The Netherlands' new science minister

Perfect? Or "Pearls before Swine"?

Has another creative, successful scientist been lost from the scientific stage? The RNA specialist Ronald Plasterk recently became Minister of Education, Culture and Science in The Netherlands.

Did he ever dream of being appointed Minister in a Dutch cabinet? Most probably not. But in February Ronald Hans Anton Plasterk was sworn in by Queen Beatrix. He is now Minister of Education, Culture & Science in the country's new coalition government.

Plasterk, born in The Hague on 12 April 1957, studied economics, but only for a short time. He then switched to biology and in 1984 was awarded a doctorate from the University of Leiden for his thesis about the G segment of the bacteriophage Mu. This was at a time when analysis of a single gene was more than enough to get a PhD. Now we're living in a world of massive parallel, large scale, high throughput biology. And Plasterk is – or was – right in the middle of it. Just recently he published the identification of microRNAs in human and chimpanzee brains by massive parallel sequencing.

As a highly productive scientist...

How did he get from Mu to microRNAs? Having worked with transposons in nematodes he suggested that there must be a system, which prevents transposons from hacking the whole genome. In 1993 he read a publication showing that transposons don't jump in gametes. From that he deduced that those cells must somehow be protected. So he began looking for mutants with gametes that allow transposon jumping. Some were indeed found and he named them mutators. About the same time Andrew Fire and Craig Mello discovered the role of RNAi molecules. It turned out that the mutator nematodes had a defect in the control of RNA interference. That's how Plasterk entered the RNAi business.

Plasterk is – or was? – a highly productive scientist. If you search the PubMed library for his name you will find 22 publications from January 2006 to date – most of them in high ranking journals like *Cell* or *Nature*. Thus, he is one of The Netherlands' most highly-cited researchers.

However, Plasterk is not only an excellent scientist but has also been politically engaged for quite some time. Since his days at the University of Leiden he has been a member of the Dutch centre-left Labour party "Partij van de Arbeit" (PvdA). When the lively debates around stem cell research started, Plasterk was asked for his comments. That was his start as a columnist in the *De Volkskrant* newspaper. This was followed by short performances every other week on *Buitenhof*, a TV-show. Having acquired a taste for writing and talking he switched from stem cells to other topics, until there was no political issue that he hadn't put to the test. He heavily criticised the quality of education and science funding in his country. He castigated George W. Bush and the war in Iraq. He is very sceptical of the British Prime Minister Tony Blair but seems to have a soft spot for the German Chancellor – and physicist – Angela Merkel. He talked about Islamic fundamentalism and immigration, and has condemned the European Constitution. He confessed to having voted "no" in the referendum on the Constitution because he doesn't want foreign politicians, who haven't been elected by Dutch people, to be in the driver's seat in The Netherlands.

... Plasterk hates to give up research,...

Prior to the elections, Plasterk agreed to co-write a PvdA election programme. So it didn't exactly come as a surprise when he teamed up with the new government as a minister. The elections created a coalition of three Dutch political parties, the Christian Democrats (CDA), the Labour Party (PvdA) and the Christian Union (CU). Being an outspoken atheist, Plasterk's appointment has already led to some pointed discussions with devout Catholic and Protestant politicians in the coalition.

He has already had a few clashes with one of the current ministers. An outspoken Darwinist, Plasterk strongly opposed

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Maria van der Hoeven's proposals that intelligent design be taught in Dutch public schools. She was Plasterk's predecessor as Science Minister. Plasterk's attacks also appear to have challenged her suitability for that chair: she is now Minister for Economic Affairs! Meanwhile, Plasterk seems to have settled into his new position. He started by campaigning for equality for women in the working environment. Being responsible for the education sector, he pledged to halve the gap in salaries between male and female national government employees within four years. He wants two per cent more women to be working each year. Since women currently occupy a mere 12 per cent of managerial positions in business, the minister would like to see this figure increase to 25 per cent by 2010.

When he was still a full-time scientist, Plasterk co-signed an appeal to the Finance Minister to fund excellent research by investing an additional one billion euros. By any measure, his new role undoubtedly demands more diplomacy than in his role as columnist. Yes-or-no answers are more useful in science than politics, a lesson that he has yet to learn if this job is to be more than just a short adventure. Only time will tell if he is gifted in the art of negotiation.

... but maybe he is...

Of course, Plasterk has had to cease his scientific work as director of the Hubrecht Laboratory/Netherlands Institute for Developmental Biology in Utrecht. Being a Minister isn't a part time job. In an interview with *Nature* he admitted that he hated having to give up research but maintained that research wouldn't suffer. Do you believe that? Sure, others will take care of Plasterk's colleagues. But removing an excellent researcher from research may turn out to be like casting pearls before swine.

... the perfect choice.

On the other hand, maybe a researcher is the perfect person for that particular job. Many reforms of the educational system have taken place in the last 25 years, often initiated by the PvdA. They were introduced with good intentions but have never been tested empirically. So it's no wonder that some of them weren't successful. It's no secret that the educational field of politics presents an uphill struggle. The weapons are not experimentally proven figures and methods but politically-shaped convictions and attitudes. Let's hope Plasterk will remain a critical investigator rather than become another passionate socialist reformer. Ronald, go in and win! Good luck!

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