

Local Flags under Siege

Decline of a centuries-old tradition in the Netherlands?

Marcel van Westerhoven

Introduction

The Netherlands has three tiers of government: the state, the 12 provinces, and (in 2009) the 441 municipalities (*gemeenten* in Dutch). In 1821, when the formation of municipalities was finally confirmed, there were 1,253. In 1989 the Netherlands counted 702 municipalities after a period of municipal reforms, most dating from after the Second World War. Municipal reform in the Netherlands is not conducted simultaneously, as it was, for instance, in Belgium in 1977. Almost every year municipalities disappear by amalgamation into larger units. This dynamic situation makes it difficult to analyze the use of municipal flags. For a few years before 1989 there had not been any reforms, so it was a good time to take stock of the municipal flags at that time. It was also the year that I first started to investigate Dutch municipal flags. Of the 702 municipalities, 662 used a flag, most of which we vexillologists would consider “good flags”. The only real sinners were some 40 that put their coats-of-arms in their flags. Only 40 municipalities did not fly a flag. At that time no logo flags were to be seen. It was the pinnacle of a period of some 30 years in which the official adoption of well-designed flags by the municipal councils had soared. As a result we had a large file of well-designed flags that we Dutch vexillologists were proud of.

After 1989, the municipal reforms kicked in again, until there now are only 441 municipalities. Sadly, in the last 20 years a phenomenon that Dutch vexillologists hoped would not become the fashion in the Netherlands nonetheless emerged alongside the reforms: the logo-on-bedsheet (LOB). Although new municipalities are still adopting well-designed flags, year by year more and more local authorities start flying logo flags, often with their name on it too. Those flags are becoming a stain on our local flag tradition.

This paper will deal with the decline in the quality of municipal flags by the emergence of the logo flag. An analysis of the new municipal flags of the last 20 years will show how serious this decline really is. Following this the causes of the decline are postulated. The paper concludes on a positive note with developments and possible actions that could turn the tide. But first, the history of Dutch local flags up to recent times will be addressed.

A short history of local flags in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has a long tradition of local authorities flying their own specific flags. In the Middle Ages the Dutch cities and towns that were member of the Hanseatic league used specific banners on their trading ships, mainly in the colours red and white. The flag of Deventer, still in use today, is a good example of such a flag (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Municipal flag of Deventer



Figure 2a. *The Battle on Lake Haarlem, May 26th 1573. Painted in 1621 by Hendrick Vroom. (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam)*



Figures 2b & 2c. *Detail of Figure 2: on the left the Amsterdam flag, on the right Haarlem flags*

In the 17th century, the Dutch Republic's "Golden Age", many cities and towns began to use special flags with which to identify and distinguish themselves. Even small fishing villages flew their own flags on their boats. This tradition came from being a nation with a heavy reliance on the sea and the waterways for trade. The flags were therefore mainly used on ships and boats. Also, the cities often had a *status aparte* which made them economically, administratively, and judicially independent. Figures 2a-c show a battle scene on Lake Haarlem in 1573 between ships of the city of Haarlem and Spanish forces. Although painted some 50 years after the event, it is very likely that the Haarlem and Amsterdam flags on the

painting were in use at the time. These are typical banners-of-arms. A more popular type of city flag consisted of horizontal stripes, from three up to thirteen. For one city a whole range of striped flags could be in use, as was the case for Rotterdam.

Until the late 19th century, international flag charts showed flags of many Dutch cities and towns among the flags of nations from all over the world. As an example, figure 3 shows Dutch local flags taken from a 1783 English flag chart. The flags on this chart were copied from others that went back at least 100 years. Next to banners-of-arms and striped flags, some flags with special designs could already be seen, as for instance for Hoorn and for Ameland.

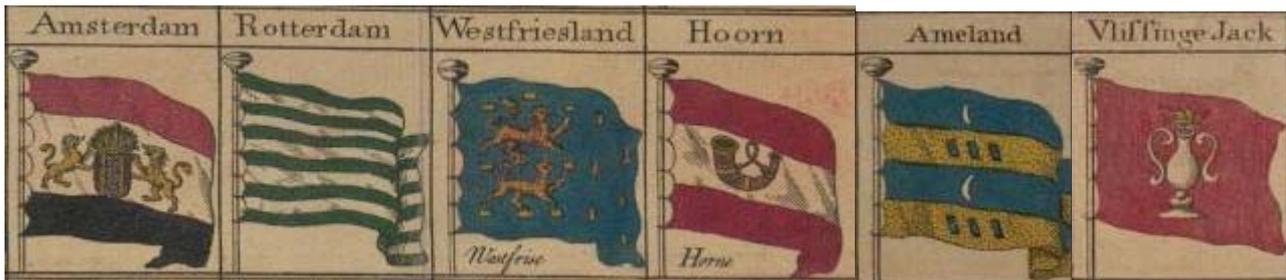


Figure 3. Dutch local flags from the flagchart "Bowle's Naval Flags" (1783)

The period from 1813, the founding year of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, until 1920 was an intermediate period with respect to local flags. Municipalities became the lowest tier of local government and the city status disappeared. Municipalities that had been cities before 1813 still used their flags, but the ones that had not been cities did not adopt flags. The flags in use were not officially confirmed or adopted. The emphasis in the young Kingdom was on unity, symbolized by flying the national flag. Provincial flags did not yet exist.

All this changed in 1920, when the first modern municipal flag was adopted officially, that of Alkmaar (Fig. 4). It has a form that in the Netherlands has become the usual practice for deriving municipal flags from coats-of-arms. Taking the very common charge of a castle tower from the coat-of-arms and putting it on stripes in the municipal colours achieved a very distinctive design recognizable even in a black-and-white depiction.

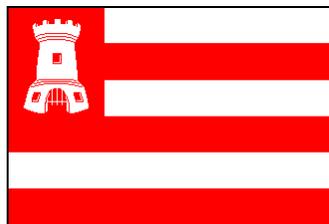


Figure 4. Alkmaar municipal flag, adopted in 1920

More, though not many, distinctive flags were adopted officially by municipal councils after 1920. After World War II, all over the country municipalities started to adopt their own flags officially. This trend fits into a phenomenon seen in many countries in Western Europe at that time: the democratization of local authorities, even small ones that never had city status, reflected in the adoption of their own distinctive symbols. In the 1950s the designs often consisted of horizontal stripes. To make the flags more distinctive, variations were made in the height of the stripes. Also, more and more vertical and diagonal patterns emerged.

The adoption of municipal flags really came into its own in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s with often ingenious designs that stood out in their simplicity and distinctiveness, using colours and symbols derived from the coats-of-arms. A common practice is the preferred placement of the symbols near or not far from the hoist, so that they can also be discerned when the wind is weak. The number of officially adopted flags rose spectacularly year after year, until in 1989, 626 out of the 702 municipalities (89%) then in existence had an official flag. The advent of vexillology in the Netherlands, spearheaded by Klaes Sierksma, one of the founding fathers of the *Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vlaggenkunde* (the Netherlands vexillological association, NVvV) in 1966, played a big role in this development.

Five municipal flags can serve as examples of how the designers derived flags from the coat-of-arms in an often subtle manner. Achtkarspelen (Fig. 5) has all four colours of the coat-of-arms on the flag. Achtkarspelen means “eight parishes”, symbolized in the arms by eight church towers. In the flag the eight blue tower roofs have been transformed into an eight-pointed blue star.

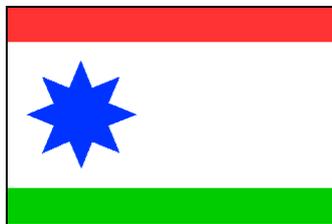


Figure 5. Achtkarspelen municipal flag



Figure 6. Slochteren municipal flag

Slochteren (Fig. 6) has a rather complicated coat-of-arms with four quarters. The flag takes its main colours and the sea-dragon as the charge from the coat-of-arms. On the flag, the sea-dragon belches flames, symbolizing the large nationally-important natural gas field below Slochteren, as signified by the red, white, and blue stripes. The former municipality of Odoorn (Fig. 7) has a burning castle on its arms. On the flag, this is depicted by a red tower.



Figure 7. Odoorn municipal flag

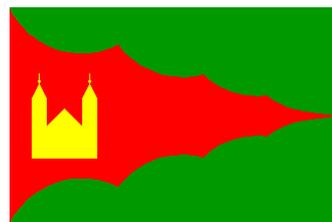


Figure 8. Heerewaarden municipal flag

The former municipality of Heerewaarden (Fig. 8) has the church from the arms in silhouette on an engrailed triangle, suggesting the hoop-net as used by the local river fishermen. The coat-of-arms of the former municipality of Erp consisted of its patron saint, Saint Servatius, in gold on a blue field. Putting the saint on a flag was not acceptable, so the designer used the two attributes of the saint, the key and the dragon, putting the key in the dragon's claws. The design was made even more distinctive by counterchanging it in yellow and blue (Fig. 9).

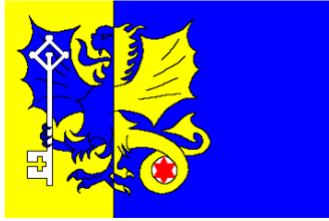


Figure 9. Erp municipal flag

In the 1970s and 1980s designers sought new ways to make distinctive flags. This led to unique flag patterns, of which four are shown in figures 10 to 13. The flag of Korendijk (Fig. 10) has a unique pattern consisting of Bavarian lozenges intertwined with a chevron.

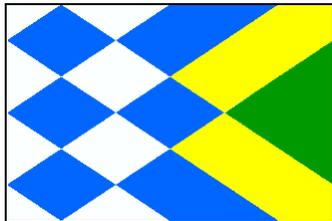


Figure 10. Korendijk municipal flag



Figure 11. Nunspeet municipal flag

The hoist part of the Nunspeet flag (Fig. 11) is patterned in the form of a harrow, the agricultural tool used to break up lumps of soil left after ploughing a field. The flag of Leusden (Fig. 12) shows the tower of the local church in colours taken from the rather complicated coat-of-arms. Also, its initial, "L", can be discerned.

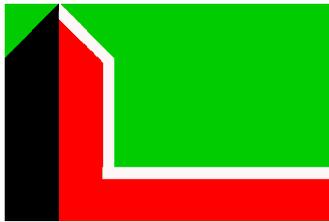


Figure 12. Leusden municipal flag

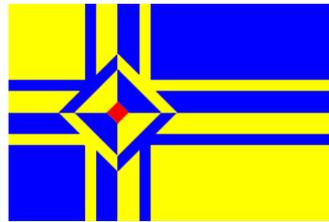


Figure 13. Marken municipal flag

The former municipality of Marken (Fig. 13) had a Scandinavian-style cross on its flag, constructed by combining four initial M's in a counterchanged pattern.

Unusual flag shapes

Most Dutch municipal flags are rectangular with the same proportions as the national flag, 2:3. However, there are some exceptions. There are two current and four former municipalities with square flags, mostly banners-of-arms. As an example, the flag of Waddinxveen is shown (Fig. 14).

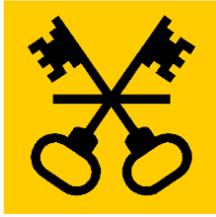


Figure 14. Waddinxveen municipal flag

A curiosity that has disappeared with the municipal reforms were triangular and swallow-tailed flags. There were three of those, shown in figures 15 to 17.

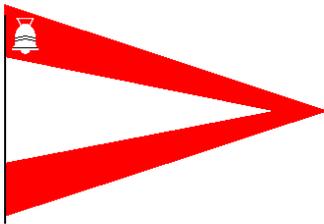


Figure 15. Nieuwe Pekela municipal flag

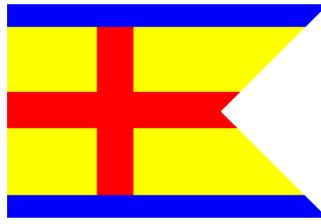


Figure 16. Herten municipal flag

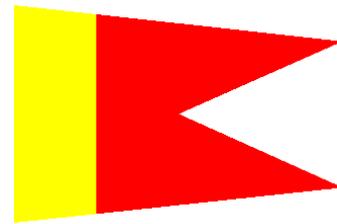


Figure 17. Hensbroek municipal flag

Unusual colours

Twelve municipal flags contain unusual colours, not used in Dutch heraldry: orange, brown, and purple. Three examples are given here.

Beuningen is a merger of two former municipalities, whose main colours, yellow for one and red for the other, are blended into orange in the middle stripe of the new flag (Fig. 18) to signify the union.



Figure 18. Beuningen municipal flag



Figure 19. Wanroij municipal flag

The “roij” in former Wanroij stands for woods cut for agriculture. The brown quarter-circle in the municipal flag (Fig. 19) had the colour of the fertile earth resulting from this process. In the flag of former Heel & Panheel (Fig 20), the colour purple symbolized the heather fields in the surroundings.

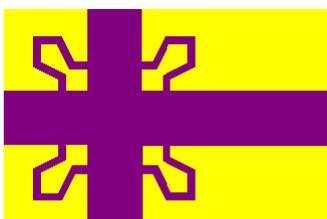


Figure 20. Heel & Panheel municipal flag

“Bad” flags

From what is shown above, one would think that there are only “good flags” in the Netherlands. If we take a look at the current municipal flags, most of them are what vexillologists would consider “good” designs. However, there are bad ones among them. Of the 441 municipalities in 2009:

- 393 have an official flag (89%);
- 17 have an unofficial flag (4%);
- 21 use a logo flag (5%);
- 10 do not use any flag (2%).

In the Netherlands, 93% of the municipalities use an official or unofficial flag. Three types of infringement can be discerned among these flags:

- the flag bears the municipal coat-of-arms or shield;
- the flag is not distinctive by being the same as a current national flag;
- the municipality uses a “parade flag”.

Flags with coats-of-arms

Today 25 out of the current 431 flag-bearing municipalities (6%) have placed their municipal coat-of-arms on their flag, either the full achievement with crown and supporters or just the shield. Of those 25, 21 are official, 4 unofficial.

Bergen op Zoom has the full achievement of its coat-of-arms on its flag (Fig. 21). The flag was documented as early as 1870. Although, if considered strictly, it is a “bad flag”, this traditional value makes it irreplaceable.



Figure 21. Bergen-op-Zoom municipal flag



Figure 22. Alblasserdam municipal flag

That this rule of “no shield on flag” can sometimes be transcended is shown by the shield-bearing flag of Alblasserdam (Fig. 22). It has a rather attractive counterchanged pattern that could be considered good design. Some really bad designs can be seen in figures 23 and 24. Lingewaal has its full achievement on a white flag in what could almost be regarded an LOB.

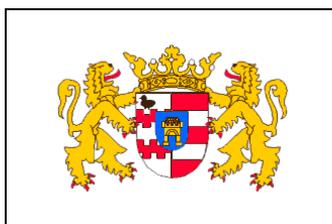


Figure 23. Lingewaal municipal flag

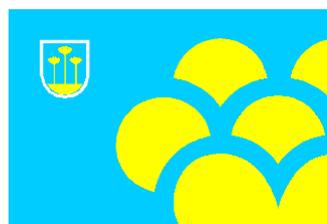


Figure 24. Zoetermeer municipal flag

In fact, the flag of Zoetermeer is a kind of hybrid between a logo- and shield-bearing flag. This must truly be one of the worst designed flags in the Netherlands.

National flags look-alikes

There are many municipal flags with two or three horizontal stripes that are difficult to differentiate. Most have a colour sequence that is not used in any national flag. Some five municipalities have flags that are exactly the same as a current national flag. This could have easily been avoided by taking distinctive symbols from the coat-of-arms. Cases in point are the Austrian flag pattern, used by no fewer than three rather well known historic cities: Dordrecht, Gouda, and Hoorn (Fig. 25). Hillegom uses the same flag pattern as Lithuania (Fig 26).



Figure 25. Dordrecht, Gouda, Hoorn municipal flags



Figure 26. Hillegom municipal flag

Parade flags

In 1938 all municipalities were invited to participate in the parade at the occasion of Queen Wilhelmina's 40th jubilee. They were all provided with a special flag consisting of the provincial colours with the shield of the coat-of-arms depicted as a square in the canton. Today 5 municipalities still use such a parade flag, in 2 cases officially. The problem with them is that the main part of a parade flag relates to the province that the municipality is situated in and not to the municipality itself.

The official flag of the municipality of Hellendoorn in the province of Overijssel is a typical parade flag with the provincial colours of red, yellow, and blue (Fig. 27).



Figure 27. Hellendoorn municipal flag

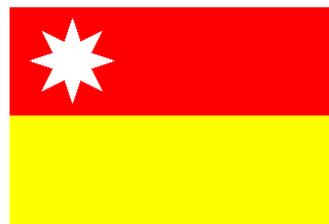


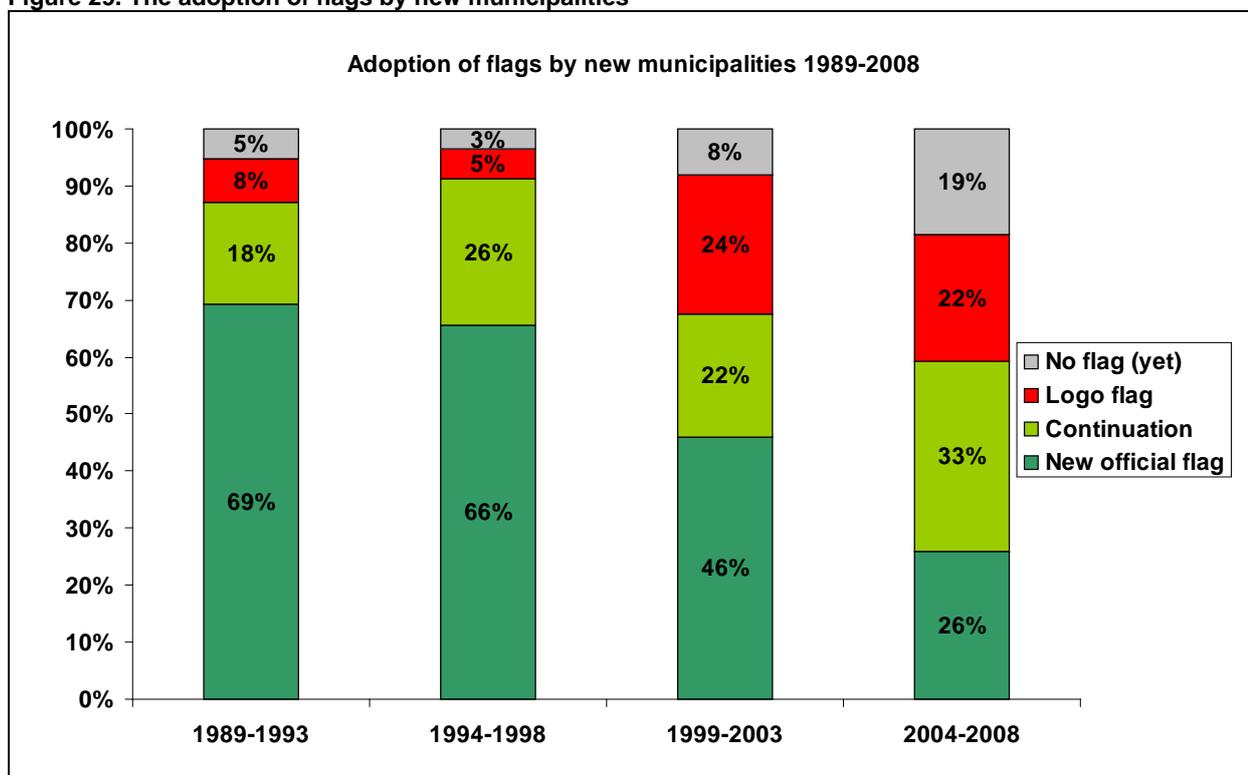
Figure 28. Moordrecht municipal flag

The unofficial municipal flag of Moordrecht (Fig. 28) in the province of Zuid-Holland is a parade flag. Although the provincial colours of red and yellow do not belong to the municipality itself, the blending with the white star on red of the municipal arms makes for a simple and distinctive flag.

The slow decline: the emergence of the LOB

Of the current 431 municipalities having a flag, only 21 (6%) use an LOB with in almost all cases the name of the municipality on it. In this light, any statement that there is a decline in the high standard of municipal flag design in the Netherlands seems to be an overreaction. However, all 21 LOBs were adopted in the last 20 years, and all of them by new municipalities resulting from municipal reforms. Before 1989, there were no LOBs. So there is reason for concern. To analyze this emergence, I listed the new municipalities for each year after 1989 and linked this to the adoption of flags by these municipalities. The results of this analysis are shown in a diagram (Fig. 29). To make it synoptic and get larger populations, I presented 5-year periods.

Figure 29. The adoption of flags by new municipalities



As can clearly be seen from figure 29, the share of LOBs really started to increase after 1999 and for the last 10 years has stood at approximately 25%. There are no signs that this image will change in the near future. What can be expected is a decrease in the number of the most recent new municipalities that do not have a flag yet, hopefully by the adoption of new official flags. In most cases it takes a few years for them to achieve ensigment.

Figures 30 and 31 give two examples of typical LOBs of newly formed municipalities.



Figure 30. Veere municipal flag



Figure 31. Wijdmeren municipal flag

Although there is reason for concern, most new municipalities still adopt well-designed flags or continue to use well-designed old ones. Figures 32 and 33 show examples of recent adoptions of new flags.

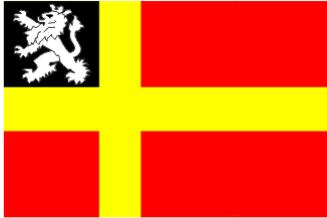


Figure 32. Utrechtse Heuvelrug municipal flag (2007)



Figure 33. Lansingerland municipal flag (2007)

The last few years have seen a far more disturbing development: existing municipalities replacing long-standing officially adopted flags with LOBs. It is as if they have forgotten that they already have an official flag. Inquiries into this practice confirm this is the case most of the time. However, even when pointed out to them, municipalities insist on using the LOB. They say it is the “daily flag”, and that the old official flag will be used for special occasions. In truth, the flag that should be used publicly on a regular basis will sadly become a museum piece. This practice of replacement is an even greater threat to the standard of flag design in the Netherlands than the adoption of LOBs by new municipalities.

So far I have found 12 cases of an existing official flag shoved off the scene by an LOB, but this phenomenon is growing and I think there are many that I have not yet encountered. To give an example, figures 34a and b show the official flag of Arnhem and the logo flag currently in use.



Figure 34a. Arnhem official flag



Figure 34b. Arnhem logo flag

When visiting Houten a few years ago, I expected to see the official flag (Fig. 35a) in front of the municipal offices. But instead I encountered a logo flag that is impossible to describe (Fig. 35b).

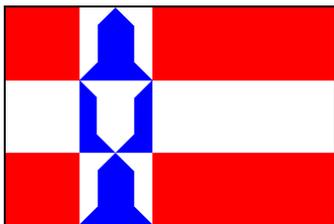


Figure 35a. Houten official flag



Figure 35b. Houten logo flag

A disturbing example can be seen in figures 36a and b. An alderman of the municipality of Renkum officially delivers the “municipal flag” to a delegation of athletes for a tournament. It is an LOB. The college of mayor and aldermen seem to have forgotten their official flag. Or maybe they considered the old one not “dynamic” enough.



Figure 36a. Renkum official flag



Figure 36b. Renkum LOB

The causes of the growing popularity of the LOB

When considering all that has been dealt with before, the question remains why LOBs are becoming more and more popular with local authorities. From contacts with municipalities, flag designers, graphic designers, and the *Hoge Raad van Adel* (High Council of Nobility, a governmental institution which has an advisory role with respect to municipal flags) and my own observations, I have postulated the following causes:

- Observing new flags, there are clear differences between provinces. New municipalities in the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, Noord-Brabant, and Drenthe in almost all cases adopted well-designed flags, while in the provinces of Overijssel and Gelderland many of the new municipalities chose LOBs. The reason for these differences is not difficult to find: in the first four provinces special societies for heraldry and vexillology are active, especially around municipal reforms. In most cases they have been established by local and provincial archivists. These societies seem to be vital in maintaining high standards. The latter two provinces do not have such a college. The provinces of Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland also do not have one, so that future municipal reforms may well lead to LOBs there too.
- Municipalities act more and more like companies. They use logos as their trademarks and put them on flags, to attract business and tourists. They want to be dynamic, modern, future-oriented, etc., and therefore wish to have flags with dynamic symbolism, clearly advertising their name and assets. In this view, the traditional well-designed municipal flag is old-fashioned, parochial, and therefore obsolete.
- Using a logo flag is convenient. The graphic designer hired to develop the new house style is asked to design a flag along with the logo or often designs one unasked. Consequently, the municipality does not see the need to adopt an official flag following the tradition.

- The argument against designing new symbols like a coat-of-arms and a flag often is that the new municipality has more important things to do. An LOB is quickly acquired, together with the new house style.
- Municipalities and their councils do not know what a well-designed municipal flag should look like. They therefore do not have the expertise to have one designed and adopt it. They also do not know where to get appropriate flag advice.
- Municipalities forget that they adopted an official flag, often because it has not been used for a long time. A new one is acquired, in most cases an LOB.
- Citizens, who should also use the flag, often do not care, because they do not have a feeling of “community” anymore. Municipalities, growing ever-larger through the many municipal reforms, are viewed by the citizens as only administrative bodies, with names that say nothing to the citizens. The civic hall often is many miles away. The loyalty and involvement of the citizens is with their smaller non-governmental unit of town or village, which in the last 20 years often have adopted very attractive new flags or traditional flags of former municipalities.

Conclusion: there is hope (and work to do)

Although I have painted a somewhat bleak picture for the future of the Dutch municipal flag, there are some glimmers of hope that the old tradition will not be swept away like that. In smaller entities such as villages, with a well developed sense of community, well-designed flags can be seen more and more often. And newly formed municipalities often still adopt a traditionally designed flag. Most unreformed municipalities and their citizens are still flying their old flags with pride.

Reasoning from the causes of the decline of the traditional well-designed flag and the rise of the LOB, the following countermeasures could be taken to reverse this negative trend:

- Luckily, LOBs are not officially adopted by the municipal councils and can therefore be easily put aside. The NVvV should approach municipalities with an LOB to try to convince them to replace their LOB with a well-designed flag. Members of the NVvV are capable and willing to design flags, at no charge.
- The advisory institution for municipal flags, the *Hoge Raad van Adel*, should actively approach newly formed municipalities immediately after the reform to advise them about how to design and adopt new symbols. The NVvV could also play a role in this process, provided that it is a coordinated effort.
- Almost all new municipalities acquire a new coat-of-arms by Royal Decree. The designer of the coat-of-arms should design a flag at the same time.
- Provincial heraldic and vexillological societies have proved very successful in ensigning new municipalities in the traditional spirit. These societies should also be established in the provinces of Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland, Utrecht, Gelderland, and Overijssel.
- Municipalities are free to use an LOB. However, they should consider that the flag should be for use by their citizens too. This consideration inherently excludes the use of a corporate type of flag like an LOB. The NVvV and its partners should actively spread this argument.

- Municipalities seem to be sensitive to the argument that an LOB does not have the prestige to fly next to the national and/or the provincial flag, but that a traditionally designed flag does. This is another argument with which the NVvV can persuade municipalities to adopt an official well-designed flag.
- The Flag Parade Rotterdam (SVR) regularly organizes outdoor flag expositions along the Boompjes Boulevard. There are plans for an exposition of the Dutch municipal flags in 2010. Only officially adopted flags will be flown there. The exposition will generate much publicity and give the NVvV and the SVN/SVR the chance to show what a municipal flag should look like.

Sources

Sierksma, Kl. (1962): *Nederlands vlaggenboek*, Utrecht: Het Spectrum.

Vexilla Nostra (1966-2008), periodical of the *Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vlaggenkunde*, ISSN 1382-2497, nrs. 1-258.

Note

Provincial colleges are:

- in Groningen: Consulentenschap voor Heraldiek in de provincie Groningen
- in Limburg: Limburgse Commissie voor Wapen- en Vlaggenkunde
- in Noord-Brabant: Noord-Brabantse commissie voor Wapen- en Vlaggenkunde
- in Drenthe: Drents Heraldisch College
- in Friesland: Fryske Rie foar Heraldyk.