

The end of consensus politics in the Netherlands

Part II: The role of Pim Fortuyn and his party

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This is the second part of a three-part article on the political background to the decline of social democracy and the rise of the right-wing populist movement headed by the late Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands. Part one was posted on August 23. The final part will appear next week.

Pim Fortuyn well understood how to utilise the pent-up frustration with the policies of the social democratic and other reformist parties and trade unions—which had presented themselves as representatives of working class interests—and the widespread political confusion, in the absence of a progressive social alternative, as to the causes of the social crisis. His call for an immediate halt to all immigration, for the dismantling of the bureaucracy in government and society at large, and for harsher penal laws stirred up an otherwise lethargic election campaign.

What was the axis of his programme? Pure egoism.

Fortuyn always insisted that he did not oppose immigration from the standpoint of a Nazi-style “blood and soil” racism; rather, he was guided by a simple maxim: each must provide first for himself. Accordingly, the Dutch were obliged to first look after themselves, not others.

He had no reservations about having business, political and other dealings with foreigners. But if the immigrant population became too numerous, if refugees consumed tax revenues, impeded his own advancement and self-enrichment, and, moreover, did not speak Dutch, then the situation could not be tolerated.

His clever agitation against immigrants skilfully exploited the general anti-Muslim atmosphere, which had been encouraged by Western governments and media in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11. He even used his own homosexuality as part of his political campaign.

Fortuyn made use of the discriminatory utterances of the Dutch Imam Haselhof concerning homosexuals as the pretext for branding the 800,000 Muslim immigrants living in the Netherlands and their culture as “backward.” Dutch culture had no place for this type of intolerance, he declared, disregarding the fact that the opinions expressed by representatives of his own denomination—Catholicism—on this question did not differ substantially from those of the Imam.

On this basis, he appealed to voters to stop the flood of immigrants out of “solidarity and tolerance” with homosexuals and concern for the “defence of their own noble culture.”

The cynical character of this political argument is underlined by the fact that the government under social democrat Wim Kok had already heightened restrictive regulations on asylum and immigration to such an extent that the “flood” of refugees had declined to a trickle well before the election. According to immigration authorities, only 8,000 refugees succeeded in crossing the Dutch border and applying for asylum in the first half of 2002. Of these, only one quarter had any prospect of being

allowed to remain in the Netherlands.

Pim Fortuyn was the political and personal incarnation of the pushy parvenus, a typical representative of a small social layer that had grown rich in the 1990s on the wave of stock market speculation and on the basis of business deals that were often as crooked as they were lucrative. Quite a few of these nouveaux riches have tried to make up for their youthful sins in the radical protest movements of the 1970s by embarking on an unprincipled political career in the society they had once criticized.

Pim Fortuyn was of this breed. A sociology professor by profession, he became a millionaire as a management consultant, political columnist and television pundit. In the course of his political transformation, he passed through radical student politics, the trade union bureaucracy and the social democratic Party of Labour (PvdA). For a time he was an advisor to the Christian Democrats (CDA), and finally a candidate for the “Rotterdam—a place worth living in” list.

At the beginning of this year, he was thrown off this list for his right-wing populism, and in March of 2002 he founded his own party list for the local elections in Rotterdam. At the first attempt, with 34 percent of the vote, his list became the strongest parliamentary grouping and, with the CDA and right-wing Liberals (VVD), formed the city government.

Within a few weeks, on the basis of his demagoguery, Fortuyn assembled a colourful group of dubious individuals who had either successfully demonstrated their aggressiveness, already realised their “Dutch dream,” or determined that they “wanted to get something done.” They included a coloured IT expert from the former Dutch colonies, a high-ranking civil servant from the ministry of defence named Mat Herben (who became Fortuyn’s successor as party leader), local pharmacists, dentists, estate agents, etc.

With this list, he launched a right-wing attack on the state bureaucracy that regulated and controlled the social consensus, in the interests of the wealthy who feel restrained and pressured by this consensus.

After twelve years of social democratic policies and eight years of PvdA leader Wim Kok as prime minister, Fortuyn found approval amongst working class layers who felt betrayed by the corporatism of the trade unions, the joint union-management “works councils,” and the established parties, and saw themselves threatened by social decline. Fortuyn benefited from the deep political confusion that prevailed among workers and youth in the absence of an independent class perspective—the destructive legacy of the decades-long domination of social democracy, Stalinism and petty-bourgeois radicalism.

Finally, Fortuyn’s witch-hunt against immigrants struck a chord among de-classed layers, which, amidst the general political disorientation, tend to be guided by purely egoistic instincts.

With his aggressive slogans and his talk-show manner, he whipped up the oppositional mood in the country, characterised by vague feelings of

powerlessness, in order to steer it along reactionary channels.

Fortuyn's murder was a reactionary act that in no way embodied the interests of the working class or advanced the struggle against his brand of right-wing populism. The working class does not deal with its political opponents by means of such individualist and terrorist methods, which cut across the political clarification and education of the broad mass of working people—the precondition for the development of a genuinely democratic and socialist opposition. Such methods inevitably create greater political confusion and play into the hands of the most determined enemies of the working class.

Fortuyn's assassination was an expression of acute social tensions, and a reaction to his own aggressive policies. However, far from halting the political machinations that Fortuyn championed, the murder provoked a mood of moral outrage and abhorrence that contributed to the spectacular election success of the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF). As a dead martyr, Fortuyn has probably done more to determine the policy of the government than if he were alive.

His legend, upon which his list relied, became the lever for producing a break with traditional consensus politics, a break that the other bourgeois parties, discredited as they were, could never have realised so quickly or decisively.

On some questions during the coalition negotiations, the LPF was not on the far right. As far as immigrants and welfare cuts were concerned, the Christian Democrats of the CDA revealed themselves to be far more pitiless than the LPF. While the LPF endorsed an amnesty for illegal immigrants who had been living in Holland for a long time, the CDA insisted that they be immediately deported without exception. The coalition agreement that the psychologically ill be no longer considered unfit to work is also a product of the Christian brotherly love of the CDA.

Like its German sister party the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), the Dutch CDA would, if it could have its way, compel all asylum-seekers to undertake a Dutch language course, pay for it themselves, and complete it in their homeland. They would then be obliged to provide proof of having passed such a course when they crossed the border.

Like the CDU in Germany, the CDA was in former times a party of consensus, a "people's party" par excellence. It accommodated different social layers—workers, entrepreneurs, traders, artisans, farmers—and sought to balance the party's conflicting social interests. During its time in opposition in the 1990s, it transformed itself into a classical neo-liberal party in the service of big business and the stock market.

Jan Peter Balkenende was the ideological champion of this conversion. He also had the inestimable advantage of not being a well-known representative of the hated political elite. He owed his election victory less to popularity or political support than to the fact that nobody knew him.

There are no longer any substantial differences between the CDA, the VVD, the other bourgeois parties and the PvdA. They have all abandoned any consideration of the interests of working people, and openly represent the interests of big business and the rich. But neither alone nor in a coalition would they have been able to produce what the dead Pim Fortuyn initiated post mortem with his list: the political shift from consensus to confrontation.

Among the political forces that opened the road for Pim Fortuyn and the new government are the petty-bourgeois radical organizations GroenLinks (Green Left) and the Socialist Party (SP).

GroenLinks developed in the 1980s out of remnants of the 1970s radical student movement, the Stalinist Dutch Communist Party and Christians who were dissatisfied with the hierarchies and dogmas of the official churches. On a local level, this party enjoyed considerable influence and had some seats in the national parliament. It supported the "Polder Model" and ensured that it was smoothly implemented in the cities and municipalities.

On the other hand, the SP, formed in 1972 as a Maoist organization,

incessantly criticized the government and its welfare cuts with radical clichés. In this way, it won over 200 seats in local and provincial parliaments. It holds nine seats in the national parliament, with almost 6 percent of the vote, and forms the left wing of the opposition. In four large cities it is the strongest party. In the old industrial city of Oss in Nordbrabant, with 65,000 inhabitants, it forms the city government together with the social democrats. In the general election, 19 percent in this city voted for the SP, as did 11 percent in Amsterdam.

Asked what the crucial difference was between the SP and the PvdA or the Greens, Amsterdam SP Chairman Wim Paquay said in a 1998 interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*: "It is our policies regarding foreigners. We are for the strict application of the existing laws against illegal immigrants. Left-wing PvdA and Green Party politicians, on the other hand, always want a form of amnesty or exceptions in problem cases. But such a procedure would attract even more foreigners, many more than could be integrated ordinarily into our Dutch society..."

These are the same positions advocated by Fortuyn's party, with the difference that, in contrast to the SP, Fortuyn was able to win the support of a whole set of wealthy voters and the media. In an expression of condolence following Fortuyn's murder, SP Chairperson Jan Marijnissen publicly recognised this political connection: "We had arrived at identical conclusions regarding many political and social problems in our country," he said, "even if we had different opinions about the solution."

The different opinions Marijnissen mentioned were, however, marginal in nature. In its programme, the SP expressly advocates more public security and the maintenance of a strong national army. Fortuyn likewise called for greater public security, but proposed the dissolution of the army in favour of strengthening the navy. He justified this proposal with the fact that the Dutch navy possesses an historically acquired competence. He was alluding to colonial times and the slave trade, when the navy was the most important military prop of the Dutch empire. According to Fortuyn, the Netherlands should concentrate on building up the navy to its old size, in order to keep pace in world politics.

Differences are hardly perceptible in the line of the SP and the LPF in their agitation against Muslim immigrants and their clergymen. After Fortuyn's murder, a pogrom atmosphere was created against Muslims. Muslim sermons were secretly taped, translated and distributed to "interested Dutch people," in order to stir up animosity—a practice that recalls the Dutch religious wars of the seventeenth century. At that time, such methods were employed to mobilise lynch mobs.

LPF Chairman Herben took part in this witch-hunt and suggested modifying the constitution so that Imams could be deported even if they had a valid residency permit or a Dutch passport. The SP, for its part, did not leave it at the level of mere proposals. It tabled a law in parliament, according to which Muslim clergyman would be obliged to complete a course in "integration into Dutch culture," under threat of losing their legal status.

Like GroenLinks, for many years the SP prevented the opposition to Wim Kok and the PvdA from challenging Dutch nationalism and basing itself on the international interests and rights of the working class. This explains why Fortuyn and his list were able to rise so spectacularly and bring a right-wing government to power.

There are many indications that having assisted the Dutch ruling elite, the LPF will disappear from the scene. In the final analysis, this organisation possesses neither an historical tradition, nor a stable social base, still less a worked-out programme.

Even during the coalition negotiations, the LPF was shaken by a violent leadership crisis. Two hours after the official photo with the Queen had been taken, the first LPF cabinet member, state secretary for emancipation and family affairs, Philomena Bijlhou, had to vacate her post. It turned out that she had worked for the military junta in Surinam in a paramilitary militia, at a time when the junta was liquidating its opponents.

Only a few days later, the LPF withdrew its parliamentary group spokesperson, Ines Scheffers, a close confidante of the party chair. In the short time since entering office, she had abused her office for personal benefit.

Most recently, Mat Herben, who had led the coalition negotiations with the other parties, announced his resignation from the party executive. In addition, a programmatic division developed in the LPF leadership over whether the national budget should be balanced at any cost by further social attacks, or a deficit accepted.

Instability characterises not only the LPF, but the entire government. During the coalition negotiations, concern was expressed in the media that no experienced, professional politicians were to be found in the LPF. This unease is strengthened by the fact that the intellectual and political resources of the traditional bourgeois parties are also exhausted, whether it be the CDA, VVD or PvdA.

As reactionary as the new Dutch government is, like all European governments it stands on extremely weak legs, and is socially isolated to a higher degree than any previous government. Nevertheless, it holds the levers of power, and could be replaced by an even more right-wing regime unless and until the working class intervenes with its own independent programme.

To be continued



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