

The Crisis We Refuse to Have - Why the Netherlands Needs a Strategic Shock

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A country that once built the Delta Works now builds routines. We have all become an ANWB couple — synchronized, safe, and slowly standing still.

The Paradox of Success

The Netherlands is not in crisis. And that is exactly its crisis.

We have built one of the most prosperous and precisely managed societies on earth. Our trains run, our hospitals heal, our budgets balance. Yet beneath this competence lies a quieter danger: the slow disappearance of purpose. We are managing our prosperity rather than shaping it.

This is not collapse but sedation — the calm of a nation that functions perfectly yet no longer moves with intent. We confuse control with progress and mistake stability for strength. What we face is not an emergency of systems, but an erosion of meaning: a country that still performs, but has forgotten what performance is for.

From Flood to Still Water

For most of our history, crisis gave us focus. The flood of 1953 did not just destroy land; it created direction. The Delta Works turned vulnerability into mastery and made us world leaders in water management. We built safety out of fear and found identity in resilience.

Today there is no flood to fight. Our institutions work so well that they have become ends in themselves. The great danger is not nature's power but our own complacency. The Netherlands has moved from fighting for survival to managing success — and somewhere along that transition, we misplaced the urgency that once defined us.

The Drift Beneath the Surface

We call everything a crisis — nitrogen, housing, migration — yet none of these are truly existential. They are symptoms of a deeper drift: a society that has lost its organising idea. We respond with commissions, subsidies, and reports, mistaking activity for direction.

In *Losing the Game of Advantage* (Outdoor Connect, 2025), I described how Dutch economic policy has turned from creating value to distributing it — from strategy to sentiment. The pattern persists. Productivity has flatlined for fifteen years. We create jobs without leverage, wealth without renewal. Capital flows into real estate instead of innovation. We are a high-cost, low-ambition economy: efficient in detail, uncertain in design.

Our politics mirrors the trend. Short-term cycles reward responsiveness over vision. We have become a nation of administrators rather than architects — capable of running anything, but hesitant to decide what is worth running.

The Disappearance of Purpose

Purpose is not a slogan; it is the logic that connects sacrifice to meaning. Without it, competence becomes routine.

After the Second World War, our purpose was **rebuilding** — turning scarcity into growth. In the 1980s, **reforming** — reshaping a welfare state that had outgrown its means. In the 1990s, **expanding** — opening ourselves to Europe and the world, convinced that connection itself was progress. Then came the crises of the new century — 9/11, the financial collapse of 2008 — shocks that might once have sharpened national purpose. Instead, we absorbed them. The Netherlands felt turbulence, but not transformation. We lived on, comfortable, certain that the system itself would carry us through. Even the global shocks that followed – the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – failed to reawaken a sense of national purpose. They were absorbed with efficiency, not conviction, as if resilience itself were enough.

Today, wealth has replaced ambition as our unspoken goal. We defend our way of life but cannot articulate what that life is for. This absence of direction explains why policy feels reactive, and why reform lacks energy. When a nation no longer knows its purpose, even good governance becomes a slow form of decline.

The Dependence We Choose

Dependence, once our fear, has become our habit. We import energy, technology, and digital infrastructure, while exporting the illusion of control. In *De Strategische Mythe van Tata Steel IJmuiden* (Outdoor Connect, 2024), I argued that our instinct to subsidize the past instead of invest in the future has become a national reflex. We spend billions preserving legacy industries, while underfunding the ecosystems that could define tomorrow’s autonomy — semiconductors, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing.

That imbalance is more than economic. It is psychological. It signals that the Netherlands no longer trusts itself to create the future, only to manage its consequences.

The Real Threat

The flood of 1953 forced us to master nature; the challenge of 2025 forces us to master inertia. One threatened to drown us; the other threatens to dull us. Both can destroy a nation — one through force, the other through fatigue.

Our danger today is not collapse, but irrelevance. We may continue to perform well by every conventional measure — GDP, employment, balance sheets — while slowly losing the ability to shape events around us. A country can survive many hardships, but not the softening of its own will.

Choosing Our Crisis

The answer is not another policy programme or innovation fund. It is a decision — to recover national purpose. The Netherlands needs a new Delta Works, not of concrete and steel, but of imagination and direction.

Purpose must again become a public discipline: the ability to think in generations, to allocate capital where it builds capacity rather than comfort, to choose creation over compensation. It means confronting the uncomfortable truth that progress and pain are often the same process.

We can wait for crisis to teach us urgency, or we can choose our crisis deliberately — a self-imposed shock that forces renewal. Every successful transformation in our history began that way: with the decision to disturb ourselves before the world did it for us.

Final Thought

The Netherlands can survive any flood except the flood of its own contentment. Our greatest risk is not external pressure but internal peace — the soothing illusion that running well is the same as moving forward.

If we wish to remain more than a well-run memory, we must once again act as if the future depends on us — because it does. The purpose that once built dikes and reclaimed land must now reclaim direction.

Comfort kept us safe.
Now it keeps us small.

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