

Right-wing parties unseat social democrats in Dutch elections

Ulrich Rippert, Steve James
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The main victors in the May 15 general election in the Netherlands are the conservative Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), which was founded just three months ago by the recently assassinated right-wing populist, Pim Fortuyn.

According to the preliminary official final result, the CDA won 43 of the 150 seats in the lower chamber of the Dutch parliament. That is an increase of 14 seats and makes the CDA the strongest party in parliament. The party's chairman, a 46-year-old professor of philosophy, is expected to assume the post of prime minister. The LPF won a total of 26 seats.

In what amounts to an electoral collapse, the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) of former prime minister Wim Kok lost nearly half of its deputies and was reduced to 23 seats. This represents the biggest defeat for the social democrats since the Second World War. Kok's successor as party head and leading candidate, Ad Melkert, announced his resignation on the evening of the vote. Wim Kok had governed the Netherlands at the head of a centre-left coalition since 1994.

Kok's partner in the outgoing government, the liberal Peoples Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), also suffered heavy losses. It retained just 23 of its previous total of 38 seats. The third party in the former governing coalition, the Democrats '66 (D66), held onto 7 of its original total of 14 seats. All in all, the parties of the outgoing coalition lost 43 of their former 97 seats in parliament. Turnout for the election was over 80 percent, notably higher than the figure four years ago (73.2 percent).

The likely new head of government, Jan Peter Balkenende (CDA), announced that he would seek to form a three-way alliance of Christian Democrats, Liberals (VVD) and the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF). It is not clear at this stage whether he will be able to do so.

In the wake of Fortuyn's murder it is apparent that while his organisation is numerically the second strongest in parliament, it has very little in the way of political cohesion. The party lacks a political programme, a proper party structure or personnel with political experience. Its most prominent representatives currently include a Rotterdam businessman, the head of a food industry association, some personal friends of Fortuyn, a pig farmer, and a former Miss Holland. There are already signs of sharp internal divisions that could lead to the party's disintegration.

Whatever its final composition, however, the new government will claim a mandate for the policies and outlook that brought Fortuyn to prominence: hostility to immigrants, Islamophobia, law-and-order demagoguery—all overlain with a veneer of liberal tolerance on questions of drugs and sexuality.

The election took place in an atmosphere of extreme political tension following the murder of Fortuyn, with many press reports emphasising social and political conditions peculiar to the Netherlands. While internal trends played a critical role, the election result in the Netherlands is in line with a more general European pattern of development. Over the past several years, social democratic-led coalitions have been defeated by right-wing parties in national elections in Austria, Italy, Portugal and, most

recently, France.

For eight years the Kok government was promoted as a model of modern social democratic "reform" politics. His so-called Polder system was praised as the standard for "job creation" and economic growth. In fact, the social and political balance sheet of the outgoing government is devastating.

Twenty years ago, the government of the day, together with the trade unions and employers' federation, agreed the so-called "Treaty of Wassenaar," regarded as the precursor of the Polder model. The unions agreed to long-term wage cuts and flexible working conditions, while the employers offered to open up large numbers of part-time jobs. At the same time, the government guaranteed drastic cuts in business taxes. Government contributions for social welfare were cut, in order to balance the state budget.

Low wages brought a revival in Dutch exports and the official rate of unemployment fell from nearly 10 percent in 1983 to under 3 percent last year. In terms of economic growth, the Netherlands exceeded the average in Europe as a whole and state indebtedness was curbed.

The British *Economist* magazine wrote of the "Dutch Delight," and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, shortly after taking office, visited the Netherlands to get a close look at the country's "Alliance for Jobs." Once branded the "sick man of the dykes," the Netherlands became "the European role model."

However, the pro-business policies of the social democratic regime resulted in a rapid growth of the "working poor." Currently, more than a third of all workers are employed in a part-time job, often less than 12 hours a week, and very poorly paid. This figure is double the number of those working part-time in Germany.

A recent report by the Amsterdam Institute entitled "The First Part-Time Economy in the World" documents the social impact of this process. Since 1970, part-time jobs in the Dutch economy have increased to a record for countries monitored by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This trend has accelerated over the past decade. The institute reported: "Already by 1988 there were 1,886,000 part-time employed people (31.4 percent of all people in employment). In 1997 their number had risen to 2,656,000. This is an increase of 40.8 per cent in nine years, four times the increase (10.3 percent) in full-time employment."

The number of self-employed increased from 150,000 to 757,000 between 1987 and 1997, while temporary, agency, and variable-hour working increased by comparable proportions. By 1997, fully a million households—total population of some 16 million—were below the poverty line. Of these, 40 percent had been in poverty since 1992. Social spending plummeted from 66 percent of gross domestic product in 1985 to around 50 percent today.

Poverty has grown in suburbs of big cities such as Rotterdam, Amsterdam and The Hague. Increasingly, the burden for sustaining social programs has been transferred to local authorities, which have responded

by cutting spending on such services.

Low wages for teachers has led to a shortage of teaching staff, while cuts in the education system have had catastrophic consequences. The health system is on the verge of collapse. The press is full of reports of severely ill patients who are placed on long waiting lists for operations and die before receiving treatment. Others are ferried by ambulance to Germany, because the medical equipment required to deal with their complaint is lacking in Holland.

While slashing taxes on employers, the government has raised indirect taxes on consumers.

Despite its record of subservience to Dutch capital, the Kok government came under intense pressure last year from the employers' federations. Economic analyses had revealed that labour productivity in Holland was considerably lower than the European Union average. Under the impact of the global economic slowdown, major Dutch employers such as electronics giant TNC Phillips laid off thousands of workers. Economic growth in the last quarter of 2001 was the lowest since 1993, and has continued to slow into 2002. According to the OECD, "[T]hese are undoubtedly testing times for the Netherlands, with the economy moving away from sustained non-inflationary growth."

In 2001 inflation rose to 5 percent, and, according to the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, "all of the negative trends have continued in concentrated form in the first months of this year." The magazine went on to say, "The figures are worse than they look. In particular, the rate of unemployment has been touched up considerably. According to the consulting agency McKinsey, the real rate is 12 percent higher than the officially recorded statistic, i.e., comparable to the level in [the German state of] Thuringia or [Italy's] Calabria."

Under these conditions, a section of the Dutch ruling elite prepared for a political change of course. Eight months ago the young philosophy professor Balkenende took over the leadership of the biggest opposition party, the CDA, and received assurances of considerable financial support from employers' circles for his election campaign. In the same period, the political initiative launched by Fortuyn also received financial backing from influential circles.

The Christian Democratic Appeal is the traditional party of bourgeois rule in the Netherlands and numerically the biggest party in the country, with 120,000 members. The party had participated in national governments for 70 years until the elections of eight years ago, when the CDA lost 20 seats and was forced to cede its position as the strongest fraction in the Dutch parliament.

The Treaty of Wassenaar, which saw the first moves to dismantle the Dutch social welfare system, was agreed under the government of CDA Prime Minister Lubbers. When, at the beginning of the 1990s, the CDA, in a coalition with the social democratic PvdA, began cutting pensions and privatising a part of the state pension plan, the CDA was voted out of office and the social democrats took over the job of pushing ahead with the Polder programme.

In its period in opposition the CDA, which includes the Catholic People's Party and the Christian Historical Union, moved sharply to the right. Its traditional rhetoric about Christian values, moderation and social consensus was replaced by an emphasis on neo-liberal, "free market" economic policy. In his election campaign Balkenende focused on law-and-order pledges to tighten domestic security and impose harsher punishment on lawbreakers, and to accelerate the privatisation of state-owned institutions.

The electoral success of the List Pim Fortuyn must be viewed against this political and social background. With all of the established parties complicit in a political system characterised by patronage and indifference to the acute social problems confronting broad layers of the population, Fortuyn had an open field to agitate against the "consensus society" and win influence with attacks on what he called "sorry politics," i.e., the

practice of apologising for the status quo while doing nothing to change it.

Fortuyn was able to factually substantiate his attacks on nepotism and the successful efforts of politicians and officials to escape punishment, even in cases of flagrant corruption and other offences. One prominent example, which angered millions of Dutch citizens and provided grist for Fortuyn's mill, was the failure of the authorities to even charge officials and local politicians whose negligence contributed to the catastrophic fireworks explosion in Enschede two years ago.

Fortuyn's indictment of the political establishment for the gutting of social welfare programs won significant support from sections of the working class, including immigrant workers, frustrated over the degradation of social conditions under the "Purple Coalition" (red and blue) of the PvdA, VVD and D66. Fundamentally, however, Fortuyn was a representative of a narrow and wealthy middle-class layer, close to the heads of industry, who have benefited enormously from the attacks on workers' living standards carried out in the 1980s and 1990s. This layer also became increasingly frustrated with the Purple Coalition, on the grounds that it was proceeding too slowly in driving down the living standards of working people.

With the support of powerful sections of business and the media, the LPF set out to exploit popular anger and political confusion within the working class to install a right-wing government, over which its business backers would have a controlling interest. It serves as a lightning rod for discontent, blaming social ills in the Netherlands on immigration and the Islamic religion, and thereby fomenting divisions in the working class and preparing the ground for new attacks on welfare and democratic rights.

Many of those who voted for Fortuyn's party undoubtedly saw their vote as an expression of protest against the PvdA, and are far from endorsing all of Fortuyn's views. Many more within the Netherlands are horrified at the apparent popularity of anti-immigrant Islamophobia, but as of yet have no viable political perspective to oppose this trend.

The fact that the far right and its business backers are the beneficiaries of the collapse of Dutch social democracy should sound a clear and urgent message across all of Europe on the need for genuinely independent political parties of the working class, based on an international socialist programme, to be built.



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