The end of consensus politics in the Netherlands

Part III: The historical roots of consensus politics

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This is the last 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 *appeared on August 23 and* part two *appeared on August 24.*

The change of government in the Netherlands followed a pattern observable throughout the whole of Europe.

In the second half of the 1990s, almost all the 15 European Union (EU) governments were led by social democrats. Today the number has fallen to five (Britain, Sweden, Finland, Greece and Germany), and all polls point to a transition of power in Germany after the national elections on September 22. The social democrats also constitute the junior partner in the coalition government led by the liberals in Belgium.

In Austria, Italy, Denmark, Portugal, France and the Netherlands over the past two years, social democrats have been replaced by conservative parties, often ruling in alliance with extreme right-wing populists. In general, the conservatives owe their election success to the disappointment and anger aroused by the social democrats. This was often expressed in a massive degree of voter abstention and was in some cases successfully exploited by the right-wing populists.

The Netherlands is by no means an exceptional case. However, politics of consensus have a longer tradition there than in any other European country. A look at Dutch history shows just how fundamental the political transformation currently under way in Europe really is.

The roots of consensus politics reach back to the time of the early bourgeois revolution in the sixteenth century. At the time, the provinces of the Netherlands were part of the Habsburg Empire, headed by the Spanish king, who ruled the Protestants with an iron fist and defended the feudal order with all the might of the Catholic Church.

In the course of their struggle against the Spanish yoke, the southern components of the 17 provinces of the Netherlands broke away from those in the north. The south—today's Belgium—was economically backward and remained Catholic, like Spain. The northern provinces, however, were heavily engaged in extending trade throughout the North Sea and fostering urban economy and culture. Lutheran Protestantism had made an early appearance there, followed by the Baptist religion and finally Calvinism, the dominant ideological force in opposition to feudal, Catholic Spain.

The northern provinces joined together in the Union of Utrecht in 1579 and succeeded in deposing their Spanish rulers two years later. Thus came into being the first Republic of the Netherlands. Owing to the division of region into provinces, its basic organisation did not take the form of a unified, centralised nation state—like those then beginning to take shape in France and Britain under the absolute power of monarchs—but of the political union of various provinces and towns of equal standing.

Since then, economic progress, internal stability and political continuity within the republic have largely been based on the art of recognising and respecting the particular interests of the various provinces, the various urban ruling classes, the various religious denominations and trade associations, and balancing them all in a "consensus," i.e., without completely suppressing or excluding any of the social, political or religious entities.

The upper classes' politics of consensus extended into the domain of social policy in relation to the subordinate classes. Unique within Europe in the seventeenth century, this led to the establishment of poorhouses and other welfare institutions, designed to defuse social conflict and strengthen the internal stability of the republic.

In the nineteenth century, this tradition was consciously continued in order to safeguard the domination of the bourgeoisie against the working class, which emerged with industrialisation, and the revolutionary movement it threatened to spawn. In 1848, farsighted middle-class politicians, led by the liberal Johan Rudolf Thorbecke, prevented the spread to the Netherlands of the revolutionary uprisings that had broken out all over Europe by implementing the first political reforms towards parliamentary democracy.

In the following decades, fundamental democratic rights such as freedom of assembly, freedom of education and postal privacy were gradually introduced. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the relatively late arrival of industrialisation in the Netherlands led to a drastic increase in the impoverishment and misery of the working class, social reforms were introduced to alleviate the worst of these excesses.

The bourgeoisie responded to the growth of the organised working class movement with a brand of politics known in the Netherlands as "verzuiling" (social building blocks). Each of the

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major Christian denominations, the Calvinist Protestants and the Catholic Church, formed one of these blocks, with its own schools, welfare and leisure institutions, media, political parties and trade unions, with the responsibility of bridging and concealing the growing gulf between the classes. Later, blocks formed from the reformist, social democratic unions and parties, as well as blocks from the business community and their parties and corporations, were added to the two denominational blocks.

Sustained by the enormous wealth accumulated from the colonial suppression of the people of Ceylon, Indonesia and Suriname and also by the organised slave trade, the Netherlands bourgeoisie was able to buttress these political blocks through the implementation of social reforms.

After the political and economic collapse caused by the Nazi occupation and the Second World War, the policy of socially cushioned consensus was revived and resumed. The increasing integration of the Netherlands into world trade and into the European Union compensated for the loss of colonies in the post-war era. Consensus politics was based on the domination of social democracy over the working class.

After the backwardness of the Dark Ages, the social ideal of hospitality and tolerance towards refugees, the heterodox and other dissenters found its first formulation in the early bourgeois revolution in the Netherlands. Owing to the necessity of uniting all social layers, all denominations and language groups in the struggle for liberation from Spanish oppression, the Union of Utrecht was expressly established in 1579 on the principle of religious freedom and tolerance towards dissidents.

In that era of the dawning of the European bourgeois revolution, the age of the Renaissance and Humanism, the Netherlands produced such important scientists and philosophers as Erasmus of Rotterdam, Hugo Grotius and Baruch Spinoza.

Erasmus of Rotterdam countered the medieval fundamentalism of the Christian scholastics with the authority and autonomy of human understanding and reason, and was the first to propagate the concept of individual freedom and tolerance in regard to religious issues. Against the background of the competition between the emerging Netherlands republic and the English and Spanish empires for colonies and control of the seas, Hugo Grotius, a leading representative of the Enlightenment, developed the concept of international civil rights.

Baruch Spinoza was one of the most outstanding spirits and one of the most attractive personalities in the whole of human history. His emphatic support for the democratic republican type of state against monarchy was rooted in his optimistic belief in the progressive nature of human reason, the pure and natural sciences and technology, and in his largely materialist philosophy of life in general. His personal modesty and readiness to help the poor were associated with a fundamental opposition to social inequality.

When Elector Karl Ludwig of the Palatinate, one of the more than 300 feudal princes throughout Germany, offered Spinoza, despite reproaches against the Dutch philosopher's quasi-atheistic views, the chair of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg in 1772, Spinoza refused with polite but determined words. He preferred to live in a republic, even if no public office or riches were granted him there. He argued that he was unsure of where "limits on the freedom to philosophise" would be drawn in the public office offered him in a princedom. Four years later, the Palatinate Electorate was conquered by the French army, its count expelled and the university placed under the trusteeship of the Catholic Church and its dogmas.

Except for the period of the wars of religion in the seventeenth century, the Netherlands was considered, long after Erasmus of Rotterdam and Spinoza, to be a tolerant country that accepted political refugees and persecuted peoples like the Jews with great hospitality. It was still well known for its liberal traditions in the nineteenth century.

In 1848, Thorbecke, then prime minister and author of the parliamentary constitution, considered it very important to disassociate himself from neighbouring Prussia, its militarism and police-state tradition, at least when it came to home rule in the Netherlands. Of course, this did not hold for the subjugation of the colonies. "At home we want a state where no police patrol the streets," he declared.

That these democratic and liberal traditions had long since ceased to constitute the basis of middle-class politics became clear at least by the time of the German occupation, when the police and all of the other authorities worked hand in hand with the Nazis to deport and murder 110,000 of the 140,000 Jews of the Netherlands. After the war, the Netherlands bourgeoisie concentrated its ideological endeavours on hushing up this collaboration and giving the appearance of continuing the democratic ideals of its revolutionary origins by reviving the politics of consensus.

Today, however, it has officially relinquished any claim to espouse a political programme for the whole society, for all classes. It is openly preparing for confrontation rather than consensus, and will thus inevitably provoke the social uprisings it has sought to avoid for 150 years.

In the Netherlands, it is the working class that has the task of defending democratic principles, one of the most important of which is the right to move freely throughout the world to find work and a place to live. In this respect, it can draw on the tradition of the protracted general strike against the persecution and deportation of the Jews of Amsterdam in February 1941. This constituted the only large-scale class response from workers to defend the Jews against the Nazis in Europe.

Above all, the working class must confront the historical task of establishing a new society on the basis of social equality. Understood in this context, the fight against racism, xenophobia and the prevalent indifference to the fate of refugees and immigrants is more than a humanitarian duty. The international alliance of working people is a strategic task, which will determine the fate of the working class in the Netherlands and the whole world.

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