

## Abraham Kuyper and the Continuing Social Question

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“It is our firm conviction that the Savior, if he were still on earth, would again align himself with the oppressed and against the powerful of our age.” Abraham Kuyper made this bold claim in his newspaper on the eve of the general elections of 1894. What was the issue that made him write this? Why did his fellow churchman and political ally of many years, Alexander de Savornin Lohman, feel compelled to write him that this statement had hurt him deeply?

The issue was whether to vote for or against extension of the franchise. Kuyper was for, Lohman against. Lohman (1845–1924) was a landowner, a jurist, and a member of parliament. Kuyper (1837–1920) was a university professor, a newspaper editor, and the chairman of the Antirevolutionary Party. The two men had fought side by side a decade earlier in the battle over church properties that secessionists claimed but that the national church held onto.

The question that now divided the friends had exercised the Dutch parliament off and on for decades and had intensified greatly in recent years. It all began when the liberal government introduced an electoral bill regulating eligibility for the right to vote. Its sponsor, Tak van Poortvliet, presented it as the definitive solution to a thorny question that should once for all be put to rest. His proposal interpreted the relevant constitutional provision with the greatest possible latitude. Whereas the constitution spoke in general terms of giving the vote to “all who possess the marks of capability and prosperity,” Tak’s bill translated this requirement into “all who are able to provide for themselves and their household,” with a last-minute rider: “and who submit a hand-written application to be enumerated for the voters list.” The idea was that only illiterates and those on

poor relief would be excluded from the right to vote. If the bill passed, it would probably enfranchise 75 percent of all adult males.

Lohman and nine other members of parliament, all belonging to Kuyper's Antirevolutionary Party, considered the bill internally inconsistent because it still included, albeit indirectly, a literacy test. Although they were content that the right to vote was not linked to an amount of taxes paid, as under the old census system, yet they still had one major, overriding objection: the bill stretched the constitution too far. It was, therefore, unconstitutional, and they would not support it.

Kuyper, on the other hand, welcomed the bill as sufficiently compatible with the long-held antirevolutionary preference for giving the vote to all "heads of households." This was a golden opportunity to gain seats in parliament for the lower and middle classes, including the core of his constituency, the *kleine luyden*. These "little folk"—tradesmen, shopkeepers, and farmers, whom he had come to know during his earlier career as a pastor—deserved to be heard in the body that debated the laws of the land. For twenty-five years, he had pleaded that parliament become more democratic in its representation. As for scruples against violating the constitution, he was inclined to interpret them, so he wrote in a bitter mood, as purely inspired by arch-conservatism aimed at torpedoing Tak's bill and opposing franchise expansion indefinitely, if not forever.

This difference in appraisal marked a growing rift, not only between Lohman and Kuyper, but also all along the ranks of the antirevolutionaries. The Christian Social Congress of 1891 had eased tensions between the left wing and the right wing of the party, but the franchise question revived the rift in all its fury.

Lohman and his right-wing allies argued that the right to vote had to be *earned*. Directly contradicting Kuyper's call in 1891 for an "architectonic critique" of existing society, they stated that responsibility for the widespread poverty in rapidly industrializing Holland lay not so much with the structures of society as with sin and ignorance on the part of the disadvantaged. Moreover, the logical outcome of Tak's bill, they argued not incorrectly, could over time only lead to *universal* suffrage, a development that they feared would only foster an increase in demand by the lower classes for the material goods of this world.

Unexpectedly, the issue would be fought out in an election campaign. When an amendment to Tak's bill passed the lower house, the bill was withdrawn, the government leader resigned, the House was dissolved, and new elections were called. The ensuing campaign witnessed what was for Dutch politics a most unusual alignment of political forces, splitting each of the existing political parties, Christian and secular alike. On one side were the Takkians, consisting of progressive liberals, left-wing Calvinist antirevolutionaries, democratic socialists, and a few Catholics; on the other side were the anti-Takkians, consisting

of conservatives, right-wing liberals, conservative antirevolutionaries, and most Catholics.

The Antirevolutionary Party hastily organized a preelection rally. In advance of that event, Lohman and his friends sent a missive to every antirevolutionary voters' club in the land stating that no antirevolutionary could in good conscience promote Tak's plans and to vote for an anti-Takkian would be the right thing to do.

Party chairman Kuyper could not let this pass. He called the missive a "fatal manifesto" and stated openly that perhaps the time had come for the right and left wings of the party to go their separate ways.

Two hundred deputies from voters' clubs across the country, plus eight hundred others, attended the party rally. They debated a resolution stating that the central issue of the campaign was the struggle between, on the one hand, "conservatives of every stripe," and on the other, the champions of "the people behind the voters." Lohman protested from the floor, but Kuyper won the day: the resolution passed by an overwhelming vote.

Lohman's group now formed a loose consortium of "Free Antirevolutionaries." They went on to win eight seats in the election. Kuyper's group won only seven seats, but its leader was unrepentant. The split in the party had become necessary, he wrote after some weeks. The battle is indeed against parliamentary "conservatism of every stripe." Of the twenty members that sit for Kuyper's group in the house, he pointed out, only nine are commoners. The other eleven are men of noble birth, landed gentry, millionaires all, who do not understand the real needs of the common people—the "people behind the voters" whose socioeconomic condition cries out to heaven. The eminent men are welcome to occupy the main floor of the party as long as they do not disturb the house rules. Furthermore, those rules dictate that antirevolutionaries are, and always have been, *Christian* democrats on principle and *Christian democrats* at heart. They, therefore, cannot but support proposals to broaden the franchise. It is high time that parliament becomes more representative and teaches government that it must protect the poor and vulnerable in society.

Lohman meanwhile informed Kuyper that his statement about whose side the Savior would be on had "irritated and aggrieved" him deeply. Thereupon, Kuyper set forth what that statement was based on. It was based on the indisputable evidence from Scripture, he maintained, that Jesus invariably sided with the poor and vulnerable in society. The Christian gospel is a double-edged sword: While it condemns the "socialistic inclinations" of the poor, it also condemns the "capitalistic tendencies" of the rich.

Kuyper's response was published in a series of ten articles that appeared from June 18 to July 9, 1894, in his newspaper *De Standaard*. By popular request, it

was brought out in book form the following year. The text, though marked by the limits and concepts of its time, shows Kuyper at his best in a combination of his roles as masterful religious educator and tribune of the disadvantaged and disenfranchised. While he apologizes in the final article for the strident tone of some of his writings during the election campaign, he takes nothing back from his main contention that the “little folk” Jesus associated with during his sojourn on earth may be equated with the oppressed *kleine luyden* and the Christian workingmen of his own day. Strongly contextual, his message nevertheless has universal meaning and sounds uncannily relevant in the twenty-first century.

Shortly after finishing his series on “Christ and the Needy” in the summer of 1894, Kuyper fell ill with pneumonia. Not until January of the following year was he well enough to resume work—“under half steam,” as he announced.

His first editorial in *De Standaard* after his convalescence was a lengthy *peccavi*. Kuyper explained that while on his sickbed he had come to see that his writings during the election fever had been too bitter in tone, “especially against those brothers who share our religious starting point.” His spirit had been too militant and not conciliatory enough. On further reflection, he had learned to see merit in the position he had fulminated against, and he now realized that he had been too hasty in condemning it so harshly.

To be sure, he continued, his defense of franchise reform still stood. Democracy was the wave of the future. It could not be stemmed, but it could be guided into safer channels if more antirevolutionaries sat in parliament. He was right in the franchise question last year, he insisted, but not sufficiently on guard against mixing false and true democracy. Our state is a constitutional monarchy, not a democracy. However, our parliament needs to become more democratic by becoming more widely representative. Whoever studies the social conditions among the working classes will agree that they need their own voice in the national assembly. That is why he, Kuyper, could not but favor the now defeated electoral bill last year. Only thus could Kuyper and his followers remain true Christian democrats. Government is called to protect *all* its citizens but especially the most vulnerable among them. The franchise simply must be extended to include as many citizens as possible and not just the higher taxpayers.

Of course, he now recognizes, Kuyper went on, that his writing was one-sided. There is a distinct shadow side to democracy. Everyone has to be on guard against a kind of mob-rule that would reduce parliament to a clearinghouse for material demands—always more material demands. That side of the coin also needs to be shown, and Kuyper now proposed to do so in a new series of articles under the title “Democratic Shoals.”

In this new series, which ran in nine installments that winter, Kuyper elaborated on the dark side of democracy. Further democratization, he set forth, hides six shoals on which the ship of parliament might founder.

First, it could encourage the false notion of popular sovereignty. The slogan “power to the people” is not wrong, provided *people* does not stand for the lower classes alone but *the nation as a whole*, and provided *power* does not mean the ability to wield governing authority but the ability to check government, and if need be to correct it and force it to abandon unjust measures by means of not approving its budgets. However, the people’s representatives must never try to occupy the seats of government. The duality between government and parliament—between ministers of the crown and representatives of the people—is the safeguard against false democracy. Antirevolutionaries are for government *by* the people (through elected representatives) and *for* the people (through fair legislation), but not *of* the people.

Second, it might make politics serviceable to material interests by having the government focus on providing “bread and games,” as in ancient Rome. Antirevolutionaries have to guard against the danger of government’s exhausting its role in paying almost exclusive attention to the material aspects of life. That would be destructive of the spiritual aspects of life and would lower our nation to the level of a materialistic society.

Third, greater democracy might fan the flames of class antagonism and pit the upper and middle classes against the lower class and install a tyranny of the majority.

Fourth, democratization might play into the hands of demagogues and open up political debate to incivility. Greater democracy—especially if the social democrats vote shop floor stewards and union bosses into parliament—runs the danger of eroding respectful manners, moderation in speech, self-respect, and honor among parliamentarians. The lower house of parliament might become the scene of shouting matches, insults, invectives, even—look at Belgium, France, and America—duels and gun fights! Today, courtesy and quiet modesty prevail, even during serious debates between political opponents. If that is lost, well-mannered, cultured people in the land will refuse to run for parliament, to our detriment.

Fifth, it might facilitate the “domination of the absolute word.” By this, Kuyper meant what we call “sloganeering.” Democracy degenerates when solutions to the most intricate political problems are reduced to catchy slogans bereft of all nuance and realism.

Sixth, a more democratic parliament could create a competitive atmosphere in which class self-interest set the tone. A healthy democracy, by contrast, balances the rights and needs of all classes.



Status Quaestionis

At the end of this second series of articles, Kuiper believed he had presented a balanced view of the need for democracy but also of the shoals on which it could founder. Both series of articles, “Christ and the Needy” and “Democratic Shoals” were published together in one slim volume. In the preface, the author replied to a pamphlet written against his first series; citing a few examples, he argued that the pamphlet’s exegesis of the relevant Bible texts was a dismal failure. The publication did not have the desired effect of luring the Free Antirevolutionaries back into the fold, but its dual message guided Kuiperians for decades to come.