‘All major breakthroughs can be traced back to “poldering”’

Since September 2012, TU Delft alumnus Wiebe Draijer has been the president of the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands, a key advisory body of the government. The fact that he had to take a major cut in pay does not bother him. “It’s good to make a contribution to the public domain”.

Jos Wassink

Lecture Hall 2 in the Faculty of Mechanical, Maritime and Materials Engineering (MijnM) was packed full on Saturday 23 March. It was not filled with students, but with former students. It was the Alumni Day, and one of the speakers was the former student of mechanical engineering Wiebe Draijer (47). Since September 2012, he has been the president of the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER), the advisory body that saw its influence dwindle considerably under the Rutte I administration, but which is now once again a full-fledged partner in considering the impact of government plans.

He told his listeners about his career and his current work. “My career looks like an accumulation of coincidences. I wanted to be a journalist, but a journalist told me that I would be better off learning a trade. Then I started to think deductively. The mechanical engineering programme was the best option – and, by the way, my father had done the same thing”. [Laughter from the audience.]

When Draijer was 17 years old, he saw an advertisement for a technology editor in the NRC Handelsblad newspaper, and he went ahead and applied. “Someone in the newsroom thought: ‘This guy has guts. Let’s invite him’. I was hired. During the first two years of my programme, I was primarily focused on this side job. Then I had a class with the recently deceased professor Okko Bosgra. ‘That’s when the light came on. I was instantly hooked on control technology. Bosgra was at the forefront of an entirely new development in control technology. It was immensely inspiring’.

Draijer conducted his graduation project in Philips Natlab. It earned him two patent applications for C2 player components. “I had contributed something. That was gratifying, but I was sitting in a room alone, working from half past seven in the morning until half past ten in the evening. That wasn’t what I wanted”.

Draijer planned his next career move, but fate had something else in store for him. “I was determined to pursue a PhD in Sweden. I was already there, but my plans went awry because of the financing from the Netherlands”. Draijer did not throw in the towel. In 1990, he became an organisational consultant at McKinsey, where he managed several large-scale mergers and acquisitions, which he still does not wish to mention by name.

Solve social issues

Draijer climbed up the ladder, eventually becoming the director for the Benelux. Even then, he felt that he should be making a contribution to society. Twelve years ago, before this sense of duty would make him decide to assume the presidency of SER, he started the website 21minuten.nl. With this site, Draijer hoped to turn democracy ‘on its head’. “The idea was that anyone could solve major social issues. People are very good at making comprehensive assessments about difficult policy issues. But it’s hard to illustrate one thing very clearly: we have knowledge that others want and that we have apparently not utilised or marketed. I mean it. Our knowledge base is incredibly strong. Any failure to exploit it fully is due to a lack of will or support in the form of good policy”.

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As an example, Draijer referred to the barriers that companies in the Netherlands encounter when initiating sustainable projects. “It’s pathetic. Take Siemens, for example. After nine years, they finally received a permit for an offshore wind farm. By that time, the company had stopped manufacturing the turbines that were mentioned in the proposal. They had to start the entire application process all over again. Good policy could be...”

‘The dropout rate amongst boys is embarrassingly high. This is due to the feminisation of education’
of great benefit to us. The Netherlands has always been bold enough to reach beyond its own power. That has brought us a long way". After his lecture, alums had the opportunity to ask Draijer questions. One participant wanted to know what he thought would have to happen in order to increase the low value that is attached to technological education programmes and to remedy the worker shortage in the technological professions. The president of SER changed the subject without missing a beat. "The high-tech industry needs 80 thousand people, and we have a shortage of 50 thousand technicians. We should work to make it more attractive and to improve the connection with the labour market. We should bring education and employment closer together. At the same time, a silent disease has emerged and taken on epidemiological proportions. The dropout rate amongst boys is embarrassingly high. This is due to the feminisation of education. It’s not conforming to the image that the commercial economy will have people. We should bring education and entrepreneurship together.

Nevertheless, participation should not disappear completely; it serves an important function. We are in particular need of consistency in policy. This is difficult, however, given all of the changing of the guard in The Hague." After the lecture, the former students broke up and headed out onto the campus. Draijer grabbed a sandwich wrapped in cellophane, left over from the lunch that had been served earlier in the afternoon.

You said that we need more technologically oriented people. But many engineers are opting for occupations outside of technology. You did as well.

"Right. It took a while before my father accepted my switch to McKinsey. You shouldn’t have me pushing the buttons, but I will always remain close to the industry. For now, I’m happy to be in the public sector. In America, it’s very common for people from the private sector to work in the public sector for a few years. It’s extremely enriching. The people at SER are unusually motivated and confident in the economy of negotiation. They absolutely do not conform to the image that the commercial sector has of them. They work extremely hard."

How has your education benefited you?

"I work with eight economists to conduct an analysis of what is wrong with the Netherlands, and how we can solve it. I can make any substantive statements in this regard. As an alumnus of TU Delft, however, I maintain my position by asking logical questions and using my common sense. I can bring myself up to speed on topics very quickly."

If you had been able to complete your PhD, you would have been a professor by now. "Perhaps, but things turned out differently. Many of my choices arose because people gave me opportunities, like Professor Bosgra and the NRC Handelsblad editor. This pattern has repeated itself time and time again."

SER investigates how choices are made. Which lessons can we learn from this?

"We’re looking at students with immigrant parents in relation to the vocational trade economy. It’s fascinating to see how choices are made. In many cases, they seem to be motivated by parents, based on outdated information. Discussion about job opportunities is needed. Although we must obviously retain freedom of choice with regard to educational programmes, the motivation is often no deeper than a surfboard!"

How do you see today’s students?

"All students in Europe, those from the Netherlands are the least likely to go abroad. This is completely inconsistent with our status as a trading nation. If you ask them why they don’t go abroad, you learn that they’re very comfortable here. They need to get out into the world. My oldest son has just started a programme in mechanical engineering at a university of applied sciences. I think he needs to go abroad. We cannot maintain our prosperity without continuing to be an extremely open economy."

In the coming years, SER will be collaborating on major themes, including labour-market reform, housing, healthcare and sustainability. You’re coming at a good time. "I see a lot of opportunities. Our government is coming to us, and the trade unions are back at the negotiating table. We should stimulate this as much as possible; it’s a gratifying job. The major energy agreement that we’re working on offers a fresh perspective on a broadly supported plan for a sustainable Netherlands. Or look at the labour market. How can we arrange it to make work better? Doing that will involve considering more than just dismissal legislation. We should explore how we can offer people incentives without undermining their sense of security. This is less pertinent with younger generations. They are more likely to follow their own paths, and they know that permanent contracts for life are not the way of the future. We are also working to develop recommendations for healthcare with regard to prevention, employment in the healthcare sector and incentives for improvement. Unfortunately, I can’t say any more about this, as the negotiations are still underway."

That’s how it works in the polder.