

Kidney specialist a politician at heart

By Loek Kusiak

He's a senator for the Christian Democrats (CDA) and a former local councillor.

The political domain is expanding his horizons, and this is no bad thing: because internist Karel Leunissen – professor of Internal Medicine at Maastricht University and head of the Nephrology Department at the Maastricht academic hospital (azM) – is terrified of compartmentalisation.

Whether it's on the representative body of his children's primary school, as a board member of the azM's Programme Committee, or even as chair of the Dutch Federation of Nephrology (the field that deals with kidney functioning), "I've always enjoyed management", says Leunissen (Heerlen, 1954). So it's only logical, in his view, that at some point the political domain came calling as well. And it's since become a passion that, alongside his work as a doctor, he just can't do without. "Working exclusively as a specialist in a micro-organisation just isn't something that I could keep up", he says. "It leads to compartmentalisation, to tunnel vision. As a scientist, you have to strive to for well-roundedness, for the Humboldt educational ideal."

He was already a loyal voter for the party, but in 2000 Leunissen also became a member of the CDA. Prominent fellow party members, like René van der Linden and Léon Frissen – who also happened to be friends of his – persuaded Leunissen to become genuinely politically active. They convinced him to stand as a CDA candidate in the 2002 municipal council elections, and before he knew it he was a councillor in Eijsden.

"Going in to bat for your town is a really great thing. I was involved with all sorts of things: tourism, spatial planning, education. I was able to have the primary school moved – it had been located right near a

dangerous intersection – and in its new incarnation become a community school. The party also called for investment in a ferry over the Maas to Belgium, which has become a big success, and for upgrading of the shopping centre. Debates and decisions in local politics are often driven by emotion. But my administrative experience helped me do away with that."

Experts

Leunissen also became active in the everyday administration of the CDA's Limburg branch. In 2007, at the request of his party, he ran as a candidate for the Limburg provincial council, and was later elected to the Senate.

"The Senate assesses proposals for new legislation by the government and the House of Representatives", he explains. "So it has direct influence on developments in society, even though it has no right of interpellation. Thanks to my membership in the Senate, I'm actually able to make a difference in affairs relating to the province and the Limburg councils. I still have intensive contact with the provincial councillors."

The senators meet once a week, usually alongside full-time management positions elsewhere. Leunissen: "They're experts who are highly active in society, such as the senator who's a retired army general; I talk with him about the war in Iraq. This mix of people and experiences is what makes the Senate work so fascinat-



Karel Leunissen

ing. We assess laws on their thoroughness, not exclusively along political lines. And we remove things from legislation that would be disastrous if it went through directly, without our intervention."

Patient database

Leunissen's broad interests are apparent from his varied portfolio: public health, scientific policy, immigration and asylum policy, housing and neighbourhoods. Can he really also exert influence on ministerial policy?

"I'm certainly trying, and to that end I'm also looking for supporters. We were able to deter the health minister, Ab Klink, from his plan to set up an electronic patient database to be implemented nationwide. As senators we didn't think that people's privacy would be sufficiently guaranteed. I also prevented Klink from wanting to upgrade hospitals by allowing them to carry out academic activities. I'm in favour of specialised hospitals: only do things that you're really good and experienced at."

Another topic in the Senate was the new measures by the Health Care Inspectorate for enforcing rules in hospitals. "Thanks to my efforts, the administrative penalties that they had in store for specialists – which were really quite repressive – have largely been removed. And I had some fierce debates on education with Minister Plasterk, who wanted to make second

master's degrees more expensive. Because by doing that he'd be setting up a roadblock for the ambitions of talented students."

That the minister and the profession of medical specialists are "diametrically opposed" is something that Leunissen regrets. "The media tends to focus only on doctors' salaries. Specialists have to engage in debate on the future setup and quality of care in order to draw attention."

Tough times

When it comes to the discussion on the overhaul of senior party members that broke out after the CDA's electoral defeat last summer, Leunissen appears to be pleased: "It was sorely needed, because we're too much of a managers' party and not enough of a people's party. I also think that politicians should get out and about among the people more often, not just right before the elections. You have to be accountable at all times, even when you're just walking around the local fair." On the weekends, Leunissen reads Senate papers. On Monday evenings he hops on the train to The Hague and spends the night in a hotel. "Tuesday is the Senate's regular meeting day. Wednesday morning at 8am I'm back in the hospital. So yes, these are tough times. I've given up half my holidays. But at least I'll have time soon to go and see the musical *Petticoat* – friends invited me."