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Netherlands

Spectacular Breakthrough for Socialist Party

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‘The anarchists won the elections.’ ‘The peasants have seized power.’ Or was it the Maoist Red Guards? These were some of the reactions once the results were known of the parliamentary elections in the Netherlands on 22 November. The reality was that the Dutch voted massively for a more social course after four years of harsh right-wing governments led by Christian Democratic Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende. As a result, for the first time in post-war Dutch history, the Labour Party's dominant position on the left is being contested, by the anti-neoliberal left Socialist Party (SP).

The elections were a breakthrough for the SP, which won almost 17 per cent of the vote and 25 out of 150 seats in the lower house (up from 9 seats after the previous elections). The SP emerged as the country's third-biggest party, after Balkenende's Christian Democrats, who came out almost unscathed, and Wouter Bos' weakened Labour Party.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/janm.jpg>]

SP leader Jan Marijnissen

The extreme reactions about anarchists and Maoists from the right-wing liberals of the VVD, like long-time Finance Minister Gerrit Zalm, were no surprise. More shocking were attempts by many commentators to treat the SP as the twin of far-right MP Geert Wilders' Freedom Party, which had a smaller breakthrough with 9 seats, or the small Protestant Christian Union, which grew to 6 seats.

The Financieel Dagblad (Financial Daily) wrote, for example, ‘Each in its own way is fighting against the open society being created by European unification and the forces of globalisation. The SP is clinging to the old protective walls of the welfare state and the Christian Union to its own religious identity, while Wilders wants to defend Dutch culture by keeping out all non-Western immigrants.’

The people have spoken, was the prevailing analysis, and the people are conservative, nationalistic and backward. An even more extreme example came from the poet Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, who voted for the Green Left party: ‘The winners of this election share a repressive, provincial mind-set. They expect little from Europe, and are all too eager to sacrifice freedom of thought to their fear of terrorism.... The Randstad (the urbanised western Netherlands, including Amsterdam, Rotterdam and the Hague) has lost. The peasants have seized power.’

The crisis of liberalism...

The truth is different, and simpler: many voters opted on 22 November to move to the left and oppose the attacks on social programmes. The combined 67 seats for Labour, the SP, the Green Left party and the new green Animal Rights party are the biggest left contingent in Dutch parliamentary history. This result reflects the spirit of Amsterdam's Museumplein, where 300,000 people responded in October 2004 to the trade unions' call to resist government attacks on pensions, and of the May 2005 referendum defeat for the European constitution.

There is an understandable longing for security in the face of neoliberal chaos behind the shift to the left. But that has little to do with ‘conservatism’, despite what today's right-wing so-called ‘progressives’ claim. Since when is it ‘progressive’ to demand lower taxes for corporations and fewer rights for workers?

The real united left-right front in Dutch politics is not some imaginary SP-Wilders axis, but the neoliberal consensus that stretches from the right-wing VVD to parts of the Green Left party. Their goal is to marginalise resistance to

neoliberalism. What they have achieved instead is alienating more and more voters from politics.

The established parties' overblown reactions reveal the deep trouble they are in. The VVD lost six seats; the Labour Party lost nine, despite its position in the opposition and its commanding lead in the polls for much of the previous year.

Both parties have problems that go far deeper than a few seats' loss or a few leadership blunders. Both are in an existential crisis. They are no longer the automatic political expressions of two of the three dominant political currents in the Netherlands, liberalism and social democracy (Christian Democracy being the third).

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/spincamp4.jpg>]

The situation is particularly complicated on the right. The classical liberals are divided among several parties: besides the VVD, they are also in the once 'left-liberal' D66, the Green Left party, parts of the Labour Party and perhaps the Animal Rights party. Since the sudden rise of Pim Fortuyn's right-wing populism in 2002, liberalism is in any event no longer the glue that holds the Dutch right together.

Although Fortuyn's divided, quarrelling party disappeared from parliament in these elections, Wilders' success shows that right-wing populism has not lost its appeal. So does right-wing Minister of Immigration Rita Verdonk's success in winning the votes of almost half the VVD's members in the party's pre-election leadership contest, and her ability to continue to plague VVD leader Mark Rutte after the election. Verdonk, the VVD's number two, managed to get more votes than Rutte.

Cynics might say that liberalism has fallen victim to its own success. With so much of the welfare state dismantled, one may ask what central project this current can still have. Many liberals hardly seem liberal at all any more. They are animated instead by a bitter enmity towards anything even mildly leftist.

... and of Labour

But the Labour Party has its own problems. After these elections, the SP has at least as strong a claim to embody the social democratic tradition. The SP's extraordinary growth creates an unprecedented situation in Dutch politics. For the first time in parliamentary history, the hegemony of the Labour Party - or its pre-war predecessor, the SDAP - is under threat.

A central question in the coming years will be who represents social democracy in the Netherlands. The SP, despite its origins as a Maoist organisation in the 1970s, may increasingly define itself, not as a current to the left of social democracy, but as the real Dutch social democratic party. Its movement to the right was visible in 1998, when it dropped the demand for the nationalisation of big companies, and even more this year, when withdrawal from NATO and abolition of the monarchy no longer appeared in its election manifesto.

When it comes to the struggle against neoliberalism, against Dutch participation in the US 'war on terror' and other key struggles, the party has consistently held true to its principles. After its breakthrough, however, the pressure for the SP to move to the right will increase, as Labour pushes SP leader Jan Marijnissen to join in a big coalition with Christian Democracy.

Even so, we must not underestimate the unique, short-lived ideological window of opportunity that now exists on the left. The question of what socialism means and who speaks in its name is now a subject for public debate. That opens up space for critical-minded socialists.

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More is at stake here than seats in parliament, which can be won and lost from one election to the next. Roots in social movements are more enduring. The Labour Party has for decades occupied many positions in the trade unions, the universities, the media, the judiciary and the many commissions and advisory councils that are a big Dutch tradition; but in recent years Labour has been losing much of this ground. It is a big, open question whether the SP can fill the gap.

The stakes are high. As long as the unions remain loyal to Labour in government, the possibility of strong social opposition to a pro-business government agenda is more limited.

There are at least initial signs that the SP is putting down stronger roots in civil society. More and more trade union activists vote SP or have even joined the SP. Antiwar groups, renters' associations and refugee organisations also increasingly see the SP as an ally. It is relatively weak among intellectuals, however. It still labours under the image of inward-looking party with little room for discussion.

Taking responsibility

Putting down roots in the movements is in any event a more promising strategy for changing Dutch society than grabbing the SP's first chance to join a coalition government and disappoint its electorate - however great the pressure. This is the implicit purpose of the comparisons between the SP and Wilders. Marijnissen supposedly has to prove his innocence by showing that he has the nerve to 'take responsibility' - meaning accept a ministerial post in Christian Democrat Balkenende's fourth government.

This is nothing less than a call to cheat the SP's voters. It is almost out of the question that the Christian Democrats will go along with such key points of the SP programme as rolling back this year's health care 'reform', renationalising the railways, raising taxes on the rich or withdrawing Dutch troops from Afghanistan.

If the SP gives up these demands, the voters that deserted the traditional parties this time will most likely abandon the SP next time. They will either cynically turn their backs on politics entirely or perhaps turn to Wilders' far right party - a prospect that apparently does not concern the SP's 'democratic' counsellors.

The voters will probably only give the SP one chance in the near future to prove itself in government. It should therefore wait until it has optimal conditions for translating a substantial part of its programme into policy: not only a strong parliamentary delegation but also an overall left majority in parliament, and above all strong social movements and a society in ferment. None of this is impossible. Labour, SP and the Green Left had a majority in the polls for many months during the past year; and October 2004 showed that Dutch society is not doomed to eternal quiescence.

Tasks for the far left

The critical left in and around the SP will have more than enough work on its hands in the coming months. To begin with, it needs to defend the advances the left made in these elections and the confidence the voters placed in the SP. This means being vigilant for any course that would cheat the voters - and for the SP to join a Christian Democratic-led government would clearly be cheating the voters.

The SP called on voters to resist the temptation to vote 'strategically' for Labour with the argument that Labour leader Bos might well end up in Balkenende's next cabinet, while a vote for the SP would ensure kicking out Balkenende as prime minister. Furthermore, people who voted SP were voting against the traditional Labour

wheeling and dealing with the Christian Democrats. If that's what voters had wanted, they would have voted for Wouter Bos.

Left activists inside the SP are also in an ideal position to counter suggestions that the SP has anything in common with Wilders. They can do that most effectively by working to build an open, multicultural, democratic and internationalist SP, a socialist party that takes bold initiatives and offers a clear alternative vision for society. With this starting point, the debate about who really stands for socialism in the Netherlands can become a very interesting one. The VVD's nightmares are not about to become true anytime soon, but there could be some fascinating years ahead.

Appendix: The SP's 'right-wing nationalist voters', and other nonsense

Considerable nonsense was spouted about the SP before, during and immediately after the elections. To take a small sample of the wealth of examples:

– *"The SP is fishing in the same troubled waters as Wilders."*

A glance at the figures about the origins of each party's voters - easily available to all the commentators - is enough to dispose of this notion. The SP's new voters were almost entirely people who did not vote in the last parliamentary elections in 2003 or who voted Labour or (to a lesser extent) Christian Democratic. Only a very small percentage of SP voters had voted for the Pim Fortuyn List in 2003. The situation is very different with Wilders: almost a quarter of his voters had voted for Fortuyn's party in 2003, and most of the rest had voted VVD or Christian Democratic.

– *"The SP capitalises on gut reflexes and nationalist sentiments."*

Strange then that so few SP voters mentioned nationalism, anti-European sentiments or discontent with immigration among their reasons for voting SP. The reasons they did mention: the future and affordability of health care - no fewer than 76 per cent said this was their primary motive - and the economy and poverty, which 31 per cent said this was one of their major reasons.

– *"The SP is a party of older white men."*

Too bad for the SP's hip critics: more than two-thirds of SP voters this year were women. In the shadow elections held in primary and secondary schools the SP came second, after Labour. The same applies to black and immigrant voters: the SP is the second biggest party among them, second only to Labour. Black and immigrant voters elected three of the SP's 25 MPs.