

Social Democrats win Dutch election

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The Labour Party (PvdA) of Prime Minister Wim Kok emerged as the winner in the Netherlands' national elections, held on May 6. The social democrats increased their vote from 24 percent to 29 percent, and won 45 seats in the 150-seat parliament. Their coalition partner, the right-wing liberal VVD, also registered an increase in its percentage of the vote, and gained 38 seats in the legislature. Together these two parties now have an absolute majority and are no longer dependent on the Democrats (D'66), the third partner in the ruling coalition. D'66 lost ten of its former 24 seats.

The Christian Democrats, the strongest party in parliament until 1994, continued its decline and received only 18 percent of the votes cast.

Wim Kok described the election result as a confirmation of his "Polder-Model." This policy combines "free-market" economics with extensive state regulation of the resulting social dislocations. Labour "flexibility," draconian wage reductions and sharp cuts in social programs are combined with the promotion of low-wage and part-time labour, and forced-work programs for the unemployed.

By such means, the official unemployment rate, which stands at 12 percent in countries like Germany and France, has been reduced to below five percent—at a terrible price. Every third job is part-time, and wages are correspondingly low. Poverty is spreading. In the space of two years the number of millionaires has increased by a third, while one in ten households live at the poverty level.

The combination of right-wing economic policies and massive state intervention provided the basis for the coalition of social democrats and right-wing liberals in 1994. Until then these two tendencies had been considered the opposite poles of Dutch political life.

While both of these parties gained in the May 6 election, a more detailed analysis demonstrates that their electoral success does not indicate widespread

support for their policies. The social democrats, despite their gains, could not overcome the losses they suffered in 1994, after the collapse of their four-year coalition with the Christian Democrats. Their May 6 result remains three percent lower than the share of the vote they obtained in the election of 1989.

Their electoral support is, moreover, far less stable than it was in past decades. In the 1970s many workers unshakably supported the social democracy. But today, when all parties promote essentially the same policies, and none of them articulate the needs of the masses, voting behavior is far more influenced by momentary moods and short-term influences.

Only the palest of campaigns was waged in the run-up to the election. As one well known pollster, Maurice de Hond, commented: "For the first time in, say, 70 or 80 years, the Labour Party and the Liberals are together in government, and they want to govern again after the election. They are really not enemies anymore. They are putting on a show. Everyone knows, including the parties themselves, that they will work together after the election. And so, basically, there is no campaign."

Nevertheless, below the placid surface, there are many indications of sharp political tensions. Because none of the parties contesting the election addressed the burning social issues, this political vacuum was filled by a strange coalition of the Catholic Church, the Young Socialists, trade unionists and small businessmen. Under the slogan "Take time to live," they protested overwork and poverty. Within three weeks they collected 300,000 signatures against what they called the "Nonstop, 24-hour economy."

In the election itself the desire for an alternative was reflected in a considerable growth on the left side of the political spectrum. GreenLeft and the Socialist Party more than doubled their vote. They have eleven and five seats in the new parliament, respectively. GreenLeft is an ecologist party that places great

emphasis on social questions. The Socialist Party has emerged from a former Maoist group.

The far-right Center Democrats, on the other hand, who had three seats in the old parliament, have all but disappeared.



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