Twitter Thread by ■■■ Ming Ong



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Very important long-read (only available in Dutch) in yesterday's Volkskrant, revealing the extent to which the Dutch Cabinet and the OMT (Outbreak Management Team), an ostensibly independent scientific advisory body, have grown entangled.
Some key points:

> OMT-leden hadden zoveel moeite met de politieke druk dat ze overwogen op te stappen. Het grote artikel staat in de volgende tweets. (1/3)
> Zonder betaalmuur: https://t.co/JDvJHz92b8https://t.co/hF0PWPVLFb
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> — Pim Joosten (@pimjoosten) January 23, 2021

1/ As early as March of last year OMT-members were uncomfortable with the way then PM Rutte blurred the lines between policy steeped in political considerations, and scientific advise in his March 16 speech, discursively rendering the OMT responsible for political decisions.

2/ OMT-member Alex Friedrich, an early advocate for large-scale testing and masks, describes how dissent was not tolerated, especially after the Dutch gov't declared all OMT-advise as "practically holy," and says that politicians were using the OMT as "a heat-shield."

3/ He further tells of how international scientific consensus (masks, the role of children in transmission, presymptomatic infectiousness) was still up for debate in the Netherlands, all through the summer of 2020.

Friedrich: "Positions taken earlier were defended, instead of welcoming new ones [insights]." One of the worst things that can happen to a scientist, he says, "[is] that people start saying you're not a team player if you don't share the same position [on advice/insights etc]."

5/ Things got so bad Friedrich even considered resigning from his role as OMT-member "three of four times."

6/ OMT-member Anja Schreijer, affiliated w/ the Dutch Public Health Services (GGD), indicates that she saw case numbers take a turn for the worse over the summer signaling that the regional strategy the Dutch opted for was not working. However,

7/ she wasn't able to find anyone that would actually listen. She concludes that the Dutch strategy had devolved into a "polder-swamp," where everyone was talking things through with everyone (in order to reach consensus). By early August case numbers were on the rise,

8/ so much so that the GGD had to start scaling down on testing and tracing as it wasn't able to keep up with the steady increase of new infections.

9/ The very fixed, rigid nature of OMT-meeting agendas, drawn up the Dutch CDC (RIVM) seems to have hampered the OMT's ability to swiftly respond to new developments. OMT-member Kluytmans concedes that group/meeting dynamics may have smth do w/ September not seeing a lockdown

Early September, Marianne Koopmans wanted to convene weekly, as the OMT could only come together if and when the RIVM called a meeting. The OMT only convened twice in September, when the virus was already making serious headway towards the second wave.

11/ Even more worrying: RIVM-director Jaap van Dissel's presence at Cabinet meetings at the Cathuys became an increasingly obvious point of concern for other OMT-members, fearing that his double-timing might impact the independence of the OMT as a whole.

12/ Those concerns were confirmed when on September 28th van Dissel presents a set of measures drawn up by the Cabinet in consultation with van Dissel, sidelining the OMT, even leading some of them to (anonimously) vent their frustrations in national newspaper De Volkskrant.

13/ Prior to the OMT-meeting of October 12th then PM Rutte informed RIVM director van Dissel that the Cabinet was not planning on closing schools.

14/ In response, van Dissel organized a pre-OMT-meeting to relay the prime minister's message: Dutch schools will not be closed.

15/ During that same pre-OMt-meeting, Kluytmans intervenes, saying: "Listen Jaap [van Dissel], I understand you're there at the Catshuis [Cabinet meeting], but you need to take a step back. Right now you're here, not there."