

# The Politics of Antithesis



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The Antirevolutionary Government of  
Abraham Kuyper 1901–1905

P. J. Hoedemaker

Translated and Contextualized  
by Ruben Alvarado



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COVER ILLUSTRATION: Political cartoon drawn by Louis Raemaekers, which originally appeared in the *Handelsblad* of December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1908. See further p. 212 below.

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# NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION

The usual translating conventions are followed. Square brackets [like this] are used either to show the original text in cases in which the translation is not straightforward or unambiguous, to provide interpolations for better understanding, or to provide supplementary material.

The chapter headings were added by the translator, as were the footnotes except where otherwise noted. Errors in the original text have been corrected.

I refer to the separatist movement led by Abraham Kuyper which resulted in the formation of the “Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland” as the Nonconformity or Nonconformist movement, to distinguish it from the Separatist or Secessionist movement of 1834 which resulted in the “Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerken.”





Yes there are two paths you can go by  
But in the long run  
There's still time to change the road you're on  
– Robert Plant



# THE RISE TO POWER

This book embodies the translations of three works produced by P. J. Hoedemaker during and just after the rule of Her Majesty's government under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper. These works constitute a personal assessment of that government from the classical Reformed perspective of the public church and the confessing Christian state. As such, they provide a searching criticism of Kuyper's "politics of antithesis." To situate them in their proper context, essays are provided to render them understandable to a generation far removed from that time. "The Rise to Power" is the first, followed by "The Pinnacle of Power," "The Fall from Power," and "Post-Mortem."

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1901, a new government was installed in the Netherlands, formed by Antirevolutionary Party (ARP) leader Abraham Kuyper. This was the culmination of decades of relentless effort, the goal toward which Kuyper had been working since in 1876, the year in which, with the passing of Groen van Prinsterer,<sup>1</sup> he had assumed the leadership of the party. Prior to this, Groen had publicly acknowledged Kuyper as his heir apparent. In so doing he had provided Kuyper with the mantle of Elijah that Kuyper so longed for.<sup>2</sup>

Kuyper was everything Groen desired in a successor. He succeeded where Groen had failed, first and foremost by establishing a daily newspaper with wide circulation, the influence of which extended far beyond the relatively circumscribed group of more affluent citizens who were qualified to vote; all the way

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<sup>1</sup> Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876), statesman and recognized leader of the Antirevolutionary Party.

<sup>2</sup> "And now, let me tell you openly: so often I fear that, if we are forced to miss you, all firm direction will be lost to us if you cannot bring yourself to cast a tangible cloak of Elijah upon one of your followers. Do not take me (oh! excellence!), only tell me who it is." Kuyper to Groen, 13 Jan. 1871, in *Briefwisseling van Mr. G. Groen van Prinsterer met Dr. A. Kuyper 1864–1876* [Correspondence between Groen van Prinsterer and A. Kuyper], p. 115.

down, in fact, to a working class lacking the means to get over the threshold. Kuyper appealed to these “kleyne luyden,” to the little guy; Groen, by contrast, was a member of the aristocratic elite, he partook of its manners and style, and could do little to extend the appeal of the Antirevolutionary Party outside that sphere.

It had not been for a lack of trying. Groen established a newspaper in the early 1830s and again in the early 1850s; they both folded for lack of interest. Groen’s highbrow commentary appealed to only a select few. Kuyper, by contrast, mastered the ability to speak to the common man. As Puchinger notes, “Kuyper wrote so clearly that supporters and opponents, young and old, scholars and the simple, understood him – whether they agreed with him or not. Kuyper had journalistic charisma! He had a hold on his readers, both religious and intellectual, that no one after him has possessed.”<sup>3</sup>

Kuyper honed this ability as a preacher in the national Reformed church; Groen, by contrast, was a jurist, royal archivist, and later in life, a deft parliamentarian. Kuyper learned to speak to the congregation in such a way as to make a connection with the simplest churchgoer; it was an ability he carried with him into his journalistic career.

His preaching career had begun in 1863 when he was installed as a pastor in Beesd, a town in the Betuwe region, the “Bible Belt” of the Netherlands, encircled between the Waal and Lek rivers. In his student days, having grown up in the city of Leyden as the son of a “nobly poor” clergyman, he had dreaded the prospect of himself becoming a poor country pastor. Yet Beesd provided a decent living, and not only that, it helped him to recover, not just religion and morality – of which he already knew – but Christ crucified for him and his sins, helped along by some simple yet pious parishioners. From this point on, he would put his life in the service of Christ the King.

In his student days, before becoming a committed convert, Kuyper considered himself a part of a human race advancing toward cultural and ethical sweetness and light. Christianity was more a school of ethics than of dogma. By extension, the institutional church of creeds, confessions, offices, and sacraments was unimportant, secondary to the activity of the laity in the world. “The

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<sup>3</sup> Puchinger and Scheps, *Gesprek over de onbekende Kuyper* [Conversation about the unknown Kuyper], p. 20.

activities and duties of church *members* ... take precedence over those of the church *government*.”<sup>4</sup> But slowly he learned to appreciate the institutional dimension of the church, especially during the soul-searching involved when he applied for and received the call to Beesd. He combined these two in a free-church orientation that would become his trademark.

During his ministry there came a mounting, chafing restlessness with the condition of the national church, the so-called “volkskerk” or people’s church. In a letter to Groen van Prinsterer in 1867 he wrote of “the deeply lamentable condition of our church, which in this part of the Betuwe I cannot depict in dark enough colors.”<sup>5</sup> What began to chafe in Beesd became a full-scale itch in Utrecht, to which city he was called later in that year. There he began to agitate for reforms which many of his colleagues, mostly orthodox, felt were too radical. One of them, Dr. J. J. van Toorenenbergen, wrote to Groen that Kuyper “has plans for a theory of church government that would strike our Reformed church in its aorta.”<sup>6</sup> And by the time he had moved to Amsterdam, his reminiscences of the church in which he was raised were dark indeed:

In my youth, the church aroused my disgust rather than my affection. Being closely acquainted with church life through ecclesiastical upbringing, I felt more repelled than attracted, especially by the form in which this occurred in Leyden. Under the liberal regime of that time, Leyden was in an absolutely pitiful condition, and the lie, the untruthfulness, the unspiritual rut that tars the heart and soul of our denomination as a whole was especially in evidence in the old Academy town in a pitiable way.... The church there was no church. The spirit did not reign there, and my heart could feel no sympathy either for a church that so grossly trampled upon her own honor or for a religion represented by such a church.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vree, *Kuyper in de kiem* [Kuyper in the bud], p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> *Briefwisseling van Mr. G. Groen van Prinsterer met Dr. A. Kuyper 1864–1876*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Groen van Prinsterer, in Groen van Prinsterer, *Schriftelijke nalatenschap: Briefwisseling, Vierde Deel, 1866–1876* [Written Legacy: Part Four, Correspondence 1866–1876], p. 271.

<sup>7</sup> *Confidentie* [Confidency], p. 35.

The crux of the problem with the “volkskerk” was laxity. It was a problem rendered insoluble by the form of church government. Since 1816, when the church was reconstituted under King Willem I, a bureaucratic structure had been imposed which rendered all attempts at church discipline nugatory, especially in doctrinal matters. If orthodox local consistories imposed discipline, appeals to these administrative boards would generally be upheld, rendering the consistories impotent. One section of orthodoxy argued for acquiescence in the situation, putting its hope in the “medical” approach: admonition and witness while abstaining from disciplinary measures. Another section argued in favor of activism: populating the administrative boards with proponents of orthodoxy, who would enforce disciplinary measures taken by local consistories (the so-called “juridical” approach).

Kuyper was of two minds. On the one hand, he was in favor of activism within the existing church structure, to remove modernists and establish orthodox churchmen in positions of power. On the other hand, he was predisposed to treat the national church as a relic from medieval times which somehow had survived the Reformation. As he put it in his inaugural sermon in Utrecht, “The cause of that decay [inherent in the national church] must never be sought with the Reformers, who clearly saw the requirements of a church, but lies entirely with the generations that came after them, and who undermined the essence of the church by seeking expansion and size at the expense of her holy character.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Kuyper’s efforts in Utrecht did not bear much in the way of tangible fruit, he did manage to galvanize supporters – as well as adversaries. These efforts also garnered him national attention, even in Amsterdam, the Netherlands’ leading city. As part of a new system whereby rank-and-file church members could vote for candidates to fill vacant pulpits, Kuyper received a call to the Reformed church of Amsterdam in 1870. Here, from within, he continued his attacks on the national church; but he also got involved in politics, and in tan-

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<sup>8</sup> *De Menschwording Gods het Levensbeginsel der Kerk* [The incarnation of God the life principle of the church], pp. 14–15. Kuyper continued as follows: “The example of Rome tempted them but does not excuse them, and such inclusion of thousands upon thousands in the church who were alien to her spirit, who did not know what they were doing, was an abuse of trust, a toying with freedom of conscience, by which the church killed her own principle of liberty.”

dem with that, journalism. Since 1869 he had been writing for a small church weekly called *De Heraut* [The Herald]; now he became the leading light of a new daily newspaper, *De Standaard* [The Standard] which began publication on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1872.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he ran for the Lower House in 1871, and although he did not win, it was a harbinger of things to come.

Kuyper's candidacy was not entirely of his own making, nor was it entirely to his satisfaction. Groen van Prinsterer saw a political future in him about which he himself was ambivalent, for it meant that he would have to pivot away from his activity in the church. Van Toorenenbergen, echoing the Apostles' Creed, wrote to Groen of Kuyper's "descent into hell" – his characterization of Kuyper's proposed exchange of the ministry for politics.<sup>10</sup> Groen did not share this view – in fact, he put Kuyper forward as one of the three candidates he was endorsing in the elections of 1871.

Kuyper breathed a sigh of relief that his electoral loss staved off that fateful decision. But his daily opinionating in *De Standaard* allowed him to build a base from which to work in the political arena, something which, as we saw, Groen had tried and failed to accomplish. From this vantage point, Kuyper hammered away at the burning issues of the day, primarily public education and the condition of the national church. These were expressions of the basic issue at hand: the nature of the public sphere in general. Was it to be "neutral," secular, or was it to be confessionally Christian, even Reformed?

Here is where cracks began to surface between Groen's approach and Kuyper's. Ultimately, the discrepancy stemmed from a difference in attitude regarding the liberalism which was established by the constitution of 1848. When this new constitution was ratified, Groen's parliamentary career took off – not because of his advocacy of it, but because of his principled opposition. While most of the country rejoiced in the newfound freedoms it established, especially given that they had been gained through peaceful acquiescence rather than violent usurpation, Groen was more reticent. On the printed page as well as in parliamentary debate, his was a lone voice pointing out the shortcomings of an

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<sup>9</sup> Actually, *De Standaard* was a revitalized version of *De Heraut*; the latter was subsumed into it and became known as the "Zondagblad" or the Sunday supplement. In 1877 the Sunday supplement would be hived off and renamed *De Heraut*.

<sup>10</sup> Vree, *Kuyper in de kiem*, p. 71.