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The Netherlands

The Netherlands shifts right, again

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The Dutch election of mid-March were a shift to the right. A second conclusion: this fits into a longer pattern. The result is not very surprising, but it is disturbing. The right has become even more rightwing and a large part of the left vote has been swallowed up by supposedly progressive liberals.

That the pro-business, secular government party VVD (the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) could once again become the largest party is not just the individual merit of its leader, prime-minister Mark Rutte. Their result of 35 out of 150 seats (a gain of two) mainly shows how effectively Rutte represents their combination of neo-liberal economics and Dutch chest-beating. In a world that is adrift, the VVD and Rutte present "The Netherlands. Ltd" as a safe investment. At least, as long as it is run by people who know the tricks of the trade. Thus, the VVD profits from both the increasing nationalism and from fear of change in an uncertain time.

According to polls, the centrist liberal party D66 has drawn votes away mainly from the left, growing with four seats to 23. In the first place from it drew votes away from the Green party, GroenLinks (GreenLeft). In the disastrous result of the left, the almost halving of GroenLinks (from 14 to 8 seats) was the biggest factor. But the social-democratic PvdA and the leftwing SP also lost considerably to D66. D66 is seen as a dam against the rising "populist" tide. D66 party-leader Sigrid Kaag can be grateful to far-right leaders Thierry Baudet and Geert Wilders: the threat of their far-right agenda could make D66, a governing party and accomplice of the VVD, appear as an alternative in the eyes of many progressives. D66 and the firmly millionaire-funded newcomer pro-European Union liberal party Volt won many of the votes that had gone to GroenLinks last time.

In 2017, GroenLinks had had extraordinary success with a campaign that radiated enthusiasm and idealism. GroenLinks leader Jesse Klaver, however, quickly showed that he did not want to be an opposition-leader and that his main aim was to participate in government in cooperation with the right. On issues such as climate and migration, GroenLinks and D66 were virtually indistinguishable, leaving many GroenLinks voters with little reason not to vote for the governing party straight away. Voters who could not resign themselves to this went to Volt for a large part. Presented in a very favourable fashion by important media-outlets, the Dutch branch of Volt Europa entered parliament with three seats.

The PvdA was only able to hold on to its nine seats. Since the 1990s, the PvdA's usual yo-yo movement of left-wing rhetoric in opposition, followed by governing in coalition with the right, disappointment, and electoral punishment, became increasingly extreme. With clever marketing and the argument of "strategic voting", the PvdA was able to recover several times, but in 2017 the string snapped. The PvdA lost 29 seats - the heaviest election defeat in Dutch political history. This year, the strategic vote went to D66. Only the voter base of the Christian-Democratic CDA is older than the PvdA's.

The defeat of the SP was expected. Still, losing five out of 14 seats was a harder blow than many of its activists had counted on. Although comparable in terms in seats, a difference between GroenLinks and SP is that for the latter, its electoral defeat is part of a longer pattern and stagnation and decline. And whereas membership of GroenLinks has increased, that of the SP has been on the decline for roughly a decade. The SP's approach of "social conservative and economic progressive" does not appear to be an electoral success formula. The SP lost voters to D66, GroenLinks, and part of its most radical left wing went to the anti-capitalist BIJ1 (Dutch pronunciation: Together) On the other side of the spectrum, no less than eight per cent of votes for the far-right Forum voor Democracy (FvD) of Thierry Baudet came from former SP supporters. Ignoring "cultural" issues like anti-racism and the legacy of the Netherlands' colonial past (and imperialist present) in combination with insisting on a willingness to compromise (even with the VVD) is often defended as a means of keeping "angry working people" away from the far right. It does

not appear to work.

What it does have an effect on is driving young leftists away. Recently, the SP broke with its youth-wing ROOD – mainly because of the latter's opposition to SP rhetoric about willingness to join coalitions with the right, including VVD. While ROOD is still demanding to be allowed back in the SP, and campaigned for the party, the SP's voter base is now one of the oldest in the country.

The real shift has taken place on the right. The extreme right has never been so big. Its flagship is still Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV). The PVV's priority is an ever radicalizing Islamophobia. This year, the PVV campaigned on a platform that include banning the Koran, closing all mosques, a complete stop of immigration from "Islamic countries", denying voting rights to hundreds of thousands of Dutch citizens with double nationality (often Turkish or Moroccan), and establishing a branch of government dedicated to "de-islamizing" Dutch society. The PVV lost slightly, going from 20 to seventeen seats, making it the third biggest party. The rise of the far right was especially visible in the north of the country. The far right was already strong in the south, but the North and East were still strongholds of the PvdA. Now these provinces, too, follow the national pattern.

Far-right newcomer Ja21 (a split from Fvd) won three seats. Ja21 in particular profited from benevolent attention in the media, using the same trick that initially made FvD successful by presenting itself as the "decent" far right alternative: without conspiracy theorists and without the "social" demagoguery of the PVV.

The steady growth of the extreme right remains an international phenomenon. Partly because there is so little fundamental opposition from the left, not even in response to the failed corona policy of the past year. The FvD quadrupled its seats, growing to eight. The FvD is at least as far on the right as the PVV. And compared to Wilders, the FvD presents a more coherent far-right ideology, based around white supremacy and social-darwinism. Unlike the PVV, which has no membership organization and is highly dependent on Geert Wilders and his Twitter-account, the FvD is building a party apparatus that quickly gathered tens of thousands of members. The party seemed nearing collapse only a few months when internal messages were leaked that showed cadre-members making explicit anti-Semitic and racist statements. Its recovery and now growth has been remarkable.

FvD leader Thierry Baudet has taken a good look at Geert Wilders' earlier success; it can be electorally rewarding to doggedly defend so-called "unpopular" positions, such as trivialising the epidemic. A large majority of the Dutch population supports measures such as lock-downs and even the curfew. The FvD however successfully rallied a minority that is radically opposed to such measures, often motivated by different combinations of far-right conspiracy theories. The Netherlands has not had so much outright racism and anti-Semitism in its parliament since the war.

According to professional political commentators, the radicalism of PVV and FvD means the two parties have "sidelined themselves" because they will not easily qualify as partners for a new government coalition. For people who do not suffer from a professional narrowing of vision, it is clear that the far right, from the opposition, will continue to put pressure on the VVD, narrow the margins for what is seen as a viable alternative, and thus to influence society as a whole - not just for a cabinet period but for the long term.

The weakness of the left (its worst result in a century) clearly goes deeper than an unfortunate campaign or misjudgements by individual leaders. The left as a frame of reference for a political identity has lost much of its power. Again, the experts talk of a declining appeal of ideologies as part of the explanation but this is not very convincing. An ideology such as nationalism reigns supreme. And what is the intense attachment, and false hope for, "Europe" (meaning: the European Union) of D66 and now Volt if not ideological? The grand narratives have clearly returned. One of the great mistakes of the Dutch Left in the period leading up to this election was that, while it was already at an all-time low in the polls, it did not prioritize its own narrative, but rather stressed its eagerness to get into government.

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In Dutch media there was much to read about how, under pressure from the epidemic and the coming economic crisis, the mood had become more “left-wing” in socio-economic terms. The idea that this time the right-wing parties, too, were taking “left-wing” positions shows, above all, how little this word means in the Netherlands. A more active role for the state is not necessarily left-wing, and there is little left-wing about doing something about poverty after years of growing inequality, while, for example, KLM and the like are still being prioritized. Hardly any party says anything positive about neoliberalism, but the basic elements of neoliberal policy are still taken for granted. But apart from BIJ1, there is not a parliamentary party in the Netherlands that takes an anti-capitalist position. Even from the SP we hear only vague calls for a “more social policy” and a “fair government”. The left should not let centrist liberals like D66 and Volt get away with declaring themselves the social, internationalist, even anti-racist alternative.

The ray of hope is the entry into parliament of BIJ1 with one seat. This party, founded in 2016, combines a commitment to anti-racism with an anti-capitalism platform. Its leader, Sylvana Simmons, is one the very few Black women in Dutch national politics and will now represent a self-avowed radicalism on the national stage. BIJ1 audience is modest but real, mainly based in the larger cities of the country. In the capital Amsterdam, the only city where was already been present in the city council, its vote doubled. Here BIJ1 was the left-wing opposition to an executive that is a coalition of the three major left-wing parties and D66. The big challenge now is to consolidate the party as a nationally visible opposition force. Such a BIJ1, with an active role in different social movements, will benefit the whole left. For this we need to work together with people who remain in GroenLinks and SP. Unity, especially with the social movements that will have to take a central place in the left-wing resistance in the coming period, will be desperately needed.

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