

Sharp reversal for Social Democrats in Dutch elections

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7 December 2006

Two developments dominated the Dutch parliamentary elections held on November 22. First, the outgoing conservative government was unable to profit from its exploitation of racism in the election campaign. Instead, according to polls, social and economic issues were the central questions in the election. Second, the social democrats in the Netherlands were unable to translate widespread social discontent into electoral support.

Although the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA) has spent over four years in opposition, it lost nearly as many votes as the combined losses of all the government coalition parties. The party that registered the greatest gains was the Socialist Party, which has its origins in a Maoist organisation. It was able to treble its vote and became the third-strongest party.

All three government parties suffered a substantial loss of votes. The Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) of Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende lost 1.6 percent, but with 26 percent of the vote (2.6 million) and 41 seats, it remains the largest group in the Dutch parliament, which has a total of 150 seats.

The right-wing Liberal Party (VVD) lost 3 percent. With 14.6 percent of the vote it dropped to fourth place. The best known member of the VVD is the outgoing immigration minister Rita Verdonk, who personified the xenophobic policy of the former coalition government.

Democrats 66 (D'66), which quit the government coalition in June because of a conflict with Verdonk, saw its vote cut in half, recording only 2 percent.

The PvdA registered the biggest losses. Its vote declined from 27.3 percent in the last national elections in 2003 to 21.5 percent this time—a loss of 546,000 votes. Just over 2 million Dutch voters cast ballots for the social democrats.

The Socialist Party (SP) gained over a million votes, gaining 16.9 percent of the total cast.

In all, ten parties are represented in the new parliament, and all of them lack a clear majority. A total of 76 seats is necessary for an absolute majority in parliament. Neither a coalition of the CDA and VVD, nor a “grand coalition” of the CDA and PvdA, nor an alliance of the PvdA, SP and Greens (who polled 4.6 percent) have sufficient seats for a majority. The Netherlands confronts a long and torturous period of coalition negotiations.

In recent years Prime Minister Balkenende has led a number of different governments which sought to combine attacks on social conditions and living standards with xenophobic policies aimed at diverting social protest into nationalist channels. In 2002, Balkenende formed a government with the extreme right-wing List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) and began a systematic campaign against the most underprivileged layers in Dutch society.

Unemployment for non-Dutch workers and immigrants is five times the national average. Employed foreign workers generally are among the worst paid and most economically insecure. Approximately 40 percent of this group leave school without formal qualifications.

The xenophobic policies of the outgoing conservative government are bound up with the person of Rita Verdonk of the VVD. Nicknamed “Iron Rita,” the former prison governess and secret service employee was responsible for implementing the policies first put forward by the List Pim Fortuyn. The latter organisation will have no representation in the new parliament.

Verdonk replaced the previous process for assimilating refugees with a radically shortened procedure. At present, very few applications for asylum are accepted. Less than two percent of all refugees are granted full asylum.

Some 26,000 people, or 90 percent of refugees living in the country without residency rights, are in the process of being expelled under the provisions of a so-called “Amnesty Law.” The powers of the police and secret service have been broadly expanded.

Entire city suburbs, where large numbers of foreigners live, are subject to surveillance by the secret services and police, who carry out raids and body searches without having any evidence of illegal activity. A new police unit has been formed to concentrate on the hunt for “illegal” immigrants.

Until the 1980s, the Netherlands had the most liberal immigration laws in all of Europe. Since then its laws have become the most repressive. Against a background of mounting repressive legislation throughout Europe, this represents an enormous shift.

In the election campaign, Verdonk once again sought to play the racist card. Five days before the election, the government agreed on legislation banning the wearing in public of face veils and the full body Burka dress. However, this ploy did not play off. The majority of the electorate rejected this latest display of xenophobia.

According to all election polls, the most important issue for voters was the deepening social crisis in the country. Large-scale welfare cuts were enacted under Balkenende, and 44 percent of all households indicated that they face financial difficulties this year.

The duration of unemployment pay was shortened and a two-year freeze on wages imposed. Social security contributions made by workers were raised, while benefits were cut.

The retirement age at which individuals become eligible for pension benefits was raised, and new obstacles introduced for those seeking early retirement. The number of early retirements in the Netherlands, formerly quite high, has now declined to the European Union average.

The types of medical treatment covered by health insurance firms have been reduced, and at the start of this year the remnants of the

state health insurance system were completely privatized.

Considerable opposition developed to these welfare cuts. In the autumn of 2004, more than 200,000 protested against the anti-social policies of the government in the only large demonstration called by the trade unions that year. One year later, the European constitution, which had been actively supported by the government, was voted down by a majority of the electorate.

Nevertheless, the social democratic PvdA was unable to profit from the mass opposition to the Balkenende government. A number of press commentaries have sought to explain the losses for the PvdA on the basis of “positive” economic figures published shortly before the election.

The government anticipates economic growth this year of 3.25 percent, and Dutch enterprises have announced increased profits. The budget is in surplus for the first time in years, and the national debt has dropped below 60 percent of gross domestic product, the level prescribed by the European Union in its stability pact. According to official government figures, levels of unemployment and poverty are declining.

However, these statistics have little to do with the living standards of the majority of the Dutch population. It was not the “upswing” that led to the massive decline in support for the social democrats, led by former Shell Oil manager Wouter Bos. Ordinary workers have not benefited from this “upswing.” The real reason for the loss in support for the PvdA is the policies implemented and defended by the social democrats.

Pre-election polls pointed to Bos and the PvdA as the potential winners, and it appeared likely that the party would be able to translate growing social disquiet into votes. However, PvdA leaders had made very clear in the course of the election campaign that, should they capture control of the government, they would not reverse the social and welfare cuts and attacks on democratic rights that had already been carried out.

The PvdA had pioneered the first assault on the Dutch welfare state in the 1980s and 1990s with its so-called Polder Model—policies that were then continued by Balkenende. Twenty years later, the social democrats are determined not to change course.

Electoral support for the PvdA fell away after Bos declared that further consolidation of state finances required additional cuts in pensions and increases in social security contributions, while taxes would increase for ordinary home owners.

It was the Socialist Party (FR) which benefited from this situation in the elections. It had raised the issue of social and welfare cuts by the government—in particular, the privatization of the health service—and was able to mobilise support amongst the poorest layers of the population, which had previously voted in large numbers for the PvdA.

According to its own figures, membership in the SP has doubled over the last four years to nearly 50,000 (the PvdA still has 62,000 members), and polls show that SP chairman Jan Marijnissen is the most popular politician in the Netherlands.

The SP was established in 1971 through the fusion of several Maoist groups. At that time it called itself the Dutch Communist Party (Marxist Leninist). One year later, in October 1972, it renamed itself the Socialist Party. It soon dropped its socialist phraseology. What remained was the party’s nationalism, characteristic of Maoist organisations.

The SP has regularly employed xenophobic slogans. As far back as 1998, the SP chairman in Amsterdam called for the “consistent

application of existing laws against illegal immigrants.” Any indulgence or mild treatment, he argued, would only encourage more refugees—“many more than Dutch society could integrate through natural means.”

In 2002, during the short period in power of the coalition of the CDA and the List Pim Fortuyn, an SP deputy, Ali Lazrak, demanded that the government examine all Muslim schools and close them if their efforts to assimilate into Dutch society proved inadequate. Along the same lines, the SP parliamentary fraction did not condemn Verdonk’s more recent “Amnesty Law,” but merely demanded a change in the ratio of those assessed to favour an additional few hundred refugees.

In 2005, the SP opposed the European Union constitution from an entirely nationalist standpoint. “Before you say ‘yes’ to the constitution, you must understand that the Netherlands will become a powerless province if the constitution is accepted,” said SP chairman Marijnissen.

The SP owes its election success to the fact that it was able to pose as an opponent of the PvdA-CDA government as well as a “fighter against neo-liberalism.” The party, however, is strictly opposed to any independent movement of the working class, and seeks to prevent such a development by participating in a “left” bourgeois government.

The SP laid down the following goals for its election campaign: “17 or more mandates, a broad majority of the left, and a progressive government that reverses the attacks carried out by the present cabinet on the welfare state, on public services and the weakest sections of Dutch society.”

Bearing in mind that a majority in the Dutch parliament requires at least 76 seats, this can only mean that the SP is preparing to assume government responsibility along with the PvdA and the Greens, and possibly an additional party. In the election campaign and in its election program, the SP dropped its former demands for the abolition of the monarchy and the withdrawal of the Netherlands from NATO—policies that would hinder participation in a government coalition.

In respect to the SP’s withdrawal of this last demand, it should be noted that Dutch participation in the Iraq war has evoked substantial popular protest.

In a manner similar to Rifondazione Comunista in Italy and the Left Party in Germany, the SP is preparing to defend and support a bourgeois government in order to contain growing popular opposition and protest. No informed observer can seriously believe that a government coalition composed of the SP, PvdA and the Greens under the leadership of Wouter Bos would reverse “the attacks carried out by the present cabinet on the welfare state, on public services and the weakest layers of Dutch society.”

Upon being elected to the European parliament in 1999, an SP deputy joined the parliamentary fraction of the “United European Left” which included deputies from the German Left Party, the French Communist Party and the Italian Rifondazione. It is now clear that the SP is prepared to follow the course of its European allies in imposing the social attacks which it currently criticises.



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