

## **Sharing the Cost of Dike Maintenance in the South-Western Netherlands: Comparing ‘Calamitous Polders’ in Three ‘States’, 1715-1795<sup>1</sup>**

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### Abstract

For early modern societies distributing the costs of flood defences over the stakeholders in an equitable way was difficult. Institutions were abused by powerful groups to shift the financial burden to poorer groups. According to Epstein such elite abuse of institutions was possible because in pre-modern states political and economic power were not separated, which made it possible for elite groups to hijack the decision-making process. By studying how three ‘states’ in the South-Western Netherlands distributed the high costs of dike maintenance, this paper partly confirms Epstein’s thesis. No separation existed between political and economic power in the province of Zeeland and here this caused a stalemate because cities represented in the provincial government protected their elites’ interests. In Holland and the territories of the States-General, however, taking quick and efficient measures for the repair and financing of sea defences was possible. Here the powerful cities had less significant interests in the areas concerned and were prepared to leave decision-making to technical and financial experts.

keywords: Netherlands, water management, institutions, state formation

### Introduction

Nowadays, few economic historians doubt the importance of institutions – the formal and informal rules, norms and values and their enforcement characteristics that together form the

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rules of the game in a society – for economic performance. Institutions are not always beneficent, however, and they do not always lead to efficient outcomes.<sup>2</sup> What Ogilvie has termed the ‘conflict’ view of institutional arrangements asserts that powerful groups can influence the decision-making process in such a way that institutions distribute resources among themselves to the detriment of aggregate economic welfare.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, authors such as Van Bavel and Soens argue that elite manipulation of institutions is not only detrimental to the economy, but also to water management; for instance, by shifting the burden of flood protection maintenance onto poorer strata of the population. In the past, elites were able to do so by exercising the right to abandon their land in areas where the costs of flood protection were high. This right was intended for poor landowners who were no longer able to pay for dike maintenance, but in practice, it was often used by wealthy abbeys or noblemen. Elites also obtained exemptions from dike rates, leaving the full burden of dike maintenance to be shouldered by less privileged groups.<sup>4</sup>

According to Epstein, in medieval and early modern Europe, the problem of elite abuse of institutional arrangements was compounded by the weakness of the state. There was no separation of political and economic power, which meant that powerful groups could hijack the decision-making process to further their own interests. As this could be debilitating, it became ‘essential to insulate the state’s decision making process ... from the pressure of competing interests’.<sup>5</sup> This approach seems particularly applicable to the case of the Dutch Republic. The seven provinces that formed this federal state were ruled by States, which consisted of

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<sup>2</sup> D.C. North, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005) pp. 15, 48.

<sup>3</sup> S. Ogilvie, “‘Whatever is, is right’? Economic institutions in pre-industrial Europe”, *Economic History Review* 60 (2007): 649-684, at 662-664.

<sup>4</sup> B. van Bavel, *Manors and Markets. Economy and Society in the Low Countries, 500-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 47-48, 401-406; T. Soens, ‘Floods and money: funding drainage and flood control in coastal Flanders from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries’, *Continuity and Change* 26 (2011): 333-365, at 348-351; W. Norden, *Eine Bevölkerung in der Krise. Untersuchungen zur Biographie einer Norddeutschen Küstenregion (Butjadingen 1600-1850)* (Hildesheim: Lax, 1984) p. 222.

<sup>5</sup> S.R. Epstein, *Freedom and Growth. The Rise of States and Markets in Europe, 1300-1750* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) pp. 16, 35-36.

representatives of the nobility and the cities. These cities tended to guard their economic interests fiercely, reflecting Epstein's claim that particular interests exercised an excessive and debilitating hold on the decision-making process.<sup>6</sup> Decision-making in the Dutch Republic did indeed require extensive negotiations and often proceeded at an excruciatingly slow pace, both at the federal and at the provincial levels. In some cases, however, this also brought benefits: once a decision was reached, it was usually grounded in broad support and could be implemented swiftly. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that at the end of the eighteenth century, reforming the Republic's outdated political system proved impossible, due to the entrenched interests of the provincial ruling elites.

This paper tests Epstein's thesis on the importance of insulating the political decision-making process from particular economic interests. It does so by studying the practices devised in the eighteenth century for raising money to cover the sharply rising costs of maintaining flood defences in the south-western Netherlands, and for distributing those costs equitably over the various stakeholders. This was a problem that was faced by most regions along the North Sea coast in the early modern period. The general rule was that the communities situated immediately behind the seawalls had to pay for their maintenance. As maintenance costs rose due to storm surges and dike erosion, it became clear that these coastal communities were no longer able to raise the capital required to repair the dikes. Support for these coastal communities could take two forms: state subsidies, often in the form of tax exemptions, or making communities situated further inland liable for part of the maintenance costs. At first glance, the second option seems fair: after all, if the existing dike were breached, the inland communities would themselves become liable for the upkeep of the expensive seawall. By contributing to the maintenance of the existing dike, they would be able to avoid this outcome. Unfortunately, most early modern landowners in inland areas did not share this view. They had never contributed to maintenance, nor did their charters oblige them to do so. In pre-modern Europe, the 'freedoms' from state fiscal and judicial interference that these charters granted were defended fiercely by incorporated bodies.<sup>7</sup> Water boards in coastal areas along the North Sea also defended their

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>7</sup> Epstein, *Freedom and Growth*, p. 14.

charters, even if this had a negative effect on safety. All along the southern shore of the North Sea, long, drawn-out battles were fought to distribute the costs of dike maintenance in a more equitable way over coastal communities and the hinterland. In the Northern German territory of Butjadingen, it took more than 150 years, from 1681 to 1855, before successful regulation could be introduced that made all stakeholders liable for dike maintenance.<sup>8</sup>

The case of Butjadingen is a good illustration of Epstein's thesis. This territory formed part of the County of Oldenburg, which was ruled by the Danish Crown. Denmark was one of early modern Europe's most absolutist states, but the majority of the legislation introduced in 1681 to distribute the costs of maintaining flood defences more equitably, had to be withdrawn within four years. Powerful local elites were able to sabotage the legislation and the burden of maintenance was left to poorer peasants and the state, which provided subsidies to cover deficits. This resulted in insufficient dike maintenance and the loss of life during floods. A third of the population drowned in the Christmas Flood of 1717; nowhere along the Wadden Coast was the percentage of victims as high as in Butjadingen. In the long run, the high burden of maintenance put severe economic pressure on the already heavily burdened peasantry of the coastal communities. Whereas agriculture along the rest of the southern shore of the North Sea was booming in the 1770s, in the coastal villages of Butjadingen, half of the farmers went bankrupt in those years.<sup>9</sup> Even these catastrophic consequences could not convince local elites to give up some of their 'freedoms'.

If even a powerful state such as Denmark proved unable to introduce a more equitable distribution of the costs, then we would expect a weaker state such as the United Provinces to have experienced even more trouble in doing so. And indeed, as in Denmark, a large part of the cost of maintaining seawalls was financed by state subsidies to the water boards, instead of rates paid by landlords. In the course of the eighteenth century, however, the Dutch did manage to create a new system in which inland areas were compelled to pay subsidies to the coastal

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<sup>8</sup> M. van Tielhof, 'Forced solidarity: Maintenance of coastal defences along the North Sea in the Early Modern period', *Environment and History* 21 (2015): 319-350, at 328-338; Norden, *Bevölkerung in der Krise*, pp. 223-226.

<sup>9</sup> Van Tielhof, 'Forced solidarity', 343; Norden, *Bevölkerung in der Krise*, pp. 225, 282-284; M. Jakubowski-Tiessen, *Sturmflut 1717. Die Bewältigung einer Naturkatastrophe in der frühen Neuzeit* (München: Oldenbourg, 1992) p. 273.

communities that were liable for dike maintenance. Due to the Dutch Republic's federal system, no fewer than three government bodies were responsible for introducing the regulations to distribute the costs of dike maintenance in the south-western Netherlands over the different stakeholders: the States of Zeeland, the States of Holland (both for the territory of their province) and the States-General of Zeeland Flanders, which was ruled directly by the federal government. This provides us with a unique opportunity for comparison: within a small region – with a land area of some 3,000 km<sup>2</sup> – three 'states' had to solve a single problem.

The three governments under study were remarkably successful in fighting the consequences of dike erosion. Only a few small areas had to be abandoned after 1715. All three 'states' spent enormous sums on the prevention of land loss, and in each case the money seems to have been well spent. There were differences in the way these costs were distributed over the stakeholders and in the amount of time and energy required to make this distribution more equitable. However, everybody agreed on the general interest in 'the preservation of the land' (*het behout van den lande*) and on the need to spend large sums of money on this.<sup>10</sup> The question was: whose money?

Eventually, all three 'states' were able to make the distribution of costs more equitable, but whereas the States-General and the States of Holland managed to do this quickly, it took the States of Zeeland seventy years. This time lag was due to the fact that the entrenched interests of elites in the area concerned determined the decision-making on the distribution of costs of dike maintenance. These groups enjoyed strong representation in the States of Zeeland, whereas they had much less influence in Holland and the States-General. As a result, the States of Zeeland became a battleground for local interest groups, whereas for the States-General and the States of Holland, the issue of distribution of costs of dike maintenance was much more of a technical matter that could be left to the experts.

The period under study starts in 1715, because the flood of 3 March of that year acted as a catalyst for the introduction of the new regulations. It ends in 1795, because momentous political changes took place in that year: the federal Dutch Republic was replaced by the unitary

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<sup>10</sup> J.A. Schorer, 'De geschiedenis der calamiteuse polders in Zeeland tot het reglement van 20 januari 1791' (Ph. D thesis University of Leyden, 1897) p. 24.

Batavian Republic, and the Batavian Republic had to cede Zeeland Flanders to France. First, I address the causes of the increasing cost of dike maintenance in the south-western Netherlands and the emergence of ‘calamitous polders’. I then turn to study the policies of the States-General, the States of Zeeland and the States of Holland.

### **From dike erosion to calamitous polders<sup>11</sup>**

The tidal rivers of Zeeland were known for their strong and swift currents. By the fourteenth century, there was already awareness of these rivers’ detrimental effect on flood defences. The currents created gullies of up to forty metres deep, which could erode the foreshore and approach the dikes. When this happened, the sandy subsoil of the dike could become saturated with water and change into an unstable liquid mass. Eventually this mass would slide into the river, taking part of the dike with it.<sup>12</sup> This did not necessarily lead to flooding immediately, but the eroded dike usually had to be abandoned after a while.

In the Middle Ages, nothing could be done to stop this process; the only remedy was to build a new dike behind the eroded one. When the old dike was finally breached, the new one became the seawall and the land situated between the old and new dikes was abandoned. The problem was that the process of erosion often continued, new landward dikes had to be constructed, and more land had to be abandoned. In this way, the island of Schouwen lost 3,000 hectares – a quarter of its surface area – between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>13</sup> This landloss undermined the finances of the water board, because the number of hectares liable for the maintenance of the sea defences was gradually reduced. In the sixteenth century the engineer Andries Vierlingh was already warning of the consequences of this gradual retreat, and he even

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<sup>11</sup> A polder is a reclaimed wetland area protected by embankments. The word is also used for the board that administers the polder and its infrastructure. The board that administers a polder or a group of polders is also called a water board (*waterschap*).

<sup>12</sup> G.P. van de Ven, ed., *Man-made Lowlands. History of Water Management and Land Reclamation in the Netherlands* (Utrecht: Matrijs, 2004) pp. 107-108.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

predicted the total ruin of the island of Schouwen.<sup>14</sup> Vierlingh's prediction did not come true, because the water board of Schouwen eventually followed his advice: not to retreat, but to defend the dikes with all available means. From the sixteenth century onwards, more effective means were available. The vulnerable, underwater part of the dike could be protected by sinking osier mats loaded with stones into the water.<sup>15</sup> These *zinkstukken* could significantly retard the erosion process. The erosion of the southern coast of Schouwen, for example, hardly continued after 1581. The huge drawback of this method was its cost: the construction and sinking of osier mats was extremely labour-intensive and the mats had to be replaced regularly, meaning that they constituted a continuous drain on a water board's resources. Even more expensive was the construction of groynes, dams of stone and woodwork perpendicular to the seawall, which were meant to prevent dangerous currents from eroding the shore.

From the sixteenth century onwards, more and more polders were endangered by dike erosion: the problem affected all the islands of Zeeland, the islands of Voorne, Goeree and Overflakkee in Holland, and the islands of Cadzand and Axel-Terneuzen in Zeeland Flanders, as well as the peninsula of Hontenisse. The erosion was mainly caused by the broadening of the Oosterschelde and Westerschelde rivers due to flooding of large areas in the sixteenth century and as part of the large-scale geological processes that commonly occur in a tidal estuary, which resulted in increasingly stronger tidal streams and thus a deepening of the gullies in these rivers.<sup>16</sup> Some polder boards had only themselves to blame; Vierlingh had already pointed out that the best defence against erosion was to maintain a broad foreshore of salt marshes, because the latter could break the power of the waves before they reached the dikes. However, companies of greedy investors in land reclamation projects would sometimes embank too much of the salt marshland, only to discover afterwards that their new dikes could not be sustained. Other

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<sup>14</sup> J. de Hullu and A. Verhoeven (eds), Andries Vierlingh, *Tractaet van dyckagie*, (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1920) pp. 392, 396.

<sup>15</sup> Van de Ven, *Man-made Lowlands*, pp. 180-181; De Hullu and Verhoeven, Vierlingh, *Tractaet*, pp. 394, 396.

<sup>16</sup> Van de Ven, *Man-made Lowlands*, pp. 108-109; F. Beekman, *De kop van Schouwen onder het zand. Duizend jaar duinvorming en duingebbruik op een Zeeuws eiland* (Utrecht: Matrijs, 2007) pp. 114-115.

companies had embanked long, narrow strips of land along the coasts of existing islands, with the result that the land area was too small to be liable for repairs to such a long stretch of dike.<sup>17</sup>

The maintenance of the sea defences was left to the polders immediately behind the dikes. In order to finance maintenance, the boards of these polders raised rates from the people who owned land within the polder. Due to the sharp increase in expenditure caused by dike erosion, several of these polders got into financial difficulties. Often their financial situations were so catastrophic that the polders suffering such difficulties were known as *calamiteuze polders*, ‘calamitous polders’. (At first, this term was only used to indicate polders that had been hit by catastrophic floods, but during the eighteenth century, *calamiteuze polders* became a legal term to denote polders that were receiving financial support. The simplest option would have been to leave these polders to their fate, but this had one grave drawback. When a calamitous polder was flooded, the polders behind it, which had previously been protected by its flood defences, might in turn become calamitous and eventually flood. As most islands in the area were small (3,000 to 30,000 hectares at most), many people feared a continuation of this process might result in the disappearance of entire islands. Islands had indeed disappeared in the past, such as the Flemish island of Wulpen in the sixteenth century. What is more, only the often relatively small polders immediately behind the seawalls were liable for the upkeep, whereas the polders located behind them did not have to contribute. It was thus considered fair to support the calamitous polders, and provincial and federal government did so by granting tax exemptions. The owners of land in the polders, who paid for dike maintenance, were exempted from paying taxes on land, cattle and sown acreage, on condition that the amount thus saved was spent on measures to combat dike erosion. In the course of time, this way of supporting calamitous polders turned out to be very costly, especially for the small province of Zeeland.<sup>18</sup>

The storm surge of 3 March 1715 was a turning point. Its effects were not worse than those of previous heavy floods, such as that on 26 January 1682, but they provoked a stronger response from both the water boards and the government. Due to the agricultural depression that had begun in the 1660s, the water boards had not invested enough in dike maintenance in the

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<sup>17</sup> Zeeland Archives, Middelburg (hereafter ZA), Wulpenpolder 70, 1709.

<sup>18</sup> Schorer, *Calamiteuze polders*, 13-14, 128.



decades preceding 1715. The flood of 1715 and smaller floods in 1714 made the landowners and polder administrators realise that drastic measures were required.<sup>19</sup> The 1715 flood thus seems to have served as a wake-up call for administrators at the local, provincial and national levels. For instance, the board of a flooded polder on the island of Goeree calculated that 40,000 guilders would be required to repair and improve the dikes.<sup>20</sup> The effect was not limited to the flooded polders; the boards of other polders also seem to have become aware of the vulnerability of their sea defences. The *Watering*<sup>21</sup> of Cadzand in Zeeland Flanders, for example, which had escaped flooding, nevertheless decided to invest more in the maintenance of its seawalls. The general meeting of landowners in 1715 agreed to raise the annual budget from 14,000 to 54,000 guilders and to request tax exemptions from the States-General.<sup>22</sup>

As in other parts of the southern North Sea coast, attempts were made to spread the costs of maintenance over a larger area, in this case over entire islands by uniting all of the polders under one water board. This had happened, for example, in 1537 (Cadzand) and 1630 (Voorne).<sup>23</sup> Such plans were proposed again for several islands in the 1720s, but this time they failed. Bringing all of an island's polders under one regional board was opposed by the officials of the existing polder boards, who would have to give up lucrative offices, especially the treasurers.<sup>24</sup> The government made no serious attempt to break the resistance. Instead, a system was developed whereby the inland polders situated behind the calamitous polders paid subsidies. This meant that all of the polder units remained administratively autonomous, but the inland polders had to contribute to the maintenance of the dikes of the calamitous polders. As far as we

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<sup>19</sup> A.M.J. de Kraker, 'Two floods compared: Perception of and response to the 1682 and 1715 flooding disasters in the Low Countries' in: K. Pfeifer and N. Pfeifer, eds., *Forces of Nature and Cultural Responses* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013) pp. 185-202, at 193-197, 201.

<sup>20</sup> L.F. Teixeira de Mattos, *De waterkeeringen, waterschappen en polders van Zuid-Holland*, vol 10.1 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1941) p. 479.

<sup>21</sup> *Watering*: water board.

<sup>22</sup> Archives Waterschap Scheldestromen (hereafter AWS), Middelburg/Terneuzen, *Watering Cadzand* 202.

<sup>23</sup> J.L. van der Gouw, *De Ring van Putten. Onderzoekingen over een hoogheemraadshap in het Deltagebied* (The Hague: s.n., 1967) p. 133.

<sup>24</sup> Schorer, *Calamiteuse polders*, pp. 23, 32-33; ZA, Wulpenpolder 71, 7 May 1731.

know, this was a unique system of financing dike maintenance that only existed in the southwest of the Netherlands. The introduction of this subsidy system provoked resistance. In the course of the seventeenth century, landowners in the inland polders had become used to the comfortable situation in which the flood defences were paid for by landowners in the calamitous polders and by the state, in the form of tax exemptions for the same polders. They themselves contributed nothing, and were quite satisfied with that. What made local water boards (polders and *wateringen*) even more reluctant to subsidise the calamitous polders was that they were incorporated bodies with ‘freedoms’. Complying with a subsidy demand implied a reduction in these freedoms, something that, as suggested above, incorporated bodies in early modern Europe were loath to accept. This was especially true of the Dutch Republic, a country that had gained its independence in a war that was mainly fought in defence of local and regional freedoms. So the ‘state’, in this case the provinces of Holland, Zeeland and the States-General, would have to use some coercion; and how they did this was strongly influenced by the presence of entrenched economic and political interests.

### **State and mutual support in western Zeeland Flanders**

Zeeland Flanders – known until 1795 as *Staats-Vlaanderen* – was a group of Flemish towns and territories that had been conquered by the Dutch Republic in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This area had no regional government of its own and was directly administered from The Hague. Here I will concentrate on the most westerly part of the region, the Island of Cadzand. One of the polders on this island, the Wulpenpolder, had been granted tax exemptions by the States-General for the period between 1637, the year it was reclaimed, and 1701.<sup>25</sup> The polder was relatively small (200 hectares) and had to maintain a long dike and dunes exposed to the sea. From 1701, the polder managed without state support for some years, but the flood of 1715 made clear that the polder would again need support. As early as 1709, most of the foreshore and beach of the polder had been washed away, but at a meeting of landowners on 15

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<sup>25</sup> ZA, Wulpenpolder 87.

March 1715, the board stated that now the dike and dunes themselves were also eroded.<sup>26</sup> The landowners not only decided to request more tax exemptions, but also asked for support from the water board of the *Watering* of Groede, situated more in the interior, which also profited indirectly from the maintenance of the Wulpenpolder sea defences. Groede was prepared to pay 500 guilders to the imperilled polder. Shortly afterwards, Groede granted sums of 2,000 *Rijksdaalders* and 2,000 guilders respectively to other adjoining polders, which were also having trouble financing the maintenance of their seawalls.<sup>27</sup>

On the other side of the island, the *Watering* of Cadzand not only decided to raise its budget, but also to form a ‘combination’ with an adjacent polder. This polder had also suffered considerable damage from the 1715 storm surge, and if it were to be flooded, Cadzand would have c. 3.5 km of additional seawall to maintain. The decision was thus made to maintain the dikes of the *watering* and the other polder together. In this way, the *Watering* of Cadzand had a guarantee that the dikes of the adjoining polder would be maintained properly and the landowners of the small polder (200 hectares) had a guarantee that the rates for the maintenance of the seawalls would remain at an affordable level, because the costs would now be spread over a much larger area (the land area of the *Watering* of Cadzand was over 3,000 hectares). The *watering* had already made similar agreements with other small polders in the seventeenth century.<sup>28</sup>

The plan for the combination was proposed by the board of the *Watering* of Cadzand and supported by 28 of the 31 main landowners at their meeting of 31 May 1715. The board defended the ‘combination’ by arguing that when one’s neighbour’s house is on fire, one is not only obliged to run to the neighbour’s aid, but also to provide all the materials required to extinguish the fire.<sup>29</sup> This did not convince a group of landowners who had not been present at the meeting. They demanded the termination of the agreement and threatened to bring lawsuits and to refuse to pay rates. In 1718 the board had to capitulate and the agreement was dissolved.

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<sup>26</sup> ZA, Wulpenpolder 70, 1709 and 15 March 1715.

<sup>27</sup> ZA, Wulpenpolder 71, 2 July 1715 and 6 May 1716.

<sup>28</sup> AWS, Watering Cadzand 29 and 202.

<sup>29</sup> AWS, Watering Cadzand 29, 1715.

The opponents did not disagree with supporting the adjoining polders as such, but they did not want to enter into an agreement with long-term consequences that could not be foreseen. In the compromise reached with the board, they agreed to pay a one-off subsidy of 1.3 guilders per *gemet* (0.44 ha) to the other polder to help finance the repair of the seawall.<sup>30</sup> This amounted to almost 9,000 guilders, in a period in which the *Watering* of Cadzand itself was in trouble because of the erosion of its dunes.<sup>31</sup>

This willingness of the polders on the island of Cadzand to support each other in times of need may seem reasonable from a modern perspective, but in the early modern period, such behaviour was exceptional, neither was it based on historical precedent in the region. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, neighbouring polders had stubbornly refused to support the *Watering* of Gaternisse, situated some 10 km to the east of Cadzand, although they were protected by its dikes. As Tim Soens has shown, water boards in this area systematically refused to contribute to the maintenance of works outside their jurisdiction, and it proved impossible to organise any regional solidarity until well into the sixteenth century.<sup>32</sup> The generosity of the water boards in the eighteenth century may have reflected their awareness/realisation that if they did not subsidise adjacent polders in trouble voluntarily, they would be compelled to do so by the States-General.

In order to acquire exemption from taxes, a water board had to receive a patent from the States-General, the highest federal authority. The States-General followed the same procedure for such grants as for the grants to reclaim new polders.<sup>33</sup> The request was handed to the state's executive committee, the Council of State (*Raad van State*), which had to decide whether the tax exemption was justifiable. The Council of State sent experts to the polder, who reported on the situation and proposed solutions. This usually resulted in a recommendation to grant an

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<sup>30</sup> AWS, Watering Cadzand 29, 26 July 1718.

<sup>31</sup> J. de Hullu, 'De kommervolle toestand der watering Cadzand omstreeks 1720-1731', *Archief Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen* (1918): 105-117, at 105-107.

<sup>32</sup> T. Soens, *De spade in de dijk. Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580)* (Gent: Academia Press, 2009) pp. 213-215.

<sup>33</sup> P. van Cruyningen, 'Dealing with drainage: State regulation of drainage projects in the Dutch Republic, France and England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Economic History Review* 68 (2015): 420-440.

exemption from certain taxes for a number of years. Such exemptions were only granted after experts had carried out thorough research: a financial expert such as a tax collector would check the accounts of the water board and recommend measures to cut costs, and a hydraulic expert would advise on the best way to repair the sea defences. From the late 1720s until his death, the latter was usually the inspector-general of the state sea defences in Zeeland Flanders, Teunis van Doeveren (1698-1776).<sup>34</sup> These experts were always looking for ways to broaden the basis of taxation for the upkeep of the sea defences, both within and beyond the area of the polder concerned. In 1730, for example, when the *Watering* of Cadzand requested tax exemptions, Van Doeveren and the tax collector Durven recommended that rates be introduced for the owners of the tithes and woodcutting rights in the *Watering*, because they also profited from the maintenance of the dikes.<sup>35</sup> In this case, no other polders were called upon for support, because there simply were no inland polders behind the *Watering*. In all other cases, however, such polders had to subsidise the calamitous polder.

How the federal government and its advisers tried to reach an equitable distribution of the costs of calamitous polders is illustrated by the procedure that followed a request for support from two polders near Nieuwvliet in 1739.<sup>36</sup> These polders had been receiving support since 1730, but they needed more aid, as the dunes and beaches were becoming increasingly eroded. On 20 July 1739, Teunis van Doeveren and the tax collector P.B. Verschuur were instructed to inspect the polders and to meet with the boards of the two polders, those of the *Watering* of Cadzand and the polders of the seigneurie of Nieuwvliet, to negotiate the subsidies. The representatives of the Nieuwvliet polders pointed out they had already been subsidising the two polders since 1730, but that they were prepared to negotiate. The representatives of the *Watering* of Cadzand stated they agreed that the two polders needed extra help, but that their board would not be able to contribute, because it was itself indebted. After this meeting, Van Doeveren and Verschuur made a plan to finance the expenditure of the two polders. They estimated that for the next ten years, the polders would need an annual sum of 3,316 guilders to finance ordinary

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<sup>34</sup> M.H. Wilderom, *Tussen afsluitdammen en deltadijken*, vol. IV (s.l. s.n., 1973) pp. 157, 293.

<sup>35</sup> ZA, Collection De Hullu 55 B, 19 June 1730.

<sup>36</sup> ZA, Manuscript Collection 1503.

expenses and another 1,822 guilders to repair and improve the breached dikes. Of the total of 5,138 guilders, almost half (49 per cent) was to be provided by the landowners in the two polders, by levying a rate of 3.5 guilders per *gemet*. This was a considerable sum, but much less than the 6 guilders that the two polders had had to levy in 1739. The polders of Nieuwvliet would have to contribute 0.75 guilders per *gemet*, amounting to just over 8 per cent. The *Watering* of Cadzand would have to contribute the same share, but because of its precarious financial situation, the States-General would provide this sum. The remaining 34 per cent was to be found by reducing federal taxes, especially the land tax. The representatives of the polders agreed to this plan on 16 September, and it was ratified by the landowners on 8 October 1739.<sup>37</sup>

Some days later, Johannes van Weenegem, treasurer of the *Watering* of Cadzand, wrote a letter to a contact in The Hague, asking him to urge the Council of State to approve the contract.<sup>38</sup> The person to whom the letter was addressed was probably an agent, a lobbyist with the Council of State and the States-General. As Zeeland Flanders had no representative in the States-General, towns and water boards in the region made use of agents to defend their interests with the federal authorities; this was the only way they could influence the decision-making process in The Hague. In spite of their almost complete lack of representation, the interests of the people of Zeeland Flanders were not treated in cavalier fashion. The federal government was prepared to pay a considerable share of the costs of dike maintenance, on condition that both the polders requesting support and the adjoining polders also contributed. The Council of State's experts convened representatives of the boards of the polders and listened to their arguments. This was not a futile exercise, considering that in the example above, the experts proposed that the state pay the contribution owed by the *Watering* of Cadzand.

At first glance, it seems surprising that the federal authorities were prepared to support this economically peripheral area and listen to its politically powerless inhabitants. Zeeland Flanders was of strategic importance, however; it supported a chain of fortresses and fortified towns that served as a major line of defence for the Dutch Republic. The disappearance of the coastal island of Cadzand, for example, would expose the important garrison town of Sluis to the

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<sup>37</sup> ZA, Manuscript Collection 1503.

<sup>38</sup> ZA, Manuscript Collection 1503, 12 October 1739.

sea and diminish the economic viability of this and other towns, because they would lose their agricultural hinterland. The States-General considered the latter to be important, because it made the towns less dependent on federal money. The inhabitants of the towns did not only depend on money brought in by the garrison, but also on trade with the surrounding countryside.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the population of the island provided the labour force required for dike maintenance. If Sluis were to be kept safe, the island's population had to be provided with an income in order to be convinced to stay there and preserve the seawalls. The policy of the States-General was mainly facilitated by the fact that none of the provinces qualified to vote had large entrenched economic interests in Zeeland Flanders. They all agreed on the strategic importance of the area and particular economic interests did not get in the way, which made it easy to leave the decisions to the experts. The experts, in turn, could look for efficient and equitable solutions without having to be overly concerned about entrenched interests.

### **Stalemate in Zeeland**

The political constellation in Zeeland, the smallest of the seven provinces of the Republic, was quite different. This province was strongly dominated by its cities, which held six of the seven votes in the provincial States. In several respects, the States of Zeeland had the same policy objectives as the States-General. The regulations introduced in 1715 aimed to limit the expenses of calamitous polders and ensure that tax exemptions were used for dike maintenance. As in Zeeland Flanders, technical experts, in the form of provincial dike inspectors, advised on requests for tax exemptions.<sup>40</sup> As early as 1721, the 1715 regulations turned out to be insufficient. Supporting the calamitous polders meant that Zeeland had lost an important part of its tax income. The provincial Audit Office (*Rekenkamer*) proposed to repair this by introducing a land tax of 3 *stuivers* (0.15 guilders) per *gemet* (0.4 ha) on all land in the province and an extra contribution on the part of the inland polders.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> A. de Kraker, 'Zeeuws-Vlaanderen als strategisch manipuleerbaar landschap', *NEHA Jaarboek* 65 (2002): 32-48.

<sup>40</sup> Schorer, *Calamiteuse polders*, pp. 13-16.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

The Audit Office's proposal marked the beginning of a veritable tragicomedy that would last for seventy years. Of the six cities that were entitled to vote in the States, the three cities of the island of Walcheren (Middelburg, Vlissingen and Veere) voted in favour of the proposal, and the other three cities (Zierikzee on Schouwen, Goes on South-Beveland and Tholen on the island of Tholen) voted against it.<sup>42</sup> This stalemate only ended in 1791. It was caused by the fact that the Zeeland cities considered the islands on which they were situated to be their own backyards. Most of Walcheren was one large polder, so the three cities of this island had no objections to making the inland polders contribute. There were hardly any inland polders on Walcheren, so the new regulation would change little. For Zierikzee, Goes and Tholen, the situation was quite different. These islands consisted of several smaller polders, some of which were calamitous, others not. The calamitous polders on these islands were supported by the 'state' (the central or regional government; in this case, the province) and the other polders on the islands did not have to contribute anything, a situation that was very advantageous for the landowning bourgeoisie in the cities. The rates in the calamitous polders remained bearable thanks to state support, and the rates in the other polders could remain very low. The burden of maintenance had thereby been shifted to the general taxpayer, thus it is not surprising that the magistrates of these three cities wanted to preserve the status quo at any cost. A change in the vein of the Audit Office's proposal would lead to a rise in the rates that the landowning elites of these cities had to pay.

Time and again, proposals to improve the situation similar to that made in 1721 were put forward and rejected by Zierikzee, Goes and Tholen.<sup>43</sup> Sometimes the small town of Tholen was willing to compromise, but Goes and Zierikzee obstructed all changes to the status quo. The towns were willing to use arguments to serve their objective. As the historian of the debate in the Zeeland States, J.A. Schorer, has remarked, Goes and Zierikzee were entirely consistent: they always rejected a new proposal, promising to support one that they had rejected on a previous occasion.<sup>44</sup> For many years, Laurens Pieter van de Spiegel, secretary and later mayor of Goes,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 44, 50, 74, 125, 132, 136.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 74.



abused his fine legal brain by finding arguments for obstructing the introduction of more efficient regulations.

It is useful to consider Van de Spiegel's arguments in more detail, because they illustrate the attitude of his contemporaries. Laurens Pieter van de Spiegel (1736-1800) was grand pensionary of Holland, one of the highest offices in the Republic, from 1787 to 1795. He was known as moderately conservative politician who had an eye for the deficiencies of the Republic's political system and was open to reform.<sup>45</sup> A memorandum of 1772 shows he took a similar approach to water management. He proposed that provincial dike inspectors should be granted more authority to monitor the works implemented by the polders, rightly arguing that improving the defences of one polder often harmed those of others. This proposal was far from revolutionary, because such measures had already been introduced from 1752 onwards, but it shows that Van de Spiegel was aware of the shortcomings of the existing system and was prepared to contemplate change.<sup>46</sup> However, although Van de Spiegel the political philosopher may have been committed to reform, Van de Spiegel the mayor of Goes staunchly defended the economic interests of his city's elites. If even a relatively enlightened statesman such as Van de Spiegel was unable to break with convention, we should not be surprised that most of his contemporaries preferred to serve parochial interests over the general good.

Meanwhile, the Zeeland Audit Office tried to arrange support from adjacent polders on a voluntary basis, an attempt that met with limited success. Of the 25 patents for tax exemptions granted in 1753, only two contained clauses guaranteeing support from adjoining polders.<sup>47</sup> The problem was that the polders that were unwilling to contribute could appeal to the 'capital' of their island, which would then block any attempt to coerce the polder into contributing – a tactic that was much in evidence in 1770. From 1766, the Audit Office had been able to coax a considerable number of inland polders into contributing to the dike maintenance of calamitous

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<sup>45</sup> P. Brandon, *War, Capitalism, and the Dutch State (1588-1795)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015) p. 274.

<sup>46</sup> National Archives, The Hague (hereafter NA), Raadpensionaris Van de Spiegel 539, 'Memorie waarin beredeneerd worden de oorzaken van het verval der publyke finantien, en van de welvaart in de provincie Zeeland', pp. 7, 33-34; Schorer, *Calamiteuse polders*, pp. 47, 54-56, 85.

<sup>47</sup> Schorer, *Calamiteuse polders*, p. 53.

polders. Even Goes had not objected to this, for a simple reason: none of the polders on South-Beveland had been involved. As soon as polders in Goes's backyard were involved, which happened for the first time in 1770, the city immediately put an end to the procedure. The request for a patent was handed over to a committee with the intention of drowning the Audit Office's plan in a bureaucratic quagmire. The magistrates of Goes sometimes claimed that they only opposed support from adjacent polders because they deemed the survival of the calamitous polders to be in the interest of the country (Zeeland) in general, meaning that the country should pay for it, not the individual polders.<sup>48</sup> The events of 1770 show that the elites of Goes cared little as to how the calamitous polders were supported, so long as the polders were not situated in the city's own backyard.

What happened to the Ouwelecpolder is illustrative of the consequences of the policy of the States of Zeeland. Like several other polders on the northern coast of the island of North-Beveland, this polder suffered from the erosion caused by gullies in the Oosterschelde River. In 1718, 1720, 1757 and 1764, the dike had to be moved landward, reducing the land area of the polder from 290 *gemeten* to a mere 154 *gemeten*.<sup>49</sup> In 1744, the States of Zeeland granted the Ouwelecpolder an exemption from taxes. From 1757, two adjacent polders were prepared to contribute 0.45 guilders per *gemet* to the maintenance of the dike of the Ouwelecpolder. Landowners in the polder itself had to pay 4 guilders.<sup>50</sup> This was not enough, so the Ouwelecpolder was forced to borrow money. In 1776, a sum of 1,886 guilders was required to pay the interest on the polder's debts, whereas its yearly income (including subsidies) was only 1,974 guilders. The total debt of the polder had increased to almost 54,000 guilders.<sup>51</sup> By that time, the only reason why the polder's dikes were still being maintained was to ensure the safety of the adjacent polders, some of which contributed a small sum and others nothing to the repair of the dikes. In 1778, the States of Zeeland managed to persuade four adjacent polders to take

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-131.

<sup>49</sup> ZA, Rekenkamer A 186 (1726, 1757) and 187 (1765).

<sup>50</sup> ZA, Rekenkamer A 186 (1744 and 1757).

<sup>51</sup> ZA, Rekenkamer A 187 (1776).

over the Ouweleckpolder and its sea defences. Faced with high costs, they decided to abandon the polder just two years later.<sup>52</sup>

From the mid-eighteenth century, the financial situation of the province became worse and worse, a situation that was at least partly caused by the continually rising cost of supporting the calamitous polders. In 1767, a report by the federal government called this support ‘the cancer of the Zeeland finances’. By 1752, this small province, with its population of about 80,000, was losing 139,000 guilders of annual tax income by granting tax exemptions to calamitous polders, and by 1790 this had increased to 206,000 guilders.<sup>53</sup> The province’s total income from taxes on real estate in that last year had been 910,000 guilders, meaning that Zeeland lost over 18 per cent of its income from this kind of taxation through exemptions.<sup>54</sup>

Between 1702 and 1747, the States of Zeeland had only the six cities as its members. When the House of Orange returned to power in 1747, a seventh member was added: the ‘representative of the first nobleman’. Originally this would have been a representative of the Zeeland nobility, but by 1600, the Zeeland nobility had been all but extinct. The only noble to remain in 1747 was the Prince of Orange, who had extensive possessions within the province, so the representative of the nobility was an agent of the prince. This seventh member could and did mediate between the cities, also in the case of the subsidies for the calamitous polders. For a long time these efforts remained fruitless, but in 1779 a new representative of the first nobleman was appointed, Baron W.C.H. van Lynden van Blitterswijk. This nobleman, who originated from Gelderland, worked energetically to achieve a compromise between the squabbling cities. It still took several years to reach an agreement, but from the second half of the 1780s, the situation began to change. Van Lynden’s perseverance and patience were rewarded on 20 January 1791, when the States of Zeeland finally accepted new regulations.<sup>55</sup>

From 1791, the adjacent polders in Zeeland had to contribute to the maintenance of the seawalls of calamitous polders. In 1792, they contributed 45,000 guilders over the whole

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<sup>52</sup> Schorer, *Calamiteuse polders*, p. 146.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 47, 115, 165.

<sup>54</sup> <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/gewestelijkefinancien>, retrieved 2 July 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Schorer, *Calamiteuse polders*, pp. 165-174.

province. This outcome was rather disappointing, because it was only sufficient to compensate for the increase in tax exemptions from 1790 onward, but for the time being it prevented a further increase in the loss of tax income for the province. Implementing the new regulation proved difficult in the first years. The city of Zierikzee, for example, tried to delay its implementation until June 1792.<sup>56</sup> Some adjacent polders flatly refused to support calamitous polders, even though they were now legally obliged to do so. In 1793, for example, two polders in the part of Zeeland Flanders administered by Zeeland refused to pay subsidies to a calamitous polder of 0.6 and 0.25 guilders per *gemet*, respectively.<sup>57</sup> Some forty kilometres to the west, polders had been paying higher subsidies to calamitous polders for decades without complaining. Those polders, however, had been confronted with a government that was determined not to tolerate free-riding.

### **Erosion on the periphery of Holland**

Just like Zeeland, Holland, the largest and most powerful of the seven provinces of the Dutch Republic, was dominated by urban interests. Of the nineteen votes in the States of Holland, the cities held eighteen votes and the remaining vote was for the nobility. When analysing the decisions of the States on issues of water management, it should be kept in mind that most of the cities had no significant interests in the islands worst affected by dike erosion. These were the islands of Voorne, Goeree and Overflakkee, situated in the far southwest, on the periphery of the province. Most of the land on Goeree was owned by the inhabitants. By contrast, burghers of the cities of Rotterdam and Dordrecht owned part of the land on Voorne and Overflakkee, but this constituted only a small part of their investment portfolio.<sup>58</sup> It is likely that only the burghers of Brielle on the island of Voorne owned much land in the area, but small Brielle was unable to obstruct the decision-making process in the States of Holland on its own.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 176-177.

<sup>57</sup> M. de Vleeschauwer, *Van water tot land. Polders en waterschappen in midden Zeeuws-Vlaanderen 1600-1999* (Utrecht: Matrijs, 2013) p. 89.

<sup>58</sup> For Goeree see NA, Staten van Holland/Gecommitteerde Raden (hereafter SvH/GR) 3936/462.

Whilst these islands were peripheral in a geographical and economic sense, strategically, Goeree and Voorne, at least, were not. Voorne was home to an important navy establishment at Hellevoetsluis that was connected to open water by the Goereese Gat, a sea inlet to the north of the island of Goeree. Flooding of this latter island might cause the silting of the Goereese Gat, which not only provided access to Hellevoetsluis, but also to Rotterdam, the second port of the Republic. The position of Voorne and Goeree within Holland was thus comparable with that of Zeeland Flanders within the Dutch Republic as a whole: they were strategically important and the risk of economic interests obstructing the decision-making process remained small.

Until 1715, the States of Holland pursued the same policy as Zeeland and the States-General: calamitous polders were supported with subsidies, usually in the form of tax exemptions.<sup>59</sup> On the islands of Voorne and Overflakkee, this policy was continued after the 1715 flood. These islands were robust and the problems were confined to a handful of polders, so expenditure remained limited. Only in the case of two polders on Overflakkee did the States demand additional support from adjacent polders, resulting in a subsidy system similar to that in Zeeland Flanders.<sup>60</sup> The States of Holland even allowed a polder on Overflakkee, which had been almost continuously calamitous since it had been embanked in 1648, to be abandoned after it flooded in November 1775. The province had been prepared to provide some assistance if the landowners had wanted to re-embank the polder, but when the landowners decided to abandon it, the States of Holland left it at that.<sup>61</sup>

The States had a very different attitude towards the island of Goeree. Here, one of the polders had flooded in 1715 and was unable to raise the 40,000 guilders required to repair its dikes. The other polders on the island, as usual, refused to support the imperilled polder. On 28 May 1717, the States of Holland took a drastic step: it was decided that from then on, the province itself would finance the maintenance of the sea defences of Goeree. The water boards on the islands lost their authority over the sea defences to a special committee installed by the

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<sup>59</sup> Teixeira de Mattos, *Waterkeeringen*, vol. 7.1, p. 381.

<sup>60</sup> Teixeira de Mattos, *Waterkeeringen*, vol. 10.1, pp. 439-441.

<sup>61</sup> NA, SvH/GR 3920.

States, which was to be funded from provincial taxes. The water boards on the island were not abolished altogether, but they only remained responsible for drainage.

The reason for this far-reaching decision was expressed clearly by the States: the island had to be preserved as long as possible, in order to guarantee that the Goereese Gat and the Brouwershavense Gat (another sea inlet that provided access to Rotterdam) remained open. In other words, this decision had nothing to do with concern for the well-being of the inhabitants of the island.<sup>62</sup> It is likely that the States also realised that the islanders would be unable to raise the enormous sums required to conserve the island. The land area of the island was less than 3,000 hectares, of which only 2,000 were cultivated, and part of the cultivated area consisted of low-yielding dune valleys.<sup>63</sup> From 1717 to 1751 the States of Holland spent over 800,000 guilders on the sea defences of Goeree: an average annual sum of about 23,000 guilders, and during the first eight years, even 45,000 guilders per annum.<sup>64</sup> The owners of the 2,000 taxable hectares of Goeree would never have been able to raise that amount of capital. Left to their own devices, the inhabitants would eventually have abandoned the island and caused the disaster the States feared.

For the islanders, the management of the dikes by the States of Holland came as an almost unmitigated blessing. Although the tax exemptions that they had been granted prior to 1717 were withdrawn, they no longer had to pay rates for dike maintenance. The raters were initially replaced by an extra tax, but after complaints from the islanders, the tax was withdrawn in 1722, and only reintroduced in 1768.<sup>65</sup> Thus for almost fifty years, the farmers and landowners of Goeree paid nothing for dike maintenance, whereas their counterparts in the other coastal polders of the southwest faced high dike rates. The poorer islanders also profited, because the continuing work on the sea defences required huge amounts of labour. Around 1730, the islanders must have been quite comfortable, because during the deep agricultural depression of those years, the farmers faced considerably lower dues than elsewhere and labourers always had

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<sup>62</sup> Teixeira de Mattos, *Waterkeeringen*, vol. 10.1, pp. 479-480.

<sup>63</sup> NA, SvH/GR 3936/421.

<sup>64</sup> NA, SvH/GR 6317; NA, Opzichter 's lands werken Goeree 5; Teixeira de Mattos, *Waterkeeringen*, vol. 10. 1, pp. 481.

<sup>65</sup> Teixeira de Mattos, *Waterkeeringen*, pp. 430-433.

enough work. They wanted this situation to continue for as long as possible, and protested loudly when the States of Holland proposed in 1734 to re-introduce the extra tax. The islanders objected that many people had abandoned their land in the years when this tax had been raised, and many more would do so if the tax were to be reintroduced.<sup>66</sup>

The States of Holland ordered the commissioners for the island to conduct an inquiry into the islanders' complaints, which resulted in a thorough study of the economy of Goeree. The commissioners collected data on taxation, rents, land prices and the abandonment of land.<sup>67</sup> The claims of the islanders about the abandoning of land proved to be unjustified: between 1682 and 1721, only 1.5 per cent of land on Goeree had been abandoned by landowners. The data on rent and land prices show that Goeree was a relatively prosperous community. The island's good clay soil (about 60 per cent of the taxable land on the island) yielded about twice as much rent per hectare during the 1730s than comparable land in Zeeland Flanders at that time. This can be explained by the fact that the inhabitants of Goeree paid no rates for dike maintenance, whereas landowners in Zeeland Flanders had to pay up to seven guilders per hectare.<sup>68</sup>

In light of the economic situation of the islanders, the States' proposal in 1734 to introduce an extra tax of about two guilders per hectare seems quite reasonable, and the claims of the islanders about the abandonment of land were clearly exaggerated. The commissioners also reached this conclusion, but implementation of the new tax was postponed until 1768. Why did the States of Holland deal so leniently with people who were evidently free-riding? They may have had good reason to give the islanders preferential treatment. In the first place, Goeree yielded an annual sum of 10,000 guilders in direct provincial taxes, which meant that over the period between 1717 and 1751 discussed above, more than 40 per cent of the expenditure on Goeree could be reimbursed from taxes paid by the islanders themselves.<sup>69</sup> Second, a local workforce was required for the continuous work on the sea defences. Without the local

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<sup>66</sup> NA, SvH/GR 6317, 24 July 1734.

<sup>67</sup> NA, SvH/GR 3934/268, 3936/421, 3936/457, 3936/459, 3936/462.

<sup>68</sup> NA, SvH/GR 3934/268, 3936/459, 3936/462; P. van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam. Boeren in West-Zeeuws-Vlaanderen 1650-1850* (Wageningen: Wageningen University, 2000) pp. 402-404.

<sup>69</sup> NA, SvH/GR 3936/457, 6317, 24 July 1734.

population, preserving the island would have been a much more difficult task. It is very likely that the islanders realised this and tried to put pressure on the States of Holland to reduce their tax burden – and they succeeded in doing so.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined Epstein's thesis that in early modern states, and especially in the federal Dutch Republic with its powerful cities, the political decision-making process was not insulated from particular economic interests, which could result in elite groups hijacking decision-making to further their own interests, at the expense of the general good. This was done by comparing the policies of the States-General, the States of Zeeland and the States of Holland on the issue of the distribution of the costs of maintaining flood defences in the southwest of the Netherlands. These costs rose sharply after 1715, with a disproportionately large share of the costs being borne by communities situated along the seawalls, whereas more inland communities contributed little or nothing. The choice was between a more equitable distribution across all of the stakeholders, or protection of vested interests in the inland polders and the shifting of most of the burden to the general taxpayer.

The outcome confirms Epstein's thesis, as shown by the fact that not one of the three eighteenth-century governments under study even attempted to implement the most efficient and equitable solution, which would have been to unite the polders of each island in a single water board. As soon as local elites made their objections felt, such plans were shelved, probably because it was feared that these elites would succeed in their attempts to sabotage them. This does not necessarily mean that the Dutch Republic was an exceptionally weak state, because the case of Butjadingen demonstrates that even absolutist Denmark had to give way to the demands of powerful local elites. The case of the States of Zeeland also provides convincing evidence to support Epstein's thesis. In Zeeland, the representatives of three cities with entrenched economic interests on the islands concerned managed to delay the introduction of a more equitable distribution of costs for seventy years. This had a catastrophic effect on provincial finances and on the 'calamitous' polders that were liable for dike maintenance. The example of the Zeeland politician Laurens Pieter van de Spiegel shows that representatives of the three cities were aware



of the weakness of the existing system, but that for them, protecting their city's interests and privileges came first.

At first glance, the policies of the States-General and the States of Holland seem to contradict Epstein's contentions. They quickly reached decisions that could have quite far-reaching implications, such as the 'nationalisation' of dike maintenance on the island of Goeree. Both in Zeeland Flanders and in Holland, more equitable systems of financing flood defences were introduced within a couple of years. This was not because political decision-making was insulated from economic interests, however; had the discussion been about an economically important issue such as the grain trade, reaching agreement would have been much more difficult. Zeeland Flanders and the islands of Vorne, Goeree and Overflakkee were geographically peripheral areas where the provincial and urban elites did not have any significant economic interests. The areas were of strategic importance, however, which made it imperative to reach rapid and effective decisions on how to support them. These strategic considerations also made it possible to delegate the implementation of decisions on the financing of maintenance of seawalls to experts. Thus although the policies of the States-General and the States of Holland might resemble modern, bureaucratic policies, this was only because there were no entrenched interests to be held at bay.