



Bridging and bonding on the left

A volatile electorate has turned the Dutch political map on its head. A progressive alliance is but the first step in creating a powerful new ideological force

René Cuperus & Frans Becker

As we all escaped to France, Germany, the US and other holiday destinations after the Dutch elections in June, we hoped to leave our daily political concerns far behind. The only Dutch news we expected to hear was concerning the World Cup hangover of our national soccer team. But this summer, even local French newspapers continued to haunt us with news from the Netherlands: “Pays-Bas: l’incontournable Wilders”, was one of the headlines in the Ouest-France. Indeed, Geert Wilders, the maverick islamophobe Dutch politician, was striking back.

He and his Party for Freedom (PVV or ‘Partij voor de Vrijheid’) were very successful in the parliamentary elections, getting 16 % of the vote, which translates into 24 seats in the 150-seat Dutch parliament. He is now playing a major role in the formation of the new government, which is still being negotiated at the time of writing: a coalition of the conservative-liberal VVD and the Christian-Democratic CDA, propped up by his populist party.

The Netherlands has become a contemporary political laboratory in which we have seen a successful social-liberal “poldermodel” replaced by the rising tide of right-wing populism: from Pim Fortuyn in 2002 to Geert Wilders at present. This is undoubtedly a very serious challenge to the Dutch Labour Party— but it is not the only one.

The challenges we face

In the present situation of socio-cultural instability and electoral volatility, we are facing at least three serious challenges. Firstly, there is an urgent need to find a way out of the financial and economic crisis. Although the Dutch economy is performing well in terms of employment, a cloud of uncertainty still hangs over the government’s recently inherited stakes in some of the major Dutch banks. Moreover, serious aftershocks can be expected: pensions under pressure and tensions in the eurozone, not to mention the social impact of severe spending cuts and austerity measures geared towards rebalancing the public finances and responding to the demographic problem of a “greying population”.

Secondly, we are confronted with the continuing ascent of the parties of discontent. In the most recent parliamentary elections, it was evident that large groups of voters have not got over the discomfort and discontent that drove them to punish the party in the European elections of 2009. Although the image our neighbours have of Wilders (‘ein bisschen wie Adolf Hitler’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) might be exaggerated, the radical and fanatic islamophobia of the PVV (“a ban on the Koran”) is having a very divisive and polarising impact on our society.

Thirdly, faith in the performance and efficiency of the public sector is dwindling. The left is identified with a strong and effective state, but has long since lost its traditional faith and self-confidence in state capabilities. It has, instead, actively stimulated the introduction of neoliberal managerial concepts of deregulation, privatisation, liberalisation and “new public management” in the public sector. The results have been rather mixed, undermining professionalism in both public services and the third sector and alienating large sectors of public workers. Thus, the loss of “public ethos” is a major challenge; one which is made all the more difficult by the spectre of large budget cuts across the various departments of government.

Volatility and the erosion of the political centre

These challenges demand solid and transparent political governance and leadership, to put it in the fashionable, nervy words of contemporary discourse. The political circumstances, however, are not particularly favourable. The political centre, which is supposed to generate stable governance, has eroded considerably over the last few decades. The traditional people's parties, the Christian democrats and social democrats, have both lost ground to their political flanks on the right and left and to homogenous parties with clear-cut interests and issues (the Greens or D66, the social-liberal parties for academic professionals), hampering the coalition-building process necessary in a country of political minorities and in a system of unrestrained representation.

The volatility of the voters is matched by a general distrust among the electorate of the established political institutions, especially the political parties and their representatives. As Marcel van Dam, former PvdA cabinet member and now a commentator for *de Volkskrant* newspaper put it: "Our democracy is in crisis, because the majority of the people do not trust the majority of the political parties and the politicians any more."

Moreover, national political decision-making is more complex and fragmented than ever before, having been moved to other arenas, policy systems and centres of power. As Marc Chavannes, a well informed journalist observed: "Nobody is in charge. Government and governance are an illusion. There is nobody at the steering wheel. Worse: there is no steering wheel." The former progressive liberal leader Hans van Mierlo put it this way: "We live in a country of pretending. We pretend the government is still in charge of society, while the government has lost its grip on the bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy has lost its grip on reality a long time ago."

The 2010 parliamentary elections

The recent national elections in June confirmed the trends of fragmentation and polarisation. We have witnessed a shift to the right, in quantitative and qualitative terms. While the 2006 elections forced the unwilling parties to form a centre-left government because a centre-right majority fell short, the 2010 elections brought about a tiny majority for the centre-right (76 out of 150 seats). Notably, the political gravity of this coalition has undoubtedly shifted to the right, with the Wilders-party holding 24 seats, the VVD 31 and the Christian-democrats (CDA) 20 seats. For the first time since general suffrage, the conservative liberals are the biggest party in parliament.

The traditional people's parties lost considerable ground: the Christian democrats lost 50 % of their electorate, the PvdA 10 %. These two parties, which laid the foundation of the post-war welfare state, have not been able to cooperate smoothly and effectively since the end of the 1950s. In those welfare state pioneer years, they formed an alliance of rivals for the post-war reconstruction, but they have since become rivals without an alliance.

At the same time the social democrats have lost their monopoly within the progressive tent. While in 2006 the left-wing Socialist Party was the main competitor, winning 25 seats in comparison to the 33 seats secured by the PvdA, in 2010 the progressive vote was even more divided – between the Green Left (10), the Socialist Party (15), the progressive liberals of D66 (10) and the PvdA (30). The fragmentation of the left and the relative decline of the social democratic party among the progressive parties is a clear trend. What is to be done?

Bonding and bridging on the left

Although the trends may be rather compelling, we think that there is enough room for manoeuvre to innovate and redefine the social-democratic project under new circumstances. Essentially, three options are open for social democracy.

The first would be to make a clear cut choice for the enlightened professional middle classes as our most important constituency. They represent the future of the knowledge economy and a growing segment of society, concentrated in the metropolitan areas. They are the carriers of an optimistic, liberal, cosmopolitan view on internationalism, multicultural integration and European unification. Such a choice would facilitate a coalition or even close cooperation with the other two libertarian left leaning parties, D66 and GroenLinks (GreenLeft), around a common project of European political integration, further increasing labour market flexibility, green innovation, individual autonomy, and stimulating top talents. It would be the cultural follow-up to the - social and economically orientated - Dutch-style Third Way. Furthermore, such a political strategy might have a knock on effect, attracting support from the new career and power feminists and migrant groups.

The second option would be to choose for what, against all laws of marketing and promotion, has been labelled a “social democracy of fear” (Tony Judt); a social democracy with the handbrake on. It would be aimed at regaining the support of the traditional as well as the new, flexible working classes and the lower middle class, and those dependent on public services, social security and welfare. It would defend the protection and security that the classic welfare state used to offer. It would be extremely critical of market forces, especially in the public sector, and of the European Union - at least in terms of its market fundamentalist outlook at the moment. It would be more activist orientated, with strong local roots. This choice would entail closer cooperation with the Socialist Party (in the Dutch case) or Die Linke (in the German case). It would also restore a close coalition with the trade unions.

Then there is a third option (not a new Third Way, of course!). This option is a Houdini-style act of freeing ourselves from the limiting conditions we are in at the moment and restoring the broad coalition of working class and middle classes, of the flexible workers in the personal service sector as well as the academic professionals in the new knowledge sectors, enlightened entrepreneurs and unionised industrial workers. This option would unite the aims of protection and emancipation with the aspirations and commitments of those who are succeeding in society. It would address the responsibility, commitment, participation and citizenship of both those who have a lot to win and those who have already won a lot. It would entail a broad coalition of the left, bridging the gap between the conservative and liberal left and new alliances with the third sector and civic society. Since we are real Houdini fans (see Wikipedia and youtube.com for escapologist Houdini’s death-defying acts), we are strong advocates of the third option.

A cross-party progressive alliance is not a new idea in Dutch politics, but until now it has always been part of a majority strategy, trying to split the Christian-democratic centre into a progressive and a conservative part. In our view, this should not be the central aim of progressive cooperation right now. Rather, uniting the forces of the left should be targeted at alleviating the fragmentation of the political landscape and creating a powerful ideological force not only to inspire the floating voter and to restore trust in politics, but also to strengthen the progressive perspective in society vis-à-vis the strong neoliberal, conservative and right-wing populist forces at work.

A progressive alliance will not be a magical formula for all our political problems - and it might suffer from the tension - mentioned above - that seems to be inherent in progressive politics at the moment: the growing social and cultural gap between optimists and pessimists, between winners and losers of globalisation, between higher and lower educated workers. A progressive alliance will only be a

success if it can bridge the gap between these different groups and unite those who have won a lot with those who have a lot to win; the vulnerable suburbs in Amsterdam West, with the wealthy quarters of Amsterdam South.

But, as Robert Putnam pointed out, we need both bridging and bonding. To put it in the form of some crucial questions for social democracy: Is the Labour Party still really in touch? Are we in touch with our voters, with our core constituencies? Are we as parties and politicians living according to the ideals we pursue? Are we in touch with labour - or do we believe that the conservative left – embodied, according to many reformers, by the anachronistic trade unions - is the enemy within? Are we in touch with the *Zeitgeist*, which forces us, like in a judo match, to adapt to and fight against at the same time? Do our parties adhere to the highest standards of professionalism when it is needed: recruitment of the best and most representative politicians, campaigns, change of leadership? Are social-democratic parties still in touch in terms of élan, energy, curiosity, openness and countervailing ideas?

A majority strategy

Uniting the left in any kind of coalition will not bring about a left majority. Holland has never had a progressive majority in parliament – only in some big cities. In order to form a majority, the left will have to cooperate with other political forces, whether they are Christian democrats or the conservative liberals. To create a common purpose among progressives and a majority programme in a broader coalition, a programme is needed that connects a materialist perspective of innovation, fair pay, decent work, social mobility and physical and social security with a post-materialistic or cultural perspective of positive freedom, a sustainable environment, an open outlook into the world around us, and an acceptance of cultural diversity. This must be a programme that aims not only for change, but also for continuity - for what we want to cherish.

Such a programme counterbalances the strong centrifugal forces in the economic, cultural and political realms: growing inequality, hardening cultural cleavages and dividing lines of distrust and abstention in our democracies. Moreover, it stops commercialising the public good; instead it strengthens the *res publica* by introducing a public ethic and orientation, not only in the public sector but also in the private and third sector. It will also design an agenda of modesty, self-restraint and moderation, built around notions of ecological, social and cultural “sustainability” against the hyper-consumerist rat race in society. This could be seen as a restoration of the concept of quality of life in an innovative way.

Social democracy has a tradition of “revisionism” and a duty of permanent innovation. Its duty is not to adapt its principles and basic values to a changing world, but instead to adapt that changing world according to its principles and basic values.

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