



HOUTMAN
ABROLHOS

BATAVIA

HANDOUT



THE DEAD END OF DICTATORSHIP: THE *BATAVIA*

Societies need foundational rules. This is true for survivors of shipwrecks and true for entire nations. Many foundational rules of a country are spelled out in its constitution. In some but not all countries, the constitution is a written document or collection of documents that form its highest laws.

Most constitutions spell out a process for choosing governments and leaders. They also spell out the basic rules for governing, such as how long a government can be in place and how to choose new governments. These rules cannot be changed easily.

As well, a liberal democracy—the type of democracy we have in Canada—will have a constitution that spreads power around. No single person or institution will have all the power. For example, Canada’s federal laws have to pass votes in both the Senate and the House of Commons. The laws must then be signed by the Governor General to take effect. And the courts have the power to interpret and review laws. Each institution acts as a check-and-balance on the other institutions. Ideally, such processes mean that our system of rule embraces thoughtfulness and compromise.

To understand why it is better to have formal processes to select and replace leaders, why it is better to spread power around, and why it is never a good idea to let too much power reside in one person, let’s consider the 1629 wreck of the *Batavia*. In this wreck, one man emerged with all the power. He used it to create a reign of terror.

POWER STRUGGLE AND CHAOS: THE *BATAVIA*

The *Batavia* was owned by the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Filled with gold, silver, and building supplies, it set sail from Holland on October 29th, 1628. The ship was part of a VOC fleet en route to the Dutch colony of Batavia, now called Jakarta. On board were 341 people: about 200 VOC sailors and officers, 100 or so soldiers, and a handful of private individuals moving to the colony.

The VOC official in command of the ship, the Upper Merchant, was Francisco Pelsaert. Pelsaert had been working his way up the VOC hierarchy for several years. The second in command, the Lower Merchant, was Jeronimus Cornelisz. He was well-educated but new to the sea. Cornelisz applied for work with VOC when his apothecary shop failed. VOC hired him because an apothecary’s knowledge of spices would be useful to the company. The ship was skippered by Ariaen Jacobsz, a seasoned sailor.

During a stop in Table Bay, South Africa, Jacobsz made a drunken fool of himself. This enraged Pelsaert. It was not the first time that the two had locked horns, and Pelsaert finally had enough of the skipper. He threatened to write him up when they reached the colony. Such a disciplinary action probably meant the end of Jacobsz’s sailing career.

Meanwhile, Cornelisz—penniless and with no loyalty to the company—started to think about stealing the ship’s wealth. Cornelisz had no problem getting Jacobsz on board with the idea of a mutiny. After all, if Pelsaert remained in charge, the skipper’s sailing career would likely be over once they arrived in Batavia.

The two devised a plan to kill Pelseart, throw unwilling passengers and crew overboard, take ownership of the gold and silver on board the ship, and sail off to a new, wealthy life. Because most of the crew were poor, it was not difficult for Cornelisz and Jacobsz to recruit key men into their mutiny plan.

To put the plan into action, the skipper steered the ship slightly off course. This way it would no longer be with the VOC fleet. Such a move would not arouse suspicion, because it was common for fleets to separate for days or weeks on end.

Unfortunately, Jacobsz steered the ship a little too off-course. On the night of June 4th, 1629, while the mutineers waited for the right moment to carry out their plans, the *Batavia* hit a coral reef on the Houtman Abrolhos, a chain of small islands about 80 kilometres west of the Australian coast.

The first hours were pandemonium. There was no strong leadership from Pelsaert and there was no sense of mutual responsibility amongst the passengers and crew. Survivors and supplies were haphazardly ferried to a nearby island. Pelsaert insisted a treasure chest be brought up to the ship's deck to be saved as well. The presence of treasure contributed to the chaos, as men tried to break the chest open to rob it. Meanwhile, the nearby island where people were being landed turned disorderly. The castaways were drinking and eating the rations as fast as they could.

Ultimately, 40 people died in these chaotic first hours.

With daybreak, Jacobsz realized he had steered his ship into the Houtman Abrolhos. When a search of the island chain for fresh water came up dry, Pelseart and Jacobsz assembled a crew of about 40 senior crew members and set off for Australia to continue the search. After several unsuccessful days working their way up the rocky Australian coast, they determined that their best course of action would be to continue to the colony. Returning to islands with no fresh water and dwindling supplies meant certain death for everyone. It made more sense to get to Batavia and send out a VOC rescue ship.

Back on the Houtman Abrolhos, the castaways had a flimsy leadership structure. The VOC had rules in place for setting up governing councils in the event of a shipwreck, but the senior officers were on the longboat. That all changed the morning that Under Merchant Cornelisz washed ashore.

That Cornelisz washed ashore was nothing short of a miracle. When the *Batavia* wrecked, almost everyone was ferried to nearby islands. However, a handful of men stayed on the damaged ship. There they drank, ate, and lived a life of general anarchy. When the ship finally broke apart and fell into the sea, most of the stragglers drowned. Jeronimus Cornelisz, however, clung to a piece of wreckage for days, eventually making land.

Cornelisz was elected as head of a council, in accordance with VOC rules. As the second-in-charge of the *Batavia*, he was the natural choice to lead the leaderless castaways. Cornelisz created a headquarters in a Grand Tent. The tent was a storehouse for the wreck's salvaged riches and arms. It also functioned as his home, containing the only bed on the island.

As ruler, Cornelisz preached a libertine doctrine. He claimed that god was good and would not create devils. Therefore, the men should not worry about moral consequences of doing evil because all actions—good or bad—were god's will.

This lacking morality bled into Cornelisz' updated mutiny plans. Assuming that a rescue ship would be coming, he hatched a scheme to take over the ship, load it with the salvaged wealth from the *Batavia*, then go pirating across the seas. He and the mutineers would either retire rich or perhaps even create a new kingdom.

For the new mutiny plan to work, Cornelisz estimated that he needed to cull the island's population to about 45 loyalists. Reducing the island's population would also ensure that the rations lasted longer.

When a man was caught stealing wine, Cornelisz seized on the moment to start the cull. He ruled that the man, along with a friend to whom he had given some of the wine, should be executed. The council

pushed back, saying the punishment was too harsh. VOC rules stated that death sentences could only be handed out by a vote of the council, and the council refused to vote in favour of executing the thief's friend. They believed he was an unwitting accomplice.

In response, Cornelisz used his status as most senior person to dismiss the entire council, also in accordance with VOC rules. He then surrounded himself with a new leadership council, exclusively of loyal mutineers.

To cement his rule, Cornelisz made the mutineers, including the members of the new council, sign a secret oath. This "Oath of Trust" was a secret agreement to be followed by the mutineers. The signatories swore their loyalty and allegiance to Cornelisz, giving him power to rule as he saw fit.

With the signing of the secret oath, Cornelisz now had full control. He next set about separating the survivors into groups. Each group was sent to live on a nearby island, with a promise that they would be brought supplies as needed. He justified this move by saying that being spread out would increase their chances of survival. However, it was all part of his plan to cull the island's population. He believed the surrounding islands had no natural resources, so by not sending supplies, the exiles would starve to death.

Meanwhile, the mutineers began killing the main island's remaining castaways. Murder became a rite of passage to prove loyalty to Cornelisz. For many castaways, the choice was to prove loyalty to the mutineers by committing a murder, or be killed themselves. At the same time, most of the women on the island became sex slaves.

People on the nearby islands soon grew suspicious when supplies never came. However, their situation was not as desperate as Cornelisz had hoped. The initial checks of the surrounding islands were done poorly. Many surrounding islands had food and water sources, and even the occasional item from the wreck would wash up on shore.

When Cornelisz realized that the exiles weren't dying off, he sent teams to the outlying islands to murder them. His missions were not entirely successful, leaving handfuls of survivors. The survivors, along with castaways who abandoned the main island, all found their way to a larger island. Some got there by building makeshift rafts. Others simply paddled across the waters while hanging onto pieces of wood. And one surgeon made it to the larger island by stealing a longboat from Cornelisz' men.

On this larger island, a rival group of almost 50 men formed under the leadership of a soldier named Wiebbe Hayes. The rival group found plenty of



Remnants of a stone fort created by Wiebbe Hayes and his island defenders.

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fresh water in a natural well along with animals to eat. Because they expected Cornelisz' mutineers to invade, they created a defence plan. They built fortifications, and armed themselves with sticks, stones, and washed up items from the *Batavia*.

As expected, Cornelisz ordered invasions of the larger island. His goal was to either kill the men or bring them onside. The first two invasions proved unsuccessful: many men on the larger island were soldiers, well-trained and well-prepared for the fights. In a third mission to the island, the rivals managed to kidnap Cornelisz.

After several days of considering what to do, on September 17th the mutineers launched a fourth attack to rescue Cornelisz.

In an almost storybook-like coincidence, during the heat of the fourth battle, a VOC rescue ship appeared on the horizon. Upper Merchant Pelsaert had

returned. The warring sides both dropped everything and raced in boats to reach the rescuers. Cornelisz' mutineers hoped to overthrow the rescue ship, Hayes' rivals hoped to warn the rescuers of danger.

Hayes' men reached the rescuers first.

When Pelsaert learned of the horrors that had unfolded, he locked up the mutineers. Then, in accordance with Dutch law and VOC policy, he held trials on the islands for the accused. With plenty of witnesses and a mutiny agreement discovered in Cornelisz' tent—signed by 37 men—it was not difficult to ascertain guilt.

Several mutineers were executed on the island, including Cornelisz. Others were taken back to Batavia for their fates to be decided by the colony governor. In an interesting historical footnote, two convicted mutineers were banished to the Australian



Replica of the *Batavia*, the flagship of the VOC fleet.

Photo Credit: Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

mainland. They became Australia's first two European settlers, never heard from again.

In the end, about 120 people were killed by the mutineers. Add in the 40 deaths from the ship running aground, the 20 or so people who died of illness either on the islands or during the voyage, and the death sentences handed out in the trials, there were only about 120 survivors of the *Batavia*. Today, it is often referred to as history's bloodiest mutiny.

WHY PROCESS AND POWER-SHARING MATTERS

When Pelseart and the skipper left on the longboat—carrying with them almost all the senior VOC officers—the castaways were left without a strong team of leaders who held some power and sway.

The power vacuum created by the VOC leadership created an opportunity for Cornelisz. As the only senior VOC official left, he manipulated the few rules to his advantage, stacked the council with loyal mutineers, and took absolute control.

Cornelisz, in other words, was a dictator. Ruthless and unchecked, he controlled the castaway's resources and the castaway's destiny. There was no means to vote Cornelisz out of power when he needed to be stopped. The only possible way to stop him was violence and war.

The wreck of the *Batavia* can help us understand the importance of having a process to choose and replace leaders. It can also help us understand the risks of letting too much power reside in the hands of too few people.

DISCUSS

1. The mutineers' Oath of Trust placed all their loyalty in Cornelisz. The overriding concern of this small clique was their own self-interest.
 - a) Can a society succeed if people with power are only loyal to themselves?
 - a) What can happen if a society ignores the well-being of its members as a whole?
2. In a fit of anger, Cornelisz tore up the original Oath of Trust so he could purge people he believed to be disloyal.
 - a) What does this tell us about the dangers of putting absolute power in the hands of one person?
 - b) What would happen if we simply let our leaders tear up our laws and rules—such as our constitution—at their pleasure?
3. Could the tragedy of the *Batavia* been averted if Pelseart had set up a strong leadership structure for the castaways before setting off in search of water? Why do we need to ensure decent people are in leadership positions?
4. In the end, the VOC held Upper Merchant Pelseart and skipper Jacobsz partly responsible for the disaster that unfolded after the *Batavia* wrecked. Do you agree with the VOC? Why or why not?