transition policy throughout the past years has become more and more focused on facilitating different economic sectors within the country. The creation of the ‘Taskforce Energy Transition’ (TFE) is an example of this. This taskforce consists of a number of high-level members of the energy sector of industry, as for instance Shell and the Gasunie.<sup>50</sup> The TFE was established in 2005 and chaired by the CEO of Shell Netherlands, which at the time was Jeroen van der Veer. This was a topic of critique of the taskforce. The taskforce is an example of the Dutch efforts to combine public and private ideas on the current energy transition.<sup>51</sup>

Developments and policies of energy transitions can shape the way the transitions are regarded within a country or community, in this case, the Netherlands. This is discussed in the article *Discursive Regime Dynamics in the Dutch Energy Transition* by Rick Bosman, Derk Loorbach, Niki Frantzeskaki, and Till Pistorius, who investigate the Dutch policies to become more sustainable in energy production, through the transition management approach. The writers mention that the plans formulated within the country are ambitious, but the Netherlands is still lagging behind many of their European counterparts in seeing to an actual increase in renewable energy sources. The main reason for this is according to the article is the influence that different actors and interest groups are able to exercise on transition processes. According to the article these actors: “mainly promote a ‘greening’ of the fossil-based centralised system instead of a more radical transition departing from the existing system.”<sup>52</sup> Systems of energy are open to exchanges and inputs, but also stuck in path-dependent processes. These processes are once again reinforced by hegemonic discourses in policy and politics. Discourses (can also be seen as a specific set of ideas, concepts or use of language which is reproduced in a system or group) become important in the analysis of the actors that are prominent in transition processes, as a certain discourse becomes leading or hegemonic.<sup>53</sup> The hegemonic discourse identified in the article is the following: “they [energy providers in the Netherlands] consider tackling climate change as the main challenge for the energy system, but securing the energy supply and keeping it affordable is seen as equally important.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Erik Laes, Leen Gorissen, and Frank Nevens, “A Comparison of Energy Transition Governance in Germany, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom,” *Sustainability* 6, no. 3 (March 2014): 1139-1140.

<sup>51</sup> Kern and Smith, “Restructuring Energy,” 4095.

<sup>52</sup> Rick Bosman et al., “Discursive Regime,” 46.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

What can arise here is a ‘carbon lock-in’, where through path-dependence technological systems and regimes become stuck in their reliance on carbon forms of energy production. Discourses can also contribute to a specific system becoming locked-in. The discourse can reinforce the already established political institutions and technologies. Through reproduction and exclusion of other discourses and interpretations in both dialogue and policy measures certain understandings about energy can become dominant or hegemonic. It is therefore important to identify the hegemonic discourse and the effects on the local regimes, to see how these specific regimes are locked-in.<sup>55</sup> Especially in politics regarding the environment or sustainability, in which a large number and variety of actors and interest groups play a role, the creation of a hegemonic discourse seems to be a contested issue. The different actors all try to create a discourse regarding energy policy that fits their perception of what the best solution will be. When a structured discourse or set of ideas is institutionalised into arranged policies, a hegemonic discourse is achieved.<sup>56</sup> Many industrial and post-industrial societies are largely reliant on carbon energy infrastructures, they are locked-into the reliance on these resources, through path-dependency. Once a society and its components are locked-in, in this case to carbon, it is difficult to shift both discourse and structure to another technological system. As all the socio-technical components reliant on carbon reinforce the discourse, further establishing the lock-in.<sup>57</sup>

This literature review has described a number of approaches to studying energy transitions. The Multi-Level Perspective and political economy of energy transition studies highlight different actors or dynamics that contribute to energy innovation and policy. Both approaches acknowledge the multitude of actors and processes that are involved in socio-technical transitions. Furthermore, Dutch politics seems to except this view of transitions as well. Even though the focus on economic factors and businesses as the focal point for policy making is critiqued. This seems to be the cause of a capitalist state, pursuing capital and wealth accumulation. The state becomes intertwined with economic actors, such as companies and interest groups. To pursue capitalist motivations, the private sector cannot be disregarded in the creation of policy it would seem. This is a two-way street, however. As governments require businesses for economic growth, private actors are also dependent on political developments which can cause financial restrictions. For policy formation in the Netherlands the case does

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<sup>55</sup> Pia Buschmann and Angela Oels, “The Overlooked Role of Discourse in Breaking Carbon Lock-in: The Case of the German Energy Transition,” *WIREs Climate Change* 10, no. 3 (2019): 2.

<sup>56</sup> Buschmann and Oels, “The Overlooked,” 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

not seem to be any different. Multiple writers and articles mention the difficulties concerning the current energy transition due to the strong influence of incumbent actors on politics. Large companies are offered platforms through which they can directly affect the political discourse on the matter. The literature on the formation of hegemonic discourses suggests that the discourse formed through policy creation can cause certain energy systems to pursue a certain trajectory, possibly that of becoming locked-in to a certain system. The way in which this is happening in the Netherlands, and who the key players are, will be further explored by the thesis.

## Innovative Aspects

The topic of energy transitions, and the current transition specifically, is widely discussed. The topic is investigated by many different academic disciplines. Interdisciplinary approaches to the study of energy innovation are being popularised. The Multi-Level Perspective discussed in the literature review exemplifies this, as it offers a more inclusive research method of innovation, regarding this as an effort originating from the intertwined nature of different societal factors. The political economy approach to the study of energy transitions investigates the power relations and complications between economic and political factors in the process of energy innovation. Both approaches bring to light valuable implications that exist within society regarding the current energy transition. There are few sources combining the two approaches to the study of transition and innovation. The Palgrave Handbook of the International Political Economy of Energy does so in the chapter *Analysing Energy Transitions: Combining Insights from Transition Studies and International Political Economy*.<sup>58</sup> However, this chapter mainly focusses on the value the two studies have to one another. It does not empirically apply the approach to current societal constructions of energy transitions. In addition, it is also novel to apply the approach to study the interplay between business and politics of energy transition in the Netherlands specifically.

The articles mentioned and treated in the literature review all acknowledge the variety of dynamics and actors inherent to energy transitions, including the complex role private incumbent actors take within the system. However, the articles do not mention how private actors move within these systems. Neither do they describe the dialogue happening between business and public institutions, and what effects this might have for energy policy.

Here I think a business history approach can be of value to construct a more in dept study of incumbent actors within the Dutch path to energy transition. By conducting a case study of the role of Royal Dutch Shell in the creation of energy policy, phenomena touched upon by articles in the literature review can be further explored for the Netherlands specifically. The case study will create a more thorough understanding of the role the company specifically has played in political understanding and visions of the energy transition. This will in turn construct a clearer image of the faults and strengths in the creation of energy policy in the Netherlands. By researching this, the future road to the creation of such policy will be a quicker and perhaps better one.

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<sup>58</sup> Kern and Markard, "Analysing," 291-318.

## Chapter 3: The Dutch Energy Transition Discourse

### Introduction

In this chapter the influence of oil companies on the formulation of an energy transition policy discourse in the Netherlands will be evaluated. To adequately answer the questions posed in the research, a conceptualisation of discourse is necessary. Therefore, the following sub-question shall be analysed: What is the (hegemonic) discourse surrounding the current energy transition in the Netherlands? This question shall investigate the power dynamics inherent to the creation of policy in general. Following this, the chapter will look into the process of policy formation concerning energy transition policy, and the actors that play an important role within this. Lastly, the conceptualised idea of policy discourse of energy transition shall be applied to the Netherlands, and the process of formulation of such policy in this specific country. The term discourse has been discussed shortly in theoretical framework part of the research preceding this chapter. As discussed here, this research will not focus on the linguistic aspects and complications of discourse and discourse analysis, but much more on the implications discourse can have for policy and politics. Discourse shall be approached as a representation of policy. Thus, policy of a certain topic (in this case energy transition) shall be considered the reflection of the hegemonic discourse of said topic in a certain time and space.

First, a definition will be created of the concepts discourse and hegemony. Doing so important philosophers and scholars that have written on the subjects will be touched upon and explored. The theories and conceptualisations that are extracted from this will form the theoretical framework in which the political engagement of Royal Dutch Shell in the Netherlands can be placed later on in the research.

### Discursive process of policy formulation

Policy and discourse share an intimate connection in some cases. The discourse and discursive structure of policy of specific societal phenomena not only represents social dynamics but can also have a formative role for societal relationships. Here specific discourses and narratives are attributed an articulative role in addition to a descriptive one.<sup>59</sup> Ernesto Laclau mentions the power implications the process of decision making can have, as the institution of certain decisions can cause the exclusion of other political alternatives. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)

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<sup>59</sup> David Howarth, "Power, Discourse, and Policy: Articulating a Hegemony Approach to Critical Policy Studies," *Critical Policy Studies* (April 26, 2010): 311.



posed that discourses are inherent with moments of ‘structural undecidability’. The choice made causes the exclusion of other possible trajectories, and are often inherently based upon hidden ideological, ethical, or social currents.<sup>60</sup> To illustrate the power of the discursive act, he takes as an example the United States Declaration of Independence. The founding fathers of the USA proclaim the nation as independent with the instituting of drawing up the declaration itself. However, as these founding fathers are representatives of the nation, the people conduct this act themselves indirectly. Derrida questions whether the people and the nation are already independent at the moment of declaration, or whether the act of declaring calls their freedom and independence into being.<sup>61</sup> The Declaration of Independence thus in this case both demonstrates what already is and constitutes what will be. Noah Horwitz in his article *Derrida and the Aporia of the Political, or the Theological-Political Dimension of Deconstruction* states that: “For Derrida, it is precisely this undecidability that makes such an act forceful since it must bring into being what must already exist.”<sup>62</sup> Laclau again builds upon Derrida’s conceptualisation of undecidability, to further explore hegemony within politics. At the moment of undecidability, and especially undecidability in politics, the decision made is one in which the power dynamics of the actors and factors involved become apparent. As the decision made causes the exclusion of alternative paths and choices, a suppression of different possibilities which would only be possible if a certain degree of power and power relations were at play.<sup>63</sup>

In collaboration with Chantal Mouffe, Laclau views specific discourses and political trajectories as resulting from hegemonic socio-political struggles between social or political groups and entities in society. Especially so in democratically organised communities, there are multiple groups that share the desire to have their set of ideas or ideology to become the hegemonic and most prominent one.<sup>64</sup> Hegemonic discourses in heterogenous democratic political organisations can be constructed through methods of ‘equivalence’ or ‘difference’. Where for the former discourse is constructed when a negative commonality is found, as for instance a common threat against which groups can unite. The latter happens when two different observations work together to find the best resolution, stressing the positive

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<sup>60</sup> Howarth, “Power,” 312.

<sup>61</sup> Noah Horwitz, “Derrida and the Aporia of the Political, the Theologico-Political Dimension of Deconstruction,” *Research in Phenomenology* 32 (2002): 159.

<sup>62</sup> Horwitz, “Derrida,” 160.

<sup>63</sup> Aletta J. Norval, “Hegemony after Deconstruction: The Consequences of Undecidability,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* (January 23, 2007): 143-144.

<sup>64</sup> Jules Townshend, “Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemonic Project: The Story So Far,” *Political Studies* 52, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 270.

differences between different set of ideas or ideologies.<sup>65</sup> The processes of political realisation and hegemony in politics become a (partly) linguistic process when the logic of equivalence is applied. Social demands and needs in politics are communicated and formulated in specific ways. The process of this communication towards political initiatives links together different demands under an umbrella term or greater social demand, which all serve the same or similar purpose such as a negative commonality or enemy. To uncover hegemonic processes Laclau and Mouffe refer back to Derrida's method of linguistic deconstruction and theory of undecidability. Deconstruction plays a role in the process of undecidability as it can uncover or 'deconstruct' the process that is ongoing and reveal the moment of decision and the hegemonic tendencies of decision making.<sup>66</sup>

The idea of 'hegemony' itself stems from Marxist ideas and theories. Laclau and Mouffe look to Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) theorisations of the word. According to Gramsci different social groupings within societies were united under hegemony of a certain ideology. This ideology is not just represented in ideas, but also in more tangible and institutional aspects of society.<sup>67</sup> Gramsci theorises that it is not just specific actors or institutions that obtain hegemony, but more so certain ideas and ideology that become hegemonic. Here interests play a role as well, the actors or socio-political groups that obtain power have their own respective interests, which can evolve into the perceived (hegemonic) interests of other groups or the majority as well. In politics and policy, different groups and actors can try to embed their own vested interests in the process of policy formulation to create a new hegemonic standard. When analysing this process, it is important to view the relational hegemony between these respective actors, to understand the outcome that would otherwise be perceived as the norm. In a certain time and place a specific view on society and politics become inherent and the commonly accepted set of ideas. Conflicting and opposing views of society can persist to exist, though in some cases the hegemonic ideology will attempt to overcome these.<sup>68</sup> The book by Fred Dallmayr *Laclau: A Critical Reader* recalls Laclau and Mouffe's theorisations on hegemony as having an articulatory capacity. Where politics has the power of creating or articulating intangible social beings and relations through connecting

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<sup>65</sup> Townshend, "Laclau," 271.

<sup>66</sup> Andro Kitus, "The Theory of Hegemony: Laclau's Path Not Taken," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46, no. 10 (December 1, 2020): 4-5.

<sup>67</sup> Fred Dallmayr, "Laclau and Hegemony," in *Laclau: A Critical Reader* ed. Hans Jonas et al., (Psychology Press, 2004), 38.

<sup>68</sup> Joscha Wullweber, "Constructing Hegemony in Global Politics. A Discourse-Theoretical Approach to Policy Analysis," *Administrative Theory & Praxis* 41, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 3-4.

different socio-political components.<sup>69</sup> They find that what follows the hegemonic process of articulation is a specific discourse formed by the attributed order and position of these certain social and political entities.<sup>70</sup> As David Howard states in his article *Power, discourse and policy: articulating a hegemony approach to critical policy studies*:

“As I have suggested, the construction of any discourse involves the taking of decisions in an undecidable terrain. But for a decision to be taken in these circumstances other possible alternatives must be repressed. This means the institution of a social identity is always an act of power. Hence, as Laclau puts it, ‘the “objectivity” arising from a decision is formed, in its most fundamental sense as a power relationship’.”<sup>71</sup>

A discourse, in politics, is formed by the measures and ideas combined on a specific problem or phenomenon. The discourse formed here can influence social and societal perceptions of the issue at hand, attributing to the process a formative character.<sup>72</sup>

### **Policy discourse of energy**

Political scientist Maarten Hajer wrote on discourse and politics in his book of 1995 *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*. Though Hajer’s book is a relatively early work on the socio-political complications of environmental policy and discourse, his theories remain interesting. He states that the social and political arena do not always overlap, there is still a lot of societal discontent about the abatement measures to reduce environmental damage, as policy and political measures still prove to be inept. Politics under find difficulty in attributing the right definition to the problem, as the ‘issue of the environment’ does not fit a political model where an issue can be solved by a single solution.<sup>73</sup> He refers to the work of the philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) on discourses, who intends to move beyond the interpretations of political scientists that see discourse as a communicatory method through which powerful actors can control and manipulate. For Foucault, these actors only obtain the power of control or manipulatory discourse, because their power is established by the discourse itself at first. He states the same can be said for the interests of these actors, interests neither are a given, but are elements also established by discourse.<sup>74</sup> From exploring a number of philosophers and their notions of

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<sup>69</sup> Dallmayr, “Laclau,” 38.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>71</sup> Howarth, “Power,” 317.

<sup>72</sup> Wullweber, “Constructing,” 5.

<sup>73</sup> Maarten Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 43.

<sup>74</sup> Hajer, *The Politics*, 51.

discourse, Hajer moves on to define the idea of discourse-coalitions through an ‘argumentative approach’. This approach sees the political arena as a place in which the discursive coalitions all try to achieve hegemony for their discourse and conception of the truth. The arguments or discourses that finally find hegemony within a system rely on three defined qualities according to Hajer: credibility, acceptability, and trust. These three make a certain argument attractive and suppress uncertainties that could possibly be invoked.<sup>75</sup>

Discourses on transformations and changing societies can also employ theoretical analysis stemming from path-dependency to analyse institutional evolution in different countries and regions.<sup>76</sup> As explained in the literature review, path-dependency causes decision making to exclude certain other possible future trajectories in technology, economy, and other aspects of society. Not much unlike the theorisations of Derrida and Laclau, where moments of structural undecidability cause the choice of certain trajectories to exclude other possible choices. Historical institutionalists perceive path-dependency as inherent in the making of policy and political processes. A basic conceptualisation of the theory views path-dependency as a relatively stable process within politics, which is opposed by interruptive elements such as ‘formative’ events and moments. These elements redirect the paths which policy has taken beforehand, introducing new periods of political prioritisation and organisation.<sup>77</sup> Both discourse and policy seem to take predominant paths but can be disrupted by the making of new decisions or the re-establishment of priorities. Which again would shape a path in which discourse, or discourse as policy, flows.

The article *Discursive regime dynamics in the Dutch energy transition* by Rick Bosman and colleagues has already been explored in the literature review. Here, the incumbent actors in the Dutch energy system are investigated to discover their relationship to the hegemonic discourse regarding the current transition. The research looks towards the process of formation of a specific discourse between incumbent actors in the energy system in the Netherlands. Differences between the actors seem to arise in varying ways. One cause of tension was the differing conceptions on how the energy transition would take place and in which way. The view of a specific incumbent actor and their discursive description of the transition seems to largely arise from the position they take within the current energy system, and what their vested

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>76</sup> Christoph Scherrer, “Beyond Path Dependency and Competitive Convergence,” in *Rethinking Regional Innovation and Change: Path Dependency or Regional Breakthrough?* ed. Gerhard Fuchs and Philip Shapira, (New York: Springer, 2005), 1.

<sup>77</sup> B. Guy Peters, Jon Pierre, and Desmond S. King, “The Politics of Path Dependency: Political Conflict in Historical Institutionalism,” *The Journal of Politics* (July 19, 2015): 1276.

interests are within it. The conceptualisation of the energy transition and the role of public institutions in the transition seems often to be aligned with different actors' interest in the future development of the energy system as well. The conflict does not lie in the description of the final goals of the energy transition, which is an almost complete reduction of the carbon production. The incumbents are conflicted in the ways this reduction will take place and the laws and regulations that should be employed to aid the process along. There also seems to be a discussion on whether the process would be a more gradual and stretched out one, or a radical and quick change of the energy system.<sup>78</sup> The article poses that the instability of the current and the discursive tensions between actors regarding the path the current energy transition should take, can possibly create an arena in which new initiatives can arise and a transition can come about and/or develop.<sup>79</sup> They state:

“This study has demonstrated that the tensions within the dominant storyline and challenges to it by ‘storylines in the making’ signals struggle between incumbents within the energy regime, especially in the cognitive ‘culture’ dimension. This could imply also a growing tension with regard to the power structures that underlie dominant coalitions, institutions and infrastructures. While discursive regime destabilization signals change to the dominant discourse, it remains an open question whether changes in discourse precede changes in the structure of a system (meaning changes in institutions, economic order and/or physical infrastructure).”<sup>80</sup>

As above stated, there seems to be a struggle within the Netherlands between different actors and their ideas of what the energy transition should look like. The Dutch government has developed several reports on the matter as well, in the form of multiple policy plans. The last one of a series being the fourth *National Environmental Policy Plan* (2001), which sees the innovation of societal systems as incremental to solving environmental issues. Here, not just technological change is important, but this must be accompanied by economic, socio-cultural, and institutional developments as well. Not just the government is considered to be responsible for the change, but society as a whole must participate to achieve this. Different actors have to take responsibility and consider their own role within the energy transition.<sup>81</sup> The view adopted by the National Environmental Policy Plan is one that sees the transition as a gradual process consisting of multiple steps and facets that eventually will result in change. The plan employs

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<sup>78</sup> Rick Bosman et al., “Discursive Regime Dynamics in the Dutch Energy Transition,” *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 13 (December 1, 2014): 55-56.

<sup>79</sup> Rick Bosman et al., “Discursive,” 57.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>81</sup> VROM Netherlands, “National Milieubeleidsplan 4,” NMP4, The Hague: VROM (2001): 4.5.

similar views to the transitioning of energy systems as the transition management approach explored in the earlier chapter of this research. The changes needed for achieving a more sustainable energy production is considered to be both a long-term process as well as an encompassing societal effort. Transformation is seen as necessary in multiple levels and areas of society, not just for the actors and organisations directly involved in energy production. The gradual creation of a different (socio-technical) regime can open up possibilities for further development of society as a whole to new ways of environmental engagement. Thus, the establishment of new socio-technical ways will not entail the end of a process, it can also be seen as the beginning to further development.<sup>82</sup>

Frans van der Loo and Derk Loorbach in a chapter titled *The Dutch Energy Transition Project (2000-2009)* describe that the National Environmental Policy Plan was an early adoption of transition management ideas in Dutch politics. The Ministry of Economic Affairs further incorporated transition management by creating society encompassing institutions to aid along socio-technical transition. The ministry developed the Energy Transition Project, first a political niche instigated by a small group of people but intended to influence the leading policy regime. The project was focused on the changing the current energy regimes by transforming the societal aspects and actors related to it.<sup>83</sup> As for discourse, Van der Loo and Loorbach mention that the project has developed more clear and novel visions and linguistics on how the transition can take shape within society. This happened along with increasing cultural (both on a global and national Dutch scale) indications that the climate is a public interest and worry. Examples of this are the popularity of a film such as *An Inconvenient Truth* by former US vice-president Al Gore, and increasing efforts in sustainable transportation in Dutch cities.<sup>84</sup>

In a later chapter in the same volume named *An International Perspective on the Energy Transition Project*, Florian Kern recounts some of the institutional difficulties the Energy Transition Project has run into. Policy wise, the project was implemented whilst Dutch politics still adhered to preceding policy objectives that were not always conducive to the implementation of new energy policy goals. An example of this were the energy policies that focused on liberalisation. New policies and goals (or niches) to foster energy transitions are

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<sup>82</sup> René Kemp, "The Dutch Energy Transition Approach," *International Economics and Economic Policy* 7, no. 2 (August 1, 2010): 295-296.

<sup>83</sup> Frans van der Loo and Derk Loorbach, "The Dutch Energy Transition Project (2000-2009)," in *Governing the Energy Transition: Reality, Illusion or Necessity?* Ed. Geert Verbong and Derk Loorbach (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 220-221.

<sup>84</sup> Van der Loo and Loorbach, "The Dutch," 232.

being developed, however, former policy regimes are still hold a dominant place in Dutch energy politics as well.<sup>85</sup> Kern states the importance of discourse and the way political issues are framed for the development of new energy regimes and systems. He also refers to Maarten Hajer work on discourse and politics of environmental modernisation. As Hajer identifies different actors or coalitions with their individual framings of a specific issue or idea of which they want to make the hegemonic discourse in politics.<sup>86</sup>

Comparing to some of its European Union counterparts, the Netherlands (and its ideas on transition management) is considered to be behind on developments concerning renewable energy initiatives and carbon-emission abatements. The transition policies are mainly focused towards changing systems in the long-term, less so on immediate carbon reductions. In addition, the creation of a large and diverse energy system might prove difficult in a small country such as the Netherlands.<sup>87</sup> In 2016 the *Transition to Sustainable Energy Report* (Transitie Naar Duurzaam) was published, an official publication of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate on the energy transition specifically. The report summary reports three main objectives and guidelines for the Dutch transition. Firstly, it is stated that though there will be a transition towards renewable energy sources to achieve a Co2 emission reduction, fossil fuels remain an integral part of the energy provision. This being especially the case for natural gas, as a fossil fuel that emits less carbon than the other carbon-based fuels. The second point of focus are the economic possibilities the transition can offer. The objective here is to foster innovation and grasp the economic opportunities that accompany this, here the cooperation of business and governmental actors is important. The last focal point are the physical changes the transition will make to the environment and public places. This includes the changes in infrastructure, but also landscapes and other spaces. Here, again, the cooperation between business, public institutions and other organisations is important.<sup>88</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, different approaches to how specific discourses can be formed have been explored. Discourse and power seem to be often entangled with one another. Powerful actors

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<sup>85</sup> Florian Kern, "An International Perspective on the Energy Transition Project," in *Governing the Energy Transition: Reality, Illusion or Necessity?* Ed. Geert Verbong and Derk Loorbach (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 281.

<sup>86</sup> Kern, "An International," 282.

<sup>87</sup> René Kemp, "The Dutch Energy Transition Approach," in *International Economics of Resource Efficiency: Eco-Innovation Policies for a Green Economy*, ed. Raimund Bleischwitz, Paul J.J. Welfens, and ZhongXiang Zhang (Heidelberg: Physica-Verlag HD, 2011), 207.

<sup>88</sup> Ministry of Economic Affairs, "Transitie naar Duurzaam," (The Hague: Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2016), 5-8.

can use their political-economic weight to obtain a hegemonic and widely accepted position for their vested interests in policy formulation. Whether looking at Derrida's explanations of structural undecidability or different notions of path-dependency, power and power relations are invoked to make certain decisions. The hegemonic implications are inspired by Marxist traditions and have been further explained by influential figures such as Gramsci, to whom Laclau and Mouffe again look. For Gramsci, not just institutions or actors gain power, but ideas and ideologies do as well. Laclau and Mouffe see democratic society and its political arena as an area in which different groups all struggle for discursive hegemony. Actors try to find prominence and ground for their specific set of ideas or discourse in politics. Hegemonic discourses in their eyes are finally constructed through equivalence or difference between different actors with opposing ideas trying to find a resolution. Hajer's conceptualisation of discourses relates such theorisations to environmental politics. He finds that different discursive coalitions all struggle to realise hegemony for their respective idea of the truth or validity. He again looks to Foucault who notes that power is not just a tool of some, but that the actors exerting this are only able to do so as the discourse attributed them their power in the first place.

These struggles are also visible in debates on the current energy transition that is seen as necessary to reverse the adverse effects of heavy carbon production on the climate. Incumbent actors within the energy system formulate discourses in accordance with their view or respective position within the system, in line with their own vested interests. This can present a struggle of the different views on how the transition should take place and which institutional tools should be used to aid it along. This seems to fit ideas of Hajer, Laclau and Mouffe on the formation of discourses in democratic heterogeneous political spheres.

The sub-question asks what the hegemonic energy transition discourse is within the Netherlands. The policy plan created in the early twenty-first century approaches the subject of transition as a society-wide effort. Not just the government is accountable for the energy transition, but societal and economic actors bear responsibility for this as well. The development of this plan created a clearer discourse on the nation-wide perception of what the upcoming transition should entail. However, in Dutch politics there still seem to be other dominant sets of ideas that prove to be not necessarily conducive to achieving transition policy goals, such as liberalisation policies. New energy initiatives are inclined to fulfil economic expectancies as well, as formulated in the report by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate. In addition, fossil fuels are considered to remain an important component of the energy system and the transition, especially the fuel natural gas. There seem to be different



coalitions, groups, and actors with varying sets of ideas that all strive to create the hegemonic discourse in energy politics and policy. This discourse will eventually be formulated through the making of decisions, which is in turn complicated by power relationships, as the making of decision privileges certain outcomes, and excludes other possibilities.

## Chapter 4: Public Institutions and Private Actors

### Introduction

The preceding chapter has looked into the energy transition discourse within the Netherlands. In this chapter the way in which the discourse comes into being and the different actors involved in this process shall be investigated. In doing so the following sub-question will be answered: How did private actors, and especially the oil companies, influence the energy transition policy discourse in the Netherlands? To adequately provide an answer to this question, first the two theories of the Multi-Level Perspective and the political economy shall be shortly elaborated on to provide a theoretical framework in which the processes of politics and power within the energy systems can be placed. After that, the role of private actors within energy politics in general and on a global scale will be explored. From here, the chapter will zoom in on the political complications and characteristics within the Netherlands. A number of different sources shall be employed to illustrate the political-economic dynamics, such as academic articles and publications from governmental and non-governmental organisations, as well as newspaper articles. This will finally clarify the complicated relationship between governmental institutions and private actors, concerning the Dutch energy transition.

### Theoretical framework

As explicated in the literature review, there are several theoretical approaches that shed light on the involvement of private actors in political processes concerning energy transition policy formulation. The first approach is that of the Multi-Level Perspective, with an emphasis on the regime level of analysis. This perspective is not a definitive and strictly defining categorical theory but can be used as an analytical tool to approach different systems of production and the relationships that shape these. The regime level entails the ongoing practices, relationships, and norms by which socio-technical systems produce and are reproduced. This level of analysis can thus show the different relationships between consumers, producers, and state actors.<sup>89</sup> The regime here is interesting as it offers the level of analysis of the societal norms and relations along which different private and public actors act in the process of governing transitions. Firms and businesses do not solely act in accordance with their business-goals or related visions

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<sup>89</sup> Mary Lawhon and James Murphy, "Socio-Technical Regimes and Sustainability Transitions: Insights from Political Ecology," *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 357-358.

but can also be placed in their respective socio-economic or political environments.<sup>90</sup> The regime can be confronted with change through the increase of pressure upon its components and its incumbent actors. Pressures can result from several causes, emanating from within the regime level itself, or from outside originating from niches or the socio-technical landscape. Sustainability transitions, such as the energy transition, can find external pressures from public opinions that spur on change within a regime. The ability of a regime to adapt to these pressures in turn relies on the involved actors and their financial and innovative abilities, but also on the institutional support. The ability to transform of private (or public) actors to certain pressures can also rely on the capacity to produce new knowledge, through Research & Development for example. Additionally, the access to resources is important as well, such as (human) capital, but also politico-institutional resources.<sup>91</sup> Governance of transition in the regime level considers not just individual actors and their capacities but evaluates the networks and dynamics in which the actors are embedded. The interaction between different parties and groups is important here, such as public and non-public (private) actors being interdependent in their ways. An example of this is the business sector, which is bound to public rules and regulations, but also state institutions in turn being dependent on such policies being adopted correctly by private parties. State and non-state actors can hold similar and different interests in the development of the transition but are always connected with other parties in a regime.<sup>92</sup>

The approach of political economy has also been discussed in the literature review and extends the focus on the Multi-Level Perspective towards one with an emphasis on the power relations between politics and economy. The political economy approach also implores Gramscian theorisations of the historical implications of the intertwining of intangible and tangible aspects of society. The focus is placed on the economic or political dynamics that cause certain institutions to evolve and transition. This view can also be applied to energy transitions, and identifying the power dynamics inherent to it, or the groups that vie for a specific form of organisation of future systems. Using a Gramscian, or Marxist approach, the current material and immaterial base and preference for the carbon-based energy systems can be seen as a form of hegemony. By studying the historical complications of a certain system,

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<sup>90</sup> Adrian Smith, Andy Stirling and Frans Berkhout, "The Governance of Sustainable Socio-Technical Transitions," *Research Policy* 34, no. 10 (December 1, 2005): 1491.

<sup>91</sup> Smith, Stirling and Berkhout, "The Governance," 1496-1497.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 1498.

the moments when such systems are most viable for change can be identified, or when the institutions around which they are built are ready for transformation.<sup>93</sup>

There are many political-economic explanations that can be made to elucidate the powerful positions fossil fuel companies have in energy systems and their hold over its concerning policies. The scale of their lobbying campaigns and the respective companies themselves is an important feature. The actors are able to organise themselves in well-structured blocs with homogenous arguments and policy agendas. In addition, they often hold good relationships with other people in high political positions or governmental functions. This is partially due to the state in turn being dependent on these fossil fuel companies as well, as they are producers of the energy supply. Energy is important for economic growth within a country, which has been reliant on fossil fuel provision.<sup>94</sup> Not completely unrelated to this approach is the perspective of the structural power implications capital and capitalism have in society. The actors within society that are large contributors to the process of capital accumulation often have a strong political influence, as the capitalist state is somewhat reliant on the increase of capital as well as the economic contributions big business can make. The companies that hold a powerful position within society have several ways in which they can exert influence on politics, as well as shape leading and hegemonic perceptions of what causes economic prosperity within society.<sup>95</sup>

In politics, power and policy formation are not always completely centralised but can be distributed among numerous actors and parties as well. A plurality of different arrangements and partnerships can be found within politics, also politics and policy concerning sustainability and the environment. The process of decentralisation within politics can make way for new and non-political actors to enter the arena, such as the social groups but also private actors. These private actors, especially, seem to have created a position for themselves acting between politics and the market. The multiplication of political participators has also influenced power dynamics, creating a more complex picture. The increasing interwovenness of private and public organisations gives and takes power to both parties in certain situations. As sometimes the state can extend its influence over the other participators, whilst in different situations this might be the other way around. Both types of actors have their own discursive tools, where the

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<sup>93</sup> Peter Newell, "Trasformismo or Transformation? The Global Political Economy of Energy Transitions," *Review of International Political Economy* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 27-28.

<sup>94</sup> Peter Newell and Matthew Paterson, "A Climate for Business: Global Warming, the State and Capital," *Review of International Political Economy* 5, no. 4 (1998): 690.

<sup>95</sup> Newell and Paterson, "A Climate," 691.

use of certain terms and ideas serves their own vested interests in the creation of policy.<sup>96</sup> An increase in the importance of business and industry made for a different position of the state itself in economic negotiations. Yet, the production and extraction of natural resources is a very specific story. This is due to the fact that often the state holds the rights and control over its sovereign natural wealth, and the provision of natural resources. This makes for an interesting relationship between public and private actors within the extractive industries.<sup>97</sup> The close correlation between energy provision and economic growth is another important variable to keep in mind when investigating these relationships, as growth is most likely in the interest of both parties. The producers of the energy sources are considered as incremental by the political parties. The state serves the purpose of balancing competing views on the future of the energy transition, and in which way this would take shape.<sup>98</sup>

### **Private actors and Public Participation**

A comparative evaluation of the theoretical transition management model and the implementation of it in Dutch politics is conducted by René Kemp, Jan Rotmans and Derk Loorbach in the article *Assessing the Dutch Energy Transition Policy: How Does it Deal with Dilemmas of Managing Transitions?* Here the issue of ‘Distributed Control’ is explored and discussed, as power and influence are shared by multiple and heterogenous actors in societies where the process of policy formation is decentralised. These actors naturally differ in interests and thus such distribution of involved actors demands interactive platforms for decision making.<sup>99</sup> The Dutch approach to distributed control of transitions was expressed through the establishment of different platforms and a taskforce in which private and public actors and institutions interacted. These platforms were designed to formulate possible policy routes as envisioned by a diverse group of actors. The platforms were considered central and incremental to the whole process of transitioning. In the first decade of the twenty-first century the idea of the energy transition became a more socio-politically accepted, and more and more different

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<sup>96</sup> Bas Arts, Pieter Leroy, and Jan van Tatenhove, “Political Modernisation and Policy Arrangements: A Framework for Understanding Environmental Policy Change,” *Public Organization Review* 6, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 103-104.

<sup>97</sup> James van Alstine and Nathan Andrews, “Corporations, Civil Society, and Disclosure: A Case Study of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative,” In *The Palgrave Handbook of the International Political Economy of Energy*, Edited by Thijs Van de Graaf et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 96.

<sup>98</sup> Newell, “Trasformismo,” 32.

<sup>99</sup> René Kemp, Jan Rotmans, and Derk Loorbach, “Assessing the Dutch Energy Transition Policy: How Does It Deal with Dilemmas of Managing Transitions?,” *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 9, no. 3–4 (September 1, 2007): 317.

actors were employed to guide the transition along.<sup>100</sup> However, there are some practical differences between the theory of transition management and Dutch implementation. A large point of contestation is the Taskforce Energy Transition, which holds an influential role in politics and shaping political ideas on the transition. The taskforce itself is chaired by the CEO of Shell Netherlands at the time, Rein Willems. Other members are associated with large energy producing and consuming organisation within the Netherlands such as: CEOs of energy companies Essent, Electralabel and Gasunie, the head of the Association of the Dutch Chemical Industry, and energy associated research organisation such as ECN (Energieonderzoek Centrum Nederland). Only one non-governmental environmental organisation has been present in the transition platforms, ‘Stichting Natuur en Milieu’. Where others (as for example Greenpeace) are either not asked to participate or not interested in this.<sup>101</sup> The authors recount that within the taskforce most actors are led by their own vested interests for the future of the energy regime. Smaller and more niche institutions and actors fail to be involved in the negotiations or platforms. In addition, the plans formulated are not as much focused on institutional transition, but mostly on reducing carbon production. The ideas of transition management, though successful in having changed political orientation, have not yet been fully expressed in Dutch transition politics. The different platforms fail to diversely and democratically involve people and interact little between themselves.<sup>102</sup> Already mentioned in the Literature Review is Carolyn Hendriks and her article *On Inclusion and Network Governance: The Democratic Disconnect of Dutch Energy Transitions*. Hendriks has created a clear figure in which the structure of the taskforce is illustrated:

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<sup>100</sup> Kemp, Rotmans, and Loorbach, “Assessing,” 324.

<sup>101</sup> Hendriks, “On Inclusion,” 1017-1018.

<sup>102</sup> Kemp, Rotmans, and Loorbach, “Assessing,” 326-327.

Figure 4.1: *The Dutch Energy Transition Program Structure as Visualised by Hendriks*

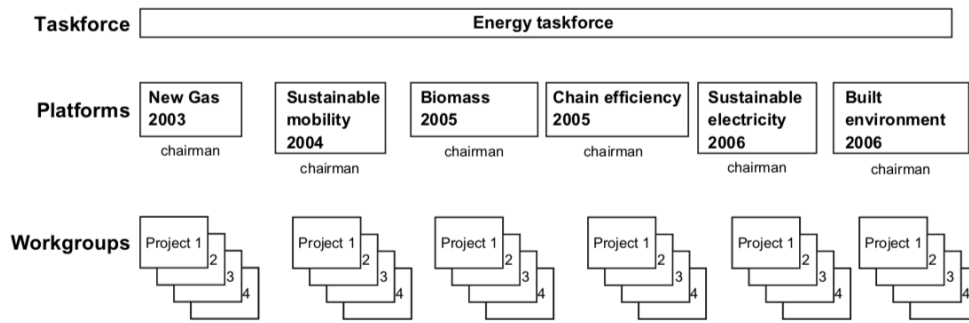


FIGURE 1 Key network arrangements in the Dutch Energy Transition Program (as at 26 June 2006)

Source: Carolyn M. Hendriks, "On Inclusion and Network Governance: The Democratic Disconnect of Dutch Energy Transitions," *Public Administration* 86, no. 4 (2008): 1015, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2008.00738.x>.

Hendriks mentions that the taskforce has increased its political power and influence, as the plan created by it have become an important influence for Dutch policy creation and direction of investments. The taskforce works as the connecting device between politics and the bottom-up workgroups and platforms functioning beneath it as illustrated in figure 4.1. The taskforce communicates with political figures, such as ministers, which is its first main duty. The second duty, as formulated by Hendriks, is to increase integrity and credibility of policies. On this objective she states:

"It's elite and advisory character is a familiar one in Dutch politics, reminiscent of neo-corporatist (Dutch polder model) policy-making. Ironically, it seems that in practice transition management replicates the very kind of network structures that transition scholars suggest we avoid."<sup>103</sup>

The Taskforce can plot out policies intended to facilitate the transition courses set out by the platforms. Though neither Taskforce nor platform have been legitimised by democratic processes. If the transition path is formulated by a top-down approach of incumbent actors, structural societal change is to more difficult to achieve, as well as beliefs in credibility among the large diversity of actors less (or not) included in the process of energy transition policy formulation.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Hendriks, "On Inclusion," 1017.

<sup>104</sup> Kern and Smith, "Restructuring," 4100.

## Incumbent Actors

As discussed in the short energy profile of the Netherlands in the introductory chapter the largest part of the energy supply is provided by natural gas and oil. In the production of both resources the companies Royal Dutch Shell and ExxonMobil and the Dutch state plays a large role. Thus, both oil companies and the state are key players concerning the energy production. The state can derive profits from the production of natural gas and oil in multiple ways, as for example through taxation, state participation, dividend, and extraction rights.<sup>105</sup> The Netherlands holds one of the largest natural gas reserves in the European Union, of which the 2002 Dutch minister of Economic Affairs stated there were ‘reasons of public interests to produce gas wherever that is possible’.<sup>106</sup> Natural gas is a somewhat cleaner fossil fuel than oil, emitting less Co2. It is therefore considered to be a transitioning fuel on the road to sustainable energy production, as it remains a fossil fuel nonetheless.<sup>107</sup> As in the Netherlands oil and gas make for the majority of energy production, the producing actors of these resources hold a powerful position within the Dutch energy system. Especially with the increasing focus on gas in the second half of the twentieth century, the NAM (as the largest national gas mining actor) became a powerful player within the regime. The oil crises in the twentieth century showed that the Dutch energy system was highly reliant on fossil fuels, which made for an increasing objective of the state to intervene in energy.<sup>108</sup>

Public debates and ideas on energy also changed, with popular conceptions of climate and environment being sharpened. Causing discourse on energy to increasingly shift to one concerning sustainable production. Linguistically, words such as ‘environmental sustainability’ and ‘transition’ gained ground in policy and political debates. This went alongside continuing liberalisation of the energy production and markets; some Dutch companies fused and were absorbed by large multinational companies. After the first decade of the twenty-first century in the Netherlands, and with a new liberal cabinet, initiatives like renewable energy were seen as financially deterring and inefficient. The dominating discourse within politics became largely economically focused, causing some smaller and transition related initiatives to become left behind.<sup>109</sup> The article by Henk-Jan Kooij et al. *Between*

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<sup>105</sup> Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, “Netherlands,” 58-59.

<sup>106</sup> Clingendael International Energy Programme, “Natural Gas in the Netherlands: From Cooperation to Competition,” The Hague: CIEP, 2014, Accessed March 24 2021, 152.

<sup>107</sup> Clingendael International Energy Programme, “Natural Gas,” 154.

<sup>108</sup> Henk-Jan Kooij et al., “Between Grassroots and Treetops: Community Power and Institutional Dependence in the Renewable Energy Sector in Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands,” *Energy Research & Social Science* 37 (March 1, 2018): 56.

<sup>109</sup> Henk-Jan Kooij et al., “Between Grassroots,” 56-57.



*grassroots and treetops: Community power and institutional dependence in the renewable energy sector in Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands* evaluates the energy systems of the respective countries and possibilities for ‘Grassroot Initiatives’, or bottom-up approaches and entrepreneurs concerning sustainable energy provision. Difficulties for industrialised countries in transitioning are partly path-dependent complications, such as centralised energy production and infrastructure which in the Netherlands is reliant on fossil fuels. In addition, the large energy companies that dominate energy markets prevent new initiatives, such as renewable energy producers, from gaining ground. One reason for this is the liberal and privatised nature of the energy system and market, where new initiatives cannot win from incumbent fossil fuel actors.<sup>110</sup> New energy producers can face complications with entering markets, as energy systems are already structured in ways that favour incumbent actors and their productive resources, with domestic markets often facilitating these. Increasingly, liberalisation of these markets in the Netherlands gave way for new initiatives to gain ground as cartels and monopolies reached their ends. Nonetheless, entering these markets may be intimidating to new projects focused on renewable energy sources, as both access to the energy grid and infrastructure must first be granted, after which other energy actors still hold large and powerful positions in these systems.<sup>111</sup> Adding into this are the more cultural or discursive aspects that determine socio-political perspectives on how the energy systems should or could be structured. In the Netherlands the discourse seems to predominately focus on the economic aspects of the energy system, these dominate other discourses that are concerned with the environment or climate. Increasingly, these perspectives have become more of a public focus, though politics and policy are still strongly centred around economic concerns.<sup>112</sup>

Processes of politics and policy formation can be evaluated in their respective political culture. Dutch politics is known for its inclusive method of ‘poldering’, where multiple (opposing) groups gather to discuss issues and their possible solutions with multiple stakeholders. These methods were also carried out with negotiations concerning sustainability policies, as Dutch politics discusses desirable solutions with different sectors of industry. Some industries are more difficult to achieve middle ground with, such as the heavy industry, as *The Economist* has reported on in 2019. Plans are now directed towards instituting financial repercussions for high emitters, more than policies targeted at individuals, to tackle the high

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

number of national emissions. More than half the country's emission can be traced back to 10 industry giants, among which is Royal Dutch Shell.<sup>113</sup>

The public-private partnerships within the natural resource extraction industry have not always been beacons of transparency. An initiative to increase the transparency and positive societal external effects of these partnerships, is the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in 2003. This initiative presents a global standard for transparency of public-private relationships within the industry. Though transparency is seen as important in global governance, it is not always appreciated as much within businesses and corporations, or sometimes even forms of governmental rule or certain sovereign bodies.<sup>114</sup> The emphasis on transparency on its own is most likely not enough to tackle the detrimental consequences of natural resource extraction in resource-rich countries, the initiative does bring to light a number of issues within the global industry. The European Union implemented measures that require natural resource companies to increase transparency on payments and transactions in 2013.<sup>115</sup> The Netherlands was admitted to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in 2018, before which the country had already been involved with the initiative.<sup>116</sup> The report published by the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in 2017 states that the minister of Economic Affairs and Climate is responsible for all things to do with exploring and extracting natural resources, such as gas and oil. Not only is the state involved in the sourcing of gas and its providing companies, but it is also the sole shareholder in Energy Management Netherlands (Energy Beheer Nederland, EBN). This company also participates in the exploration of gas, it is a prominent participator in GasTerra and the NAM and has an advisory role to the minister of Economic Affairs and Climate.<sup>117</sup>

To further explore the role of gas companies, such as the NAM and Gasunie, and thus the role of certain oil companies (as these are owned in majority by Shell and ExxonMobil) within Dutch political negotiations on the energy transition, governmental publications can be explored as well. Here, questions asked by parliamentarians and the answers given by the responsible ministers are often published online publicly. In this case the questions were directed towards an investigation on the cooperative governmental and academic initiative

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<sup>113</sup> "Costly Climate Measures Are Hard to Sell, but the Netherlands Has a Plan," *The Economist*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/07/09/costly-climate-measures-are-hard-to-sell-but-the-netherlands-has-a-plan>.

<sup>114</sup> Van Alstine and Nathan Andrews, "Corporations," 97.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>116</sup> Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, "Netherlands," accessed March 31, 2021, <https://eiti.org/netherlands>.

<sup>117</sup> Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, "Netherlands 2017 EITI Report," Oslo: EITI, 2019, Accessed 25 March 2021, 43.

called the ‘New Energy Coalition (NEC)’, who alongside private actors researched roads to sustainable energy provision. The investigation stated that gas companies (such as the NAM) held strong influence on the research. The questions demanded clarification as to why it were companies who themselves made profits from fossil fuel production that were involved in the research, and if the minister thought this was worrisome. The then minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Eric Wiebes stated that it is important for the gas companies to work towards a sustainable energy provision, as the project welcomes help and knowledge of multiple parties, also those who initially provide the fossil fuels, as they would have to transition as well.<sup>118</sup>

In 2017 minister Wiebes also stated in Dutch parliament that the energy transition would most likely become a costly one. The minister explained that the transition would cost about as much as the economic growth of the same year, fearing costs would probably even rise higher than that.<sup>119</sup> In the debate the minister discussed the economic effects the transition to sustainability would have, calling the issues of sustainability and climate an expense issue.<sup>120</sup> The NAM itself publishes, in the same year, that certain ideas on the energy transition are very ambitious, and perhaps even a bit unrealistic. Such as certain goals to have the Netherlands completely sustainable by 2030. The NAM states that their energy objective is to lower Co2 emissions, but that energy should remain affordable and that choices should remain economically conscious as well. They state that even though they are large gas producers, they do not fear the upcoming transition. However, they also stress the importance of natural gas in the future, and that further gas field explorations should not be put on hold as long as renewable energy sources would not yet be ready to produce sufficient energy.<sup>121</sup> In relation to the energy transition, the Dutch state reports in 2020 that natural gas will remain a key component in the energy transition, up until 2050 natural gas will produce at least 30% of the energy in the Netherlands, if not more.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Rijksoverheid, “Beantwoording Kamervragen over het bericht dat gasbedrijven Gronings onderzoek naar duurzame energie domineren,” The Hague: Rijksoverheid, 2020, Accessed March 25 2020.

<sup>119</sup> Robert Giebels, “Waarom alle economische groei volgens Wiebes op zal gaan aan de energietransitie,” *de Volkskrant*, December 16, 2017, sec. Economie.

<sup>120</sup> Tweede Kamer, “Begroting EZK/LNV (deel Economie en Klimaat),” Accessed May 15, 2021, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/h-tk-20172018-35-7.html>

<sup>121</sup> NAM, “Energietransitie – de noodzaak voor een balans tussen ambitie en realiteitszin,” accessed March 26, 2021, <https://www.nam.nl/nieuws/2017/energietransitie-de-noodzaak-voor-een-balans-tussen-ambitie-en-realiteitszin.html>.

<sup>122</sup> Ministerie van Economische Zaken en Klimaat, “Gas blijft scharnierpunt in de energietransitie - Klimaatakkoord,” May 28, 2020, <https://www.klimaatakkoord.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/05/28/gas-blijft-scharnierpunt-in-de-energietransitie>.

## Conclusions

Changes in political organisation, such as decentralisation, can disrupt the dynamics of power within the process of policy formation. The political arena increasingly becomes one where a heterogeneous group of actors interact with one another. The relationships that exist within this arena are an interesting topic of research when investigating how private actors concern themselves with policy making. Such public-private partnerships are increasingly popular in the natural resource extraction industry, but public-private cooperation is a popular phenomenon within political processes as well. In the Netherlands the transition management approach is leading in energy transition policy formation, causing multiple actors to be included in the process. The involvement of multiple actors in the search for new policies, fits within the Dutch political culture of ‘poldering’ as well. In theory this approach would be conducive to a heterogeneous combination of political actors, in practice there are some obstacles. The Taskforce Energy Transition is an influential organ within the process, which makes for domination of already incumbent energy actors, leaving little room for novel and bottom-up approaches. This was not just the case in the taskforce, but the energy system as a whole in the Netherlands has trouble creating space for new initiatives and entrepreneurs with new perspectives.

There are a number of powerful actors within the energy and political system in the Netherlands. As a country where natural gas is important in the energy provision, the productive agents of this resource hold a large amount of power. The Dutch gas producers are either (partly) owned by the government, or heavily intertwined with governmental organs, such as EBN and the NAM. Adding into this, the NAM seems to also be involved in negotiations and research into the energy transition. Which raises questions on credibility as the NAM has vested interests in the design of a future energy system, being a natural gas producer. The organisation has also stated that the future of energy in the Netherlands will most likely be one where gas still has a prominent role. This vision is also voiced by the Dutch state, who also obtain a large number of profits from the production and exploration of natural gas. In general, the issue within political processes concerning the Dutch energy transition seems to be not that incumbent actors or influential fossil fuel producers do not believe or think an energy transition should take place, but more so their dominating concern with their own (future) interests.

## Chapter 5: Private-Public Cooperation

### Introduction

This chapter will evaluate how Royal Dutch Shell positions itself in the debate surrounding the energy transition. This will be done by firstly looking into Shell's own published statements to see how the company perceives its own role in the energy transition. Secondly, Shell's participation in political processes and public platforms will be evaluated to understand the company's role in Dutch politics. To fully understand the attitude and behaviour of Shell, the gas extraction companies it is involved in will have to be evaluated as well. The NAM is an important example of this, and how it participates in public platforms can also be an important factor. The following sub-question shall be answered in this chapter: What is the attitude of Royal Dutch Shell to the energy transition according to their business reports? And how do they participate in public platforms and institutions?

### The Energy Transition Report

Royal Dutch Shell seems to engage itself with both processes of sustainable development and the energy transition. Its website provides numerous reports concerning both 'Energy and Innovation' and 'Sustainability'. Underneath the header 'Sustainability' reports can be found covering the years 1997-2019.<sup>123</sup> Accompanying this, Shell has published a report in 2018 concerning the energy transition itself, describing the corporate strategy for moving into low-carbon energy provision. The media release on the report states the following:

“It [The Energy Transition Report] also explains how Shell's capacity to adapt to the transition should allow it to thrive in the longer term by supplying the types of energy customers will need over the coming decades. For Shell, this means that the company will still sell the oil and gas that society needs, while preparing its portfolio to move into lower-carbon energy, when this makes commercial sense.”<sup>124</sup>

This *Energy Transition Report* of 2018 will be the main focus for this chapter, as it targets the plans for the energy transition specifically which is the main subject for this research. This report will be considered as Shell's stance towards the future of the energy system, supplemented with secondary research on the company's public statements.

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<sup>123</sup> Shell Global, “Sustainability Reports,” accessed April 29, 2021,

<https://www.shell.com/sustainability/sustainability-reporting-and-performance-data/sustainability-reports.html>

<sup>124</sup> Shell Global, “Shell Publishes New Report on Strategy for Energy Transition,” accessed April 29, 2021,

<https://www.shell.com/media/news-and-media-releases/2018/new-report-on-strategy-for-energy-transition.html>.

The report is an acknowledgement of Royal Dutch Shell International that energy transition is necessary to achieve the goals set by the Paris Agreement to lower carbon emissions in an effort to limit human induced climate change. It describes the company's role, and its role in relation to (global) society in the current energy system, and its aims for facilitating the energy transition. The report is divided into five chapters: Towards a Low-Carbon Future, Shell Scenarios, Our Resilience in the Medium Term, to 2030, Changing Our Portfolio in the Long Term Beyond 2030, Shell's Actions Today and Working with Others.<sup>125</sup> Much of the report is based on one of the three formulated scenarios in the report, named 'Sky'. This scenario bases itself on the two other scenarios 'Mountains' – focused on the role of large and powerful actors such as government and business in the energy transition – and 'Oceans' – reliant on private actors and market dynamics as drivers of innovation. The Sky scenario combines the former two approaches, to include multiple sides of society in the energy transition. It incorporates multiple industries and forms of energy to formulate fitting transition goals per sector, which would finally help to achieve the objectives as formulated in the Paris Agreement.<sup>126</sup>

Shell sees the future demand for fossil fuels rising, as energy demand rises globally as well. Oil and gas demands, according to the Sky scenario, shall rise slowly until 2030, after which this shall decline slowly again. The provision of these fossil fuels would be necessary to meet global energy demands, for which renewable energy sources do not yet produce efficiently enough. Continuation of investments in and exploration of oil and gas fields would be necessary to sustain economic growth, as production rates would decline Shell reports on the basis of International Energy Agency data.<sup>127</sup> This view also seems to be in line with the perceptions from both the NAM and the Dutch Climate Accord on the future role of fossil fuels.

Shell aims to diversify its future energy investment portfolio according to the report. It intends to play into consumer and society demands for energy, which includes investments in oil and gas production. In addition, investment in renewable energy sources is becoming more and more attractive to the company, as costs decline for such sources. Still the reports states: "However, regulatory uncertainty in some power markets could lead to uncertain long-term revenues. To avoid this, we are seeking to invest in projects that are commercially viable

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<sup>125</sup> Royal Dutch Shell plc, "Shell Energy Transition Report," (The Hague: Royal Dutch Shell plc, 2018), 5-11.

<sup>126</sup> Royal Dutch Shell plc, "Shell Energy," 19.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 23.

today.”<sup>128</sup> Other oil products the company expects an increasing demand for in the upcoming years are transport petrol, such as for aviation, or petrochemicals for consumers, agriculture and electronics or products associated with energy transition initiatives. Shell intends to increase energy efficiency of their petrochemical production plants.<sup>129</sup> The last chapter of the report mentions the close cooperation of Shell with other key actors in the transition, such as governments or other companies. Apart from multiple international organisations concerned with sustainability the company associates itself with, the report mentions Shell’s cooperation with governments of countries, giving the example of the Netherlands. They state that they are collaborating with governmental policymakers and other industry actors in the energy transition considerations. They mention a ‘coalition’ instituted in 2016 with other private actors to help long the Dutch energy transition.<sup>130</sup>

In comparison with other scenario’s regarding energy transitions, such as that of the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), Shell’s Sky scenario is less optimistic in regard to the future progress of lowering emissions.<sup>131</sup> The article *The role of renewable energy in the global energy transformation* by Dolf Gielen et. al. compares the three scenarios in Table 5.1.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 45-49.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>131</sup> Dolf Gielen et al., “The Role of Renewable Energy in the Global Energy Transformation,” *Energy Strategy Reviews* 24 (April 1, 2019): 41.

Table 5.1: *Shell Future Scenario's Compared with those of the IEA and IRENA by Gielen et al.*

Comparison of IEA, IRENA and Shell scenarios for global energy transition, 2050.  
Sources [12,27,53].

		IRENA	IEA	Shell
		REmap	2°/66%	Sky
Total primary energy supply	[EJ/yr]	550	586	828
Total final consumption	[EJ/yr]	386	398	548
Renewable energy share in total primary energy supply	[%]	63	46	43
Fossil fuel CO <sub>2</sub> emissions in 2050				
Baseline*	[Gt/yr]	37	37	
Emissions 2050	[Gt/yr]	9.7	9	18
Contribution of abatement options				
Renewable energy	[%]	41	37	
Energy efficiency (including electrification)	[%]	53	35	
Others	[%]	6	29	
Investments for decarbonisation 2015-50 (excl. stranded assets)	[USD trln]	120	114	
Energy intensity improvements	[%/yr]	2.8	2.9	2
Electric mobility in transport	[%]	31	n/a	21
Total biomass demand	[EJ/yr]	128	147	55

Note: \*includes non-energy use (feedstock).

Gielen, Dolf, et. al. "The Role of Renewable Energy in the Global Energy Transformation." *Energy Strategy Reviews* 24 (April 1, 2019): 43.

Both the IEA and IRENA scenarios are relatively close in calculations, with the Sky scenario sometimes diverging. Shell expects the total future energy supply and consumption to be much higher than its fellow calculators. All the above depictions and expectations of the energy transition find that renewable energy sources are an incremental feature in it, but mainly differ in visions of how energy efficiency shall be organised in the coming years.<sup>132</sup>

The article *Narrating organisational identities by way of evolutionary tales—Talking Shell from an oil to an energy company* by Lisa Backer comments on the narrative abilities of managers and executives from Royal Dutch Shell, which has changed the perceptions of the company from the inside out through the use of various mediums. The perceived identity of the company has shifted from it being an 'oil company' to it being an 'energy company'. The change is also due to the company's embrace of different energy productive sources, such as renewables.<sup>133</sup> The article looks at the construction of certain narratives by managers of Shell, to explain the transformed corporate identity. External influences and pressures have caused

<sup>132</sup> Dolf Gielen et al., "The Role," 41.

<sup>133</sup> Lise Backer, "Narrating Organisational Identities by Way of Evolutionary Tales--Talking Shell from an Oil to an Energy Company," *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 24, no. 1 (2008): 34.



high-up Shell executives to construct new narratives to reform the company's identity. Backer states that:

“Thus, it appears, managers can use agentive actor evolutionary tales to protect business as usual, that is to say, certain “historical” reified construction in the organisational identity, while they can use adaptor evolutionary tales for challenging and renewing the relational organisational identity.”<sup>134</sup>

Within the entirety of Shell itself, there seem to be discrepancies on how narratives of the energy transition should be constructed. Shell International Renewables' perception of the near future of energy differs somewhat from Royal Dutch Shell's high-up managers. The top managers of Shell fear that the transition has a too high reliance on renewable energy sources which will affect business and profits. The core business of the company is still fossil-fuel production, which has required large upfront investments. A swifter transition to alternative sources than envisioned earlier on, can have financially detrimental effects. The company's traditional and normative identity based on fossil-fuel and accompanying technologies is being challenged by a narrative of renewable energy sources focusing on different types of investments, through external pressures and opposing internal narratives.<sup>135</sup> The opposing views and internal pressures have caused a number of executives concerned with renewable energy and energy transition to leave the company in 2020, just before a planned announcement on energy transition strategies. The Financial Times reports that the three Shell employees, all with leading positions in renewable energy or energy transition departments within the company, have left over disagreements to do with how and at which pace the transition should take place.<sup>136</sup> In addition to this, more and more shareholders of Shell seem to support the idea of a rapid decrease of fossil fuel investments and an increase of renewable energy investments. In 2020 14,4% of shareholders agreed to this, whereas in a recent 2021 vote this appeared to be 30%. The International Energy Agency recently published the report *Net Zero by 2050*, imploring all fossil fuel producers to stop investing in gas and oil production. This marks a radical departure from the agency's earlier illustrations of the energy transition, which included the provision of fossil fuels until at least 2050.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Backer, “Narrating,” 35-36.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>136</sup> Leslie Hook and Anjali Raval, “Shell Executives Quit amid Discord over Green Push,” *Financial Times* December 8, 2020, <https://www-ft-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/content/053663f1-0320-4b83-be31-fefbc49b0efc>.

<sup>137</sup> Carel Grol, “Aandeelhouders en EIA voeren druk op Shell op om sneller te vergroenen,” *Financieel Dagblad* May 18, 2021, <https://fd.nl/ondernemen/1384295/aandeelhouders-voeren-druk-op-shell-op-om-te-stoppen-met-olie-en-gas-oaflca4b4M2R>.

The following paragraphs will provide examples of Royal Dutch Shell's participation in public platforms and how they communicate with politics concerning the energy transition. The examples are either of Shell's direct political engagement, or indirectly through other organisations such as the NAM or GasTerra.

### **Taskforce Energy Transition as participatory platform**

A point of focus within Dutch energy transition politics is the pluriform inclusion of societal actors. Royal Dutch Shell is included in the process of policy formulation directly through the Taskforce Energy Transition, as it was chaired by the CEO of Shell Netherlands Jeroen van der Veer. The taskforce created a 'Transition Action Plan' to guide the Dutch energy system towards sustainable development in the long term. The Action Plan was presented to the Dutch cabinet in 2006. A letter on the website of the government reviews the Transition Plan thematically, including reactions of the cabinet at that time. In general, the reactions of the cabinet to the proposed policies are positive and in compliance with many of the ideas, although they differ on some.<sup>138</sup> The plan sees the different key parties, markets, governmental organs, and society all as equal components in the process of creating a sustainable energy system. It views the government as a supporting institution and responsible for public demands, but also as an important facilitator in research and development. Businesses and companies are considered free to invest in which ever form of transition they see fit but count the government again as a supportive actor in assisting energy innovation. The cabinet's response is not in complete conflict with the proposed plans, but sees the government's role as somewhat wider and more engaging than the facilitative role depicted. Its responsibilities also include the creation of regulations and an economic environment in which markets and business can operate optimally. The cabinet invites the taskforce for negotiations and deliberations concerning the envisioned division of roles of important actors. The taskforce also mentions some financial propositions, such as an increase in governmental funding through the establishment of a fund, to which the government remains somewhat hesitant in the letter, and states it remains a financial effort of both markets and public institutions together.<sup>139</sup>

The advice of the taskforce is based upon the knowledge produced by the different policy platforms that have been created to bring together various actors and broaden societal engagement. The transition platforms, existing of experts, businesses, civil servants and others,

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<sup>138</sup> Tweede Kamer, "29 023 Brief van de Minister van Economische Zaken," accessed April 14, 2021, <https://www.rijksbegroting.nl/algemeen/gereferreed/9/9/6/kst99695.html>.

<sup>139</sup> Tweede Kamer, "29 023 Brief."

were seen as the core of transition management.<sup>140</sup> As has been elaborately explained in the preceding chapter, the taskforce does under find criticism, as multiple sources state the taskforce is dominated by incumbent actors from the Dutch energy system (such as the CEO of Shell Netherlands). In addition, there is little room for input and knowledge about innovation or novel energy initiatives.<sup>141</sup> Royal Dutch Shell has published a statement in 2021 addressing “Corporate Political Engagement”, also in the context of the energy transition. Here the cooperation and contact between political official and business representatives is considered to be important in the process policy creation. The statement discusses corporate lobbying as well, and it considers ‘responsible lobbying’ as possibly valuable component to political processes due to the exchange of company knowledge. The issue of politicians and businesspeople alternating between the company and politics is addressed too, Shell clarifies there is an ethical manual and procedure that is employed in these cases.<sup>142</sup>

It remains a challenge to adequately describe and obtain information on the role Shell and its representatives have in Dutch politics. There have been attempts to gain more transparency on the public participation of the company and the influence this might have in policy formation. The initiative the ‘Shell Papers’ by Dutch journalistic platforms Follow the Money and Platform Authentic Journalism (Platform Authentieke Journalistiek) are an example of such an attempt. The two organisations have submitted WOB-requests demanding on all information on state interaction with Shell to seventeen different governmental organs in the Netherlands. Nine of these were national ministries, three provinces and five municipalities. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate reacted by calling on all other organs to formulate a similar response to the request. While most organs complied to this, the northern municipalities and provinces of Groningen and Assen (where there are multiple gas extraction operations) complied and handed over the requested documents. After several negotiations between the Ministry and the journalistic platforms, the lasting thirteen governmental organs denied the request. The journalists then responded with a WOB-request asking on information on the original WOB-request, which released intra-governmental emails and negotiations on the original request. This clarified that a number of the organs were never

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<sup>140</sup> René Kemp, Jan Rotmans, and Derk Loorbach, “Assessing the Dutch Energy Transition Policy: How Does It Deal with Dilemmas of Managing Transitions?,” *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 9, no. 3–4 (September 1, 2007): 323-324.

<sup>141</sup> Kemp, Rotmans, and Loorbach, “Assessing,” 326.

Florian Kern and Michael Howlett, “Implementing Transition Management as Policy Reforms: A Case Study of the Dutch Energy Sector,” *Policy Sciences* 42, no. 4 (August 14, 2009): 394.

Hendriks, “On Inclusion,” 1017.

Kern and Smith, “Restructuring,” 4095.

<sup>142</sup> Royal Dutch Shell plc, “Corporate Political Engagement,” (The Hague: Royal Dutch Shell plc, 2021), 1-3.

actually planning on releasing any of the documents. Currently the Platform Authentic Journalism is lodging objections against the rejected files and waiting to receive and analyse the accepted files from Groningen and Drenthe.<sup>143</sup>

### **Lobby and Shell**

The research platforms Transparency International Netherlands and Lobbywatch have published investigations on the amount of influence businesses and corporations have on Dutch politics and the different cabinets run by Prime Minister Mark Rutte since 2010. The influence of lobbying actors in Dutch politics seems to be large, as there have been many speculations that conversations with large companies as Shell and Unilever have caused hefty taxation measures to be scrapped from the political agenda. The Prime Minister Mark Rutte speaks with several large interest groups and organisations, but unexpectedly there is a clear absence of both Shell and Unilever from the political agendas. Though it is possible that since the formation of a new cabinet since 2017, there have been no more new conversations, the organisations call it to be unlikely. Lobbywatch questions the transparency of political intertwinement with business, as they mention instances in 2018 where the Minister of Finance met the CEO of Shell, to discuss the possibility of a ‘CEO-group’. The minister neglected to incorporate this in his public agenda, as the talks would have been on personal title. The research by Lobbywatch and Transparency International states that business seem to have a large influence on political decision making, as the dissolving of the taxation measures has illustrated. Though the cabinet seems to be taking steps towards transparency of policy considerations. Nonetheless, the actual content of the conversations as well as the non-publicly communicated conversations are still only to be unmasked by initiation of WOB-requests.<sup>144</sup>

Indirectly, there are also forms of lobby in which Shell participates. The ABDUP is a lobby-organisation (already in existence for around 75 years) in which executives of Shell, DSM (the Dutch state mines), Unilever, Philips, and AkzoNobel participate and converse with Dutch politicians. The organisation operates through multiple commissions, all responsible for specific economic-political topics. These commissions were background components in the long-term development of political agendas. The lobby-group worked in close contact with the

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<sup>143</sup> Platform Authentieke Journalistiek. “Zo verliepen de eerste twee jaar van ons onderzoek naar de Shell Papers.” Follow the Money April 15, 2021. <https://www-ftm-nl.eur.idm.oclc.org/artikelen/terugblik-2-jaar-shell-papers>.

<sup>144</sup> Lotte Rooijendijk, “Onderzoek Lobbywatch: het bedrijfsleven loopt de deur plat bij Rutte III,” *Transparency International Nederland* 3 July 2018, <https://www.transparency.nl/nieuws/2018/07/onderzoek-lobbywatch-bedrijfsleven-loopt-deur-plat-rutte-iii/>.

PHAUSD lobby-group, established in 1978, which concerned itself with environmental politics specifically. The aforementioned members of ABDUP were also members of PHAUSD. According to *Follow the Money*, different civil servants in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and VROM and researchers have mentioned PHAUSD to be a difficult component in Dutch environmental legislation, often going against proposed policies.<sup>145</sup> The article by *Follow the Money* led to parliamentary questions directed to the minister of Economic Affairs and Climate in 2019. These questions were intended to obtain further clarifications on the political power of ABDUP, and their role in recent years, but these are still left unanswered.<sup>146</sup> A WOB-request has clarified that in 2016 the Prime Minister (Mark Rutte) and the minister of Economic Affairs (Jeroen Dijsselbloem) at the time were invited to a dinner with ABDUP, also known as the ‘presidents-gathering’ (presidentsbijeenkomst). Other invitees were multiple members of Shell, AkzoNobel, DSM, Unilever, and Philips.<sup>147</sup>

### **Gas companies and public influence**

The report published by the Dutch government, *Transition to Sustainable Energy*, mentions the changing role natural gas will have in the future. The report explains that in order to formulate the future of gas in the energy system, the government will have to negotiate with important actors within the industry, such as Shell and Exxonmobil (both part of the ‘gasgebouw’, the Gas Building).<sup>148</sup> The ‘gasgebouw’ is used to refer to all the private-public collaborations and conversations that assist the NAM in realising gas production. Four different organisations work together here: The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate, the NAM, GasTerra and EBN.<sup>149</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, the NAM is owned by both Shell and ExxonMobil respectively, where GasTerra is owned by the two companies and the Dutch government.

Research at the faculty of law of Groningen University has investigated the complexity of political decision making and governance in northern provinces of the Netherlands. In this region, gas and energy production is becoming an increasingly difficult political situation due to societal ramifications. The studies have pointed to the low level of democratic engagement

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<sup>145</sup> Platform Authentieke Journalistiek. “Lobby van multinationals blijkt kind aan huis bij ministeries.” *Follow the Money* September 3, 2019. <https://www-ftm-nl.eur.idm.oclc.org/artikelen/abdup-lobby-verweven-met-ministeries>.

<sup>146</sup> <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kv-tk-2019Z16375.html>

<sup>147</sup> Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, “Besluit op Wob-verzoek over overleg ABUP/ABDUP Nederlandse multinationals,” (April 18, 2019), <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/wob-verzoeken/2019/04/18/besluit-op-wob-verzoek-over-overleg-abup-abdup-nederlandse-multinationals>.

<sup>148</sup> Ministry of Economic Affairs, “Transitie naar Duurzaam,” (The Hague: Ministry of Economic Affairs), 60.

<sup>149</sup> Shell Netherlands, “Het Gasgebouw,” accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.shell.nl/media/dossiers/groningen-versneld-naar-nul/het-gasgebouw.html>.

and citizen participation in governmental decision making, on both provincial and national levels. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate is often the responsible organ in the case of fossil fuel extraction. This ministry tends to regard energy transition plans, and the technology needed for this as an economic matter. Therefore, it neglects the consequences for people and communities and mainly cooperates with important economic actors and businesses to instigate new energy initiatives.<sup>150</sup> A study focused on Groningen and the NAM questions the undertaken measures to counteract the earthquakes that have been caused by gas extraction in the region.<sup>151</sup> Here too it seems that there is little influence of societal organisations in the process of governmental decision making. There is little transparency, making it difficult for not only people but also local public organs such as provincialities or municipalities to participate in the process.<sup>152</sup>

## Conclusion

The general outline of Royal Dutch Shell's energy transition strategy is not completely divergent from those of the Dutch government and other organisations such as the NAM. The future image of the energy system is one in which fossil fuels, especially gas, are still present, though the size of their role is diminishing. In addition, economic and commercial viability of new energy projects is considered to be important; Shell seems to look towards sustainable energy initiatives that make commercial sense. The Sky scenario is one in which a plurality of societal actors cooperate to create a new energy system, a formulation not unlike that of the Dutch political approach. Upon comparing this scenario to those of other energy agencies, it is evident that they attach a greater role of significance to the future use of renewable energy sources than Shell initially does, their focus is still on fossil fuel sources. The article by Backer explicates this as well, there are different actors within the company with diverging opinions on the future of Shell. The company's top managers still view gas and oil production as its main business and profit source.

The taskforce which the former Shell Netherlands CEO chaired, has an important role in the process of policy formation concerning energy transition. As this taskforce is considered to be the connecting factor between high-end politics and the bottom-up workgroups and platforms formulating the different transition paths. The taskforce emphasises the cooperation

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<sup>150</sup> Bröring, "Splijtzwam-Besluitvorming," 261-262.

<sup>151</sup> Henrich Winter, "Governance en aardbevingen in Groningen," in *In Dienst van het Recht: Opstellen aangeboden aan prof. mr. J.G.Brouwer ter gelegenheid van zijn afscheid als hoogleraar Algemene Rechtswetenschap aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen* (2017): 232.

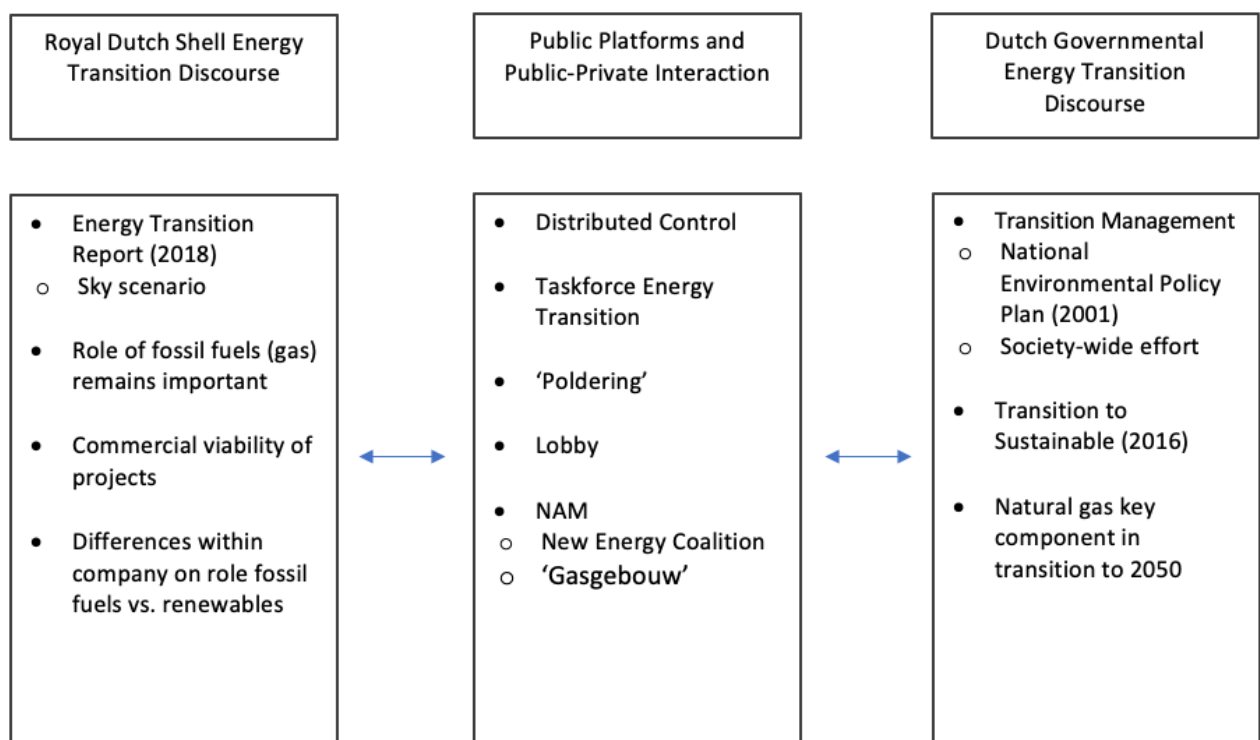
<sup>152</sup> Winter, "Governance," 243-244.

between different societal actors, just as Shell's own report on energy transition does. It is not a strange or an improbable view that different actors in society should work together to achieve a sustainable transition, as several other institutions have advocated as well. However, as multiple sources clarify, the taskforce is dominated by large industry players and lacks democratic and diverse inclusion. Shell has other political connections as well, one example of this is lobbying and the ability to obtain (private) conversations with multiple political figures. As well as the close cooperation between business and government in the production and extraction of natural gas in the Netherlands. The gasgebouw is an example of a way in which the different private and public actors cooperate and conversate. The extractive businesses of natural gas in the northern provinces in the Netherlands have been criticised for their lack of transparency and democratic involvement, much like the approaches to energy transition on the national level in which Shell situates itself. It is therefore questionable whether the advocated objective to include a broad range of societal actors in the process of policy creation for the transition has been lived up to in political practices. The ways in which Shell has influenced the process of policy creation concerning energy transition shall be further investigated in the following chapter.

## Chapter 6: Royal Dutch Shell and Discourse in the Netherlands

The following chapter will evaluate the influence of Royal Dutch Shell on energy transition policy in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Here the sub-question will be: What role does Royal Dutch Shell play in the formulation of the discourse on energy transition policy in the Netherlands? In answering this question, the collected data and information from preceding chapters will be used as background information to form a conclusion. The political engagement of Shell concerning the energy transition in the Netherlands will be placed in the light of socio-technical transition and political economy theories, to further understand the possible intertwinement of big business and politics. To visually summarise what data has been collected in preceding chapters, and how this relates to one another, figure 6.1 has been created. The points highlighted in this figure shall be elaborated further on throughout the chapter.

Figure 6.1: *Summary of Energy Transition Attitudes and Public-Private Intertwinement of Shell and Dutch Politics*



Source: Summary of data from preceding chapters



### **Complications in Dutch transition policy**

The Dutch energy transition discourse has been formulated around the ideas of transition studies, resulting in the concept of transition management. The Energy Transition Project in the first decade of the twenty-first century is an example of the political realisation of this. The project was intended to produce goal-oriented policies. Four main issues with the energy transition project have been identified in the article *Implementing Transition Management as Policy Reforms: A Case Study of the Dutch Energy Sector* by Florian Kern and Michael Howlett:

- Though the intended orientation was a socio-technical reform, many platforms and policies remained focused on traditional technological ideas, often leaving the social or societal aspects out of the equation.
- Policies often remained oriented towards economic considerations, focusing on liberalisation and profit potential. The taskforce admitted to considering the economic opportunities in opting for certain niches and projects. Doing so, projects without clear financial intents, and perhaps a more ‘radical’ nature were disfavoured.
- The policy advising platforms reporting to the taskforce have been considered a central part in policy formulation regarding the energy transition. However, these platforms are no examples of pluriform societal engagement, as large energy actors are mainly represented here.
- Lastly, again the objective of liberalisation seems to be prominent in political decision making, as financially unfavourable or little market potential has caused certain projects to be undermined by those contributing to liberalisation efforts.<sup>153</sup>

### **Contradictory Policy**

Dutch energy politics is shaped by contradictions and conflicts. Its policy ambitions are to include multiple and diverse actors and factors from society in the process of creating environmental and energy objectives. Though there seems to be an articulated drive for gaining a more diverse energy system, the numbers and facts do not point towards this. Novel and small energy initiatives find difficulty in establishing themselves within the dominant energy regime. Consequently, the Netherlands remains one of the lowest scoring countries on shares of renewable energy sources in the European Union.<sup>154</sup> The energy regime seems to be strongly

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<sup>153</sup> Florian Kern and Michael Howlett, “Implementing Transition Management as Policy Reforms: A Case Study of the Dutch Energy Sector,” *Policy Sciences* 42, no. 4 (August 14, 2009): 393-394.

<sup>154</sup> Hisschemöller and Sioziou, “Boundary Organisations,” 793.

instituted in its ways with little room for arising niches such as renewable energy sources to break through. This can partly be due to the institutional and political environment and its facilitative abilities, but also the potentiality of the niches and novel initiatives to find the needed structure and alliances to attest the energy regime in which they emerge.<sup>155</sup>

Politics and policy are important facilitative ingredients in the change of an established system. However, what can emerge are the possible hostile reactions of other elements and actors locked-into the existing system to new energy initiatives. Powerful actors within society can use their economic-political status to hold on to their position.<sup>156</sup> This is interesting when considering the policy proposals and envisioned future energy scenarios by Shell and the government, as they do not reject the possibilities new energy sources such as renewables, and even intend to invest in these. However, neither do they see to a radical departure from fossil fuels in both the energy system, as Shell's future scenarios even include increased investments in oil and gas. Dutch politics also contribute an important role to the fossil fuel natural gas in the future of the energy system.

One policy aspect that is often stated to be of importance when conceptualising the energy transition and other climate related policies, is the continued economic growth related to energy. To states (and companies) economic growth and market successes are certainly incremental, and this growth is not necessarily inherent to environmental damage. Companies can also increase profits by creating innovative and new products that cater to transforming societal needs whilst being environmentally friendly. When discussing production in relation to the environment and climate, the most important objective here perhaps is not the economic imperative, but the diminishing of environmental damage. This perspective has been advocated by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development in 1987 (among others), to view the environmental needs and financial and economic objectives as separate goals. To see it as such would not only question how much economic growth is possible, but also in which ways this can happen as most conducive to environment and society.<sup>157</sup> Increasingly, firms and industries find ways in which economic growth is achieved as well as diminishing environmental damage. However, in many established economies and political spheres the economic objective is still embedded when considering the transition to sustainability.<sup>158</sup> This

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<sup>155</sup> Antonia Proka, Matthijs Hisschemöller, and Derk Loorbach, "Transition without Conflict? Renewable Energy Initiatives in the Dutch Energy Transition," *Sustainability* 10, no. 6 (June 2018): 14-15.

<sup>156</sup> Roger Fouquet, "Historical Energy Transitions: Speed, Prices and System Transformation," *Energy Research & Social Science* 22 (December 1, 2016): 9.

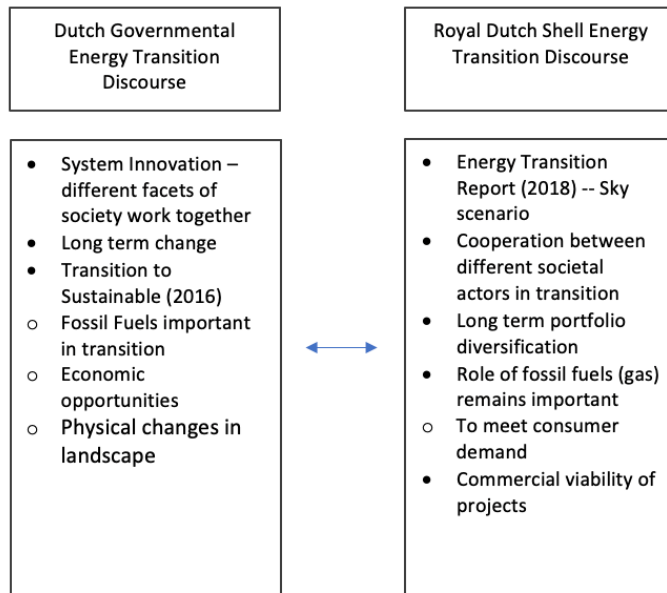
<sup>157</sup> James Meadowcroft, "Environmental Political Economy, Technological Transitions and the State," *New Political Economy* 10, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 494-495.

<sup>158</sup> Meadowcroft, "Environmental," 495.

is also what the Dutch energy transition policies have been criticised for. As the focus of many policies remained on liberalisation and profit realisation, at the expense of certain novel energy initiatives. As for Shell, the press release on the company’s Energy Transition Report states that the company will continue in the fossil fuel business and diversify its portfolio with new and more sustainable energy initiatives: “when this makes commercial sense”.<sup>159</sup> The economic rationale remains important in both business and policy concerning energy transitions.

From the preceding chapters an energy transition discourse has been identified for both Royal Dutch Shell and the Dutch government. To systematically compare the two, Figure 6.2 is created.

Figure 6.2: *Summary and Comparison of the Energy Transition Policy Discourse by the Dutch Government and Royal Dutch Shell*



Source: Summary of data throughout the research

The similarities of the reports mainly concern the focus on the persisting prominence of fossil fuels, namely natural gas, in the energy system and the commercial viability of sustainable energy initiatives, key points in both energy reports. It is unlikely that the report by Shell directly influenced the Dutch energy transition approach, as the Dutch state report was published in 2016 and the report of Shell in 2018. However, the transition management approach indicates that business has been included in the creation of energy policy. Shell

<sup>159</sup> Shell Global, “Shell Publishes New Report on Strategy for Energy Transition,” accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.shell.com/media/news-and-media-releases/2018/new-report-on-strategy-for-energy-transition.html>.

specifically has been included as well, through their participation in the taskforce, lobbying and close cooperation and corporate secondments between the government and the company.

A Dutch weekly news magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* reported on the intimate connection between Shell and Dutch politics in 2013. In 2010 WikiLeaks already published that from Dutch ministries such as The Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs high-up civil servants fulfilled secondment positions for periods of time at Royal Dutch Shell. As well as the other way around, as corporate executives were positioned in state posts. The files published clarified that this was the case during the military and political developments in Iran (where Shell is active in resource extraction) in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The Dutch government publicly supported the United States' military interventions in the region but did demand that Shell would be able continue its activities undisturbed. During this time, a civil servant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was working at Shell, to aid along the activities in the politically compromised region, after which the civil servant returned to the ministry as director of 'Economic Cooperation'.<sup>160</sup> The Dutch government seems to actively concern itself with the activities of Shell, and to what extent these can be conducted without any interruptions. Another example of this is the reaction to the first European negotiations on the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, demanding increased standards for transparency of oil and gas companies. Shell stated their doubts on the newly proposed measures to increase transparency on extraction projects. Following this, the Dutch government also stated their doubts on the project. After WikiLeaks, multiple news outlets reported on the intertwinement of politics and business in the Netherlands. The ministers of Economic Affairs and Foreign Affairs were questioned in parliament on their thoughts on the conflict of interests that would arise from this. The responses from the parliamentarians emphasised the positives that could be gained from such secondment positions between business and state. The 'hopping' of civil servants to businesses and back to politics here could be seen as aiding along the increase of knowledge and expertise of the sector of industry.<sup>161</sup> Civil servants can be paid by Shell, when keeping in contact with the company, also on developments concerning topics such as energy and climate. An article by the business newspaper *Financieel Dagblad*, provides a file with a list of the secondment positions of people between companies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both the incoming (from Shell to the

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<sup>160</sup> William de Bruijn, Tijn van Huijkelom and Marcel Metze, "Het ministerie van Shell-zaken," *De Groene Amsterdammer* October 23, 2013, <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/het-ministerie-van-shell-zaken>.

<sup>161</sup> De Bruijn, van Huijkelom and Metze, "Het ministerie,".

ministry) and the outgoing (from the ministry to Shell) workers were placed in positions to do with the energy sector, sustainability, and the climate.<sup>162</sup>

### **Theory: the political economy of Shell**

The public participation of oil companies, and Shell specifically, can be placed in light of the political economy perspective. This can clarify why certain policy choices were made, and what the power implications were behind this. Doing so, the perspective can bring to light the incumbents in certain energy systems and their vested interests in it. Those dependent in their businesses on fossil fuels, will likely be reluctant to change a system which is dependent on the same, and try to keep the system and its infrastructures in place. This can also be said for states that obtain profits from fossil fuel extractive activities, which they acquire either indirectly through companies engaging in extraction or more directly through participation.<sup>163</sup>

There are a large number of factors that explain the complicated dynamic between different actors in society and their relationship to energy provision and resource extraction. States with different kinds of markets, democracies and how liberalised these are, will all have different relationships with participating actors.<sup>164</sup> Another effect that can contribute to the power dynamics between state and business in energy policy, is increasing globalisation. States can fear the effects that stringent environmental policy measures will have as certain heavy emitting industries will be inclined to move their business to locations where regulations are less strict. Here states will be more likely to follow the dominant trajectory of emphasising the importance of the economy in relation to the energy transition, in order to justify creating facilitative policy to the emitting industries. The persistence of such industries in society can (as mentioned before) limit the possible break-through of more radical initiatives. The effects of capital leaving the already established economies and a reformation of energy regimes can in turn mean a reorganisation of dominating actors and states.<sup>165</sup>

Both the Dutch government and Shell profit from natural gas extraction. The state revenues from gas extraction in the year 2018 from 1965 reached a cumulative number of profits of 416.8 billion euros, and the extraction business is considered to add a large value to the Dutch economy. The Groningen gas field holds a large part of the gas reserves in the

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<sup>162</sup> Correspondent, “Buitenlandse Zaken kapt detachering bij Shell af,” *Financieel Dagblad* July 16, 2021, <https://fd.nl/economie-politiek/1351276/buitenlandse-zaken-kapt-detachering-bij-shell-af-rse1ca9yIEk1>.

<sup>163</sup> Peter Newell, “Trasformismo or Transformation? The Global Political Economy of Energy Transitions,” *Review of International Political Economy* (November 13, 2018): 27.

<sup>164</sup> Newell, “Trasformismo,” 33.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Netherlands. However, due to the earthquakes caused by the extracting activities the government has had to cut back on gas winning activities in this region and increase imports.<sup>166</sup> Policies concerning the transition from both Shell and the government include continuing investments in natural gas extraction and industries. The analysis through political economy theorisations can bring to light the incumbent state structures, institutions and economic actors that benefit from and protect a system dependent on fossil fuels. Whilst downplaying other narratives that could contribute to a restructuring of an energy system and economy that is not based on carbon modes of production.<sup>167</sup> The Dutch state and Royal Dutch Shell both place an emphasis on the narrative of natural gas as a key factor in the energy transition, these actors financially profit from this and are reluctant to let go of the institutional infrastructures supportive of this form of energy production. Rick Bosman et al. in the article *Discursive Regime Dynamics in the Dutch Energy Transition* note that for the incumbent actors and energy providers within the energy system in the Netherlands (in this case not Shell):

“What actors mean with the notion of ‘energy transition’ is largely influenced by their “relative discursive position” within the energy system, e.g. while most incumbents in this research understand it as a long-term gradual transformation towards a low-carbon energy system via natural gas as transition fuel, other actors often see it as a radical and swift change to a fully renewable based energy system.”<sup>168</sup>

## Conclusion

Though it will remain difficult to truly establish how the final energy transition discourse in the Netherlands is formed, it is possible to compare the different views on the energy future as narrated by Shell and the Dutch state. Both parties seem to adhere to the convictions of human induced climate change, and the important role energy systems play within this. Both the Royal Dutch Shell and the Dutch state have formulated energy transition policies that communicate the importance of natural gas (a somewhat cleaner fossil fuel), carbon price mechanisms and the commercial viability and opportunities alternative and renewable energy sources can present. Where some might suggest that for the creation of a sustainable energy provision, environmental objectives and economic preferences should be seen as two separate entities. The role of natural gas in the energy transition policy discourse is therefore an interesting

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<sup>166</sup> CBS, “Natural Gas Revenues Almost 417 Billion Euros,” webpagina, Statistics Netherlands, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2019/22/natural-gas-revenues-almost-417-billion-euros>.

<sup>167</sup> Newell, “Trasformismo,” 41.

<sup>168</sup> Rick Bosman et al., “Discursive Regime Dynamics in the Dutch Energy Transition,” *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 13 (December 1, 2014): 55-56.

component. Gas remains an important source of energy production in the future transition plans in the Netherlands, but it is also already incumbent in the current energy provision, as the largest part of the energy is produced by this resource specifically. Both the state and Shell are invested in the natural gas business and profit from this, and both mention that the economic imperatives in the future energy systems are still important. The energy system is somewhat locked-into the use of natural gas and fossil fuels, and arguing from a political economy perspective, those who have vested interests in such a regime will most likely be reluctant to radically change it. While the Dutch government and Shell have admitted the need for alternative and renewable energy sources, they emphasise that natural gas will keep playing an important role in the energy future, even though it is a fossil fuel that does emit and harm the environment, albeit less so than coal and oil. Viewing the energy transition policy process in such a light, raises questions as to what extent the vested interests in fossil fuels and natural gas, and the emphasised need for economic viability of sustainable energy caused the policy discourse of both Shell and the Dutch state to take on the shape it has during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

## Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, the central research question of this thesis shall be answered: How do oil companies participate in the formulation of a specific energy transition policy discourse in the Netherlands in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and what influence did this have on policy? Theories on discourse formulation within policy suggest that deconstruction of political processes can help to detect which actors and power dynamics are inherent to this. The political arena can be understood as a struggle between different societal groups to make their desired form of discourse the hegemonic one. Vested interests play an important role here, as different societal actors try to embed their perceived interests in the processes of policy creation. The new hegemonic sets of policies and ideas in time can become the commonly accepted standard concerning certain issues. The political economy perspective has provided further theorisations on power dynamics between different actors within energy systems specifically.

The need for energy transition policy seems to be acknowledged in the Netherlands, and there are numerous occasions on which private actors, including oil companies, have participated in the formulation of such policy. The Transition Management approach mapped out by Dutch politicians looks towards the long-term development of the energy transition and how to achieve this, it intends to include various actors from within society. Widely included are actors that stem from business and industry, and prominent within this group are incumbent actors from the energy sector. Thus, politics seems to look towards those involved in processes of energy production, and contrary to the road the transition intends to take, fossil fuel producers are not just included but even prominently involved, as the case study of Royal Dutch Shell exemplifies. The Taskforce Energy Transition is a leading example of the role Shell has played in the policy formulation concerning the energy transition, and the non-democratic and top-down character that has been attributed to the policy process by its critics.

The intention for the inclusion of this specific group of actors has often been advocated to lead to an increase of knowledge of the energy sector of industry. Fossil fuel companies do have sector specific knowledge and skills of production of energy. However, these are all very specific insights, into a specific way of energy production. Royal Dutch Shell has a core business, which is oil and gas production and provision, as the high-end executives have communicated within the company as well. Indeed, the need for new and renewable sources of energy is acknowledged and increasingly, parts of the production and investments are directed towards this. However, the policy discourse communicated within the company itself and to



the greater public does not exclude the future investment in fossil fuels. On the contrary, these fuels feature rather prominently in their discourse. Their future visions of the energy system are thus rather clearly connected to their core business. This can be considered a path-dependent causality. Shell is historically and financially (through sunk-costs and made investments) rooted in the fossil fuel business. From theories about discursive processes in policy, vested interests of the company can be considered a key factor as well. Shell has economic interests in a future formulation of an energy system in which their core business is represented. The reports on the energy transition published by the company communicate its view on the future of fossil fuels, as well as the need for the commercial viability of new energy projects. This also goes for the reports on the transition published by the Dutch government. The state also envisions a persisting role of fossil fuels in the energy system, with an emphasis on natural gas. Going by similar reasoning as is done for Shell, the Dutch government also has its vested interests mirrored by its energy transition discourse, as it too profits from natural gas extraction. The increase of knowledge the fossil fuel sector of industry is able to offer would also be the reason for the secondments between Shell and governmental organs. Where company employees or civil servants move between the governmental and corporate positions. Here again questions on conflict of interests can be raised when oil company executives are placed in ministerial positions to do with the energy transition and/or climate, as well as the rather specific energy related knowledge the executives would bring to the table.

One reason for the lacking insight into the extent in which Dutch public and private actors are intertwined in the creation of energy policy is the political reservation in sharing information on the public-private relationships. This is exemplified by the long-lasting WOB-request by Follow the Money and Platform Authentic Journalism, as it appeared difficult to gain knowledge on ties between Shell and governmental organs. In fact, governmental organs put in a lot of efforts to ensure these documents would remain withheld from the wider public. When such WOB-requests are complied to, they sometimes do reveal meetings and events where both important politicians and company executives are present. Such as meetings between corporate executives and the minister of finance, or the ‘presidents-gathering’ of the corporate lobby group ABDUP.

Counting together all the evidence, the firm impression is given that Royal Dutch Shell and the Dutch government are closely connected in the process of formulation of energy transition policy. The two discourses, of both Shell and the government, bear incredibly close resemblance. The emphasis on the persisting role of fossil fuels and the expected commercial viability of projects features prominently in the policy discourses and differs from the advice

of other energy and research institutions. The transition discourse communicated by the government is so similar to that of one of the energy sector's strongest actors, it seems to be unable to actually institute the change needed to achieve national environmental and sustainable energy objectives. Resulting in the Dutch shortcomings regarding renewable energy production and investment compared to other EU-states. The details on what truly happens and what is said behind the closed doors of energy transition politics remain missing. Adding onto this, the government thoroughly withholds this exact information from those asking questions about this, or even Shell-state relations more generally. Nonetheless, the data that has been publicly published and presented throughout the thesis, points to nothing less than the close ties between the Dutch private and public actors. The intimate political connections with the company, and their similar future conceptions of the energy system strongly suggest that oil companies, and most specifically Royal Dutch Shell's discourse of the transition and the discourse of the Dutch state are linked interchangeably. Consequently, a hegemonic discourse has been produced in which both actors' vested interests are strongly represented. This has resulted in an energy system that cannot achieve the set sustainable energy objectives nor radically change the entrenched and incumbent fossil fuel energy production and its dominating actors.

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