

Gijs Vonk, champion of the most vulnerable in society, knighted

Gijsbert Vonk (1960, Sittard), Professor of Social Security Law at the Faculty of Law of the University of Groningen, received a Royal Decoration from Mayor K. Smid of the municipality of Noordenveld at his home in Steenbergen. Professor Vonk will be appointed Knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau.

An excellent academic, a real networker, very socially involved and above all a kind and sympathetic man with a sense of humour. A frontrunner in the field of social security law, which provides a vital safety net for the most vulnerable in society. Wherever Gijs Vonk worked, within and outside of academia, he is recognized as an academic who was fully committed to championing the interests of society's most vulnerable, such as the homeless, the sick, migrants, refugees, people on social assistance, and the long-term unemployed. Social protection is the leitmotif of his career. Expertly and enthusiastically, he will inspire those around him to join him in the conviction that a social welfare state should strive for a dignified existence for all: a message that is not obvious in a society showing increasing signs of fragmentation and individualization.

Legal conscience

Vonk read Law in Amsterdam and London, after which he obtained his PhD in European Social Law at Tilburg University in 1990. He became Head of Legal Affairs in Amstelveen at the Social Insurance Bank (SVB) in 1990, a role he combined with his work as Professor by Special Appointment of Social Security Law at VU University Amsterdam. At the SVB he was known as the legal conscience of the organization and he made great strides to make policymaking more transparent. He has done tremendous work on the legal legitimacy cycle, paying particular attention to publishing the policy rules on the laws and regulations that the SVB implements.

Subject matter expert

In 2006 he was appointed Professor of Social Security Law full-time at the Faculty of Law at the University of Groningen. As a subject matter expert, he wrote many influential academic contributions and published in numerous journals, both within and outside the legal world. His multidisciplinary interest is evident from his concern for social issues, such as the Dutch childcare benefits scandal, welfare fraud and poverty. Students praise him as a teacher and mentor, and value how he imparts his knowledge and passion to them. He is internationally regarded as an authority in the field of comparative European social security law.

Deep-rooted sense of justice

Vonk has always demonstrated a deep-rooted sense of justice. For example, in his publications he repeatedly points to the risk that the human dimension was in danger of being lost from social security. He is acutely aware of the impact of legislation on the daily lives of vulnerable people and had already warned in 2014 that they were increasingly being confronted with stricter obligations and heavier sanctions. Even then, he was urging judges to act as a counterweight by protecting the vulnerable in our society and guarding the core values of the welfare state. The predictive value of his analysis has now been painfully confirmed by the childcare benefits scandal.

Selfless commitment to the homeless and welfare benefits recipients

Vonk frequently gives of himself selflessly to others, including the homeless and those receiving social assistance. For example, he supported the preparation of a complaint against the Dutch authorities about the compliance of municipalities with their duty to shelter homeless people. He also acts as counsel for welfare recipients who got into trouble due to the strict sanctions policies. He recently participated in the Cross-Border Welfare State project, an investigation into the tension between immigration, social security, and integration.

Valued as a networker and scientist

The appreciation felt for how Vonk has practiced his profession is also evident from his nomination for the Huibrechts Prize in 2016 and award of the VAR Michiels Prize in 2015. The jury of the Administrative Law Association (VAR) was impressed by how Vonk manages to make his scientific work relevant and how he stimulates the debate about the need for legal change. His standing as a pillar of society and the value of his contribution by word and deed is recognized in the honour he receives today.