

Max van der Stoel: A life in the service of mankind

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In the steady flow of sorrowful responses to the news of the death of Max van der Stoel earlier this year, four words regularly occupied an important position: idealism, dedication, integrity and modesty. These same words describe precisely my personal experience and observations of Max during his full life in Dutch politics, as a diplomat, in senior international positions and as a Minister of State.

As a result of our highly divergent careers and probably also due to our considerable age difference, in our day-to-day life, our paths crossed considerably less often than would perhaps be expected. On those occasions when it did happen, however, we generally required few words to confirm the high degree of consensus and like-mindedness between us.

In the early nineteen sixties — a period when Max was already a member of the Dutch Upper Chamber and for some time had been associated with the research institute for the Dutch Labour Party (the Wiardi Beckman Stichting) based in Amsterdam's Tesselschadestraat — I occasionally saw him walking down the road, sometimes together with Joop den Uyl, eating his lunchtime sandwich or an apple, from a plastic sandwich bag.

I had recently started work nearby in the Vondelstraat, as a young policy worker of the construction union of the Dutch Trade Union Congress (NVV), and would often spend my lunchtime in the same way. In other words, as young men, we were both employed with a branch of what at the time was still known as 'the Red Family'; the branches in question, however, were separated by a considerable gulf. Furthermore, Max was already clearly in the process of establishing a position for himself; I, on the other hand, was fresh to the job.

It would be more than ten more years before my career elevated me to chairmanship of the NVV, later the FNV, and as a natural extension thereof, also of the European trade union movement. During that same period, Max occupied a number of important Cabinet positions — twice Minister and once Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs — and, as a member of the Dutch Lower and Upper Chamber established a wealth of parliamentary experience. When I first entered the Dutch Lower Chamber as an elected people's representative, in 1986, Max had moved away from The Hague several years previously, to take up the position of Dutch ambassador to the United Nations.

It was however specifically in his capacity as UN ambassador that I came to know Max more intimately. As chairman of the FNV, I was invited to join an international commission whose role was to issue proposals for the drawing up of a code of conduct for multinational companies. My work took me to New York

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on a regular basis, and Max made it a habit to invite me (and if she was accompanying me, my wife Rita) to take lunch in his residence.

Although we came from very different social backgrounds — his father was a doctor, mine a carpenter — to a large extent, we shared the same motives. We were both filled with the desire to make an active contribution to tackling injustice, exploitation and suppression in the world. Initially at least, my angle of approach focused more on tackling poverty and social and economic disadvantage; the approach favoured by Max was to stand up for democratic freedoms and the upholding of human rights. It is of course true that both approaches complement one another.

As a Minister and thereafter, Max established an indestructible international reputation as a proponent of the democratic rule of law, human rights and minority rights. His arguments were put forward in a sound and pragmatic manner, but he was always steadfast in his principles. In his political role, he supported dissident movements in dictatorial regimes irrespective of whether they came from the right wing (Greece) or the left wing (the former Czechoslovakia).

Following his retirement, he continued to do much important work in these fields. During the first half of the nineteen nineties, he was UN rapporteur on compliance with human rights in Iraq. At a later stage he was employed as special advisor to Solana, EU coordinator for Macedonia. His ground-breaking work as High Commissioner for National Minorities in the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) of course deserves particular praise. Precisely because of his extensive knowledge of business and his remarkable personal characteristics — honesty, persistence, politeness and modesty — his work in that field was extraordinary.

We often discussed these issues together. The fall of the Berlin Wall and of communism in the former Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern and Central Europe opened the door to the gradual inclusion of those countries in formerly ‘Western’ associations and organisations, such as the Council of Europe, NATO and the European Union. In my trade union period and later in occupying my political positions, I was always positively involved in this ‘healing’ of Europe.

In the same way that the European institutions were established on the basis of the underlying principle that former enemies could best be reconciled in a shared home, the permanent bringing together of East and West was anything but a ‘technical project’. During that period, Max and I regularly spoke — either in the Prime Minister’s tower in The Hague, or during unexpected meetings — about what was needed to encourage these two halves of Europe to grow ever closer. Those discussions were always valuable.

Peoples who liberate themselves from suppression need time and advice to identify the right path to achieving political democracy and respect for the rights of minorities. Max van der Stoep was always available to offer them sound advice of that kind. For him, conflict prevention was of vital importance. Promoting dialogue, listening to and discussing with one another, were among the essential

tools for achieving results. These were also methods I commonly used, myself.

I still clearly remember how on one dark day in January 2001, at my request, Max visited me in my work room in the Prime Minister's tower: as so often, he arrived somewhat scruffily dressed and with a threadbare, pale brown diplomatic briefcase under his arm. I presented him with my highly confidential request to discuss with the father of Maxima Zorreguieta the probability of her intended engagement to our Crown Prince Willem Alexander. Not so much to my surprise but very much to my relief, unsolicited, Max rapidly reached the same conclusion as me about the desired outcome. The discretion and tact with which he tackled this delicate matter were impressive.

Max was still alive to see the start of what has now generally become known as the Arab Spring. Unfortunately, he was unable to observe the (initial?) denouement in Libya and the further developments in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and elsewhere. He and I were witnesses to the way in which the desire for democratic rights and political freedoms in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere went hand in hand with the heartfelt desire for better social and economic prospects, work and income. It is abundantly clear that there is still a very long way to go before the closely intertwined wishes (of a political, social and economic nature) are achieved.

As President of the Club of Madrid and as member of the Board of Trustees of the International Crisis Group, over the past few years, at regular intervals and in various parts of the world I have had to deal with numerous issues and aspects about which I in the past exchanged ideas with Max van der Stoel. Such exchanges are no longer possible. The best way to honour his memory, however, is to try to continue in his spirit.

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