

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title text.

Social Democracy in the Netherlands

Three Future Options

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March 2011

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- n Cultural and economic cleavages and new political issues such as immigration and European integration are dividing social democratic constituencies and leading to an erosion of the »leftist working class«. While the Left as a whole remains fairly stable, the PvdA has become a minority within the progressive camp. The fragmentation of the Left is both a cause and consequence of the erosion and fragmentation of the post-war *Volksparteien*.
- n Both in terms of ideology and in terms of constituency, Dutch social democracy faces tough challenges and inevitable choices. Will it remain a *Volkspartei*, bridging the gap between the modernising and conservative parties on the left and bringing together different segments and moods in society – in other words, restoring the post-war grand coalition between the working and middle classes? This article uses the experiences of the Dutch PvdA to sketch out a concept of neo-idealism founded on a »people-based economy« and a »return of positive freedom«.



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Executive summary

The Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) has been fairly successful in terms of government participation since 1989, but rather unsuccessful electorally. As a member of various government coalitions, it has shared the mainstream views of this period, embracing the »Third Way« approach to welfare state reform, the deregulation and privatisation of the public sector and the promotion of a larger and more integrated European Union. Combined with a rather pragmatic style of governance, this has alienated a substantial part of the PvdA's traditional electorate.

Since 1990 (locally) and 1994 (nationally), Dutch politics has experienced extreme voter volatility. The decline of core electorates and the polarisation and fragmentation of voters has led to an erosion of the two traditional mainstream *Volkspartijen*, the Christian democrats and the social democrats.

Cultural and economic cleavages and new political issues such as immigration and European integration are dividing social democratic constituencies and leading to an erosion of the »leftist working class«. A new meritocracy is arising, splitting the electorate into a more educated segment that is optimistic about the future and embraces change and internationalization, and a less educated segment that has more to lose from the internationalisation and modernisation of society. At the same time we are witnessing a rise in support for parties at the extremes of the political spectrum that have an unprecedented populist appeal. These profit from and encourage anti-establishment attitudes and distrust of political parties and politicians and mobilise anti-immigration sentiments.

In the meantime, social democracy has lost its monopoly of the Left. While the Left as a whole remains fairly stable, the PvdA has become a minority within the progressive camp, winning only 30 seats at the 2010 elections, as compared with 15 seats for the more radical Socialist Party, 10 seats for the GreenLeft and 10 for the progressive liberals of D66. The fragmentation of the Left is both a cause and consequence of the erosion and fragmentation of the post-war *Volkspartijen*.

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gap between the modernising and conservative parties on the left and bringing together different segments and moods in society – in other words, restoring the post-war grand coalition between the working and middle classes? The authors believe it should, although this would require a kind of Houdini act.

This article uses the experiences of the Dutch PvdA to sketch out a concept of neo-idealism founded on a »people-based economy« and a »return of positive freedom«.

Brief Historical Overview

The Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij (SDAP) was founded in 1894 by those in the Dutch labour movement who preferred the parliamentary road to the more anarchistic and syndicalistic tendencies of the time. In 1897 the SDAP entered parliament with just two seats, yet it was to become the mainstream of the Dutch labour movement, with the Dutch Federation of Labour Unions (NVV) as its partner. After the introduction of universal suffrage in 1920 the SDAP gained around 20 per cent of the vote. It remained a minority movement in Dutch society, however, competing with two other major emancipation movements: the radical Protestant lower middle class and the Roman Catholics, who each established and maintained their own labour unions.

Social democracy in the Netherlands was an isolated movement, »contained« by the confessional organisations who sought to protect their constituencies from the »red menace«. That is why Dutch social democracy never succeeded in monopolising the workers' vote, but remained one of three coexisting »pillars« in a highly segmented and segregated society and political system: a Catholic pillar (consisting of several political and civil organisations), a Protestant pillar and a socialist pillar dominated by the political culture of the liberal bourgeoisie.

Before World War II the social democrats put much of their energy into strengthening their own movement, creating a »red family«, including a youth movement with a specific culture of flags, dances and distinctive clothing, women's clubs, an educational institute, choirs, a broadcasting association, a publishing company and a newspaper. They also found political strength in local politics, where they implemented a political program of public utilities, better housing conditions, health care, ed-

education and cultural emancipation. Local politics turned out to be a laboratory for the post-war welfare state and it remains an important aspect of social democracy in the Netherlands to this day, especially in the cities.

It was not until 1939 – following the outbreak of war – that the social democrats entered the national government. This came in the wake of a fundamental renewal or revision of the economic program (*Plan van de Arbeid*, with strong Keynesian/Tinbergen elements) and of the basic principles and electoral strategy of the SDAP. The party turned away from classical Marxist dogmas, introduced ethical values instead of historical necessity as the basis for social democratic politics, accepted the monarchy and national defence, embraced parliamentary democracy as a basic value in itself and placed the labour movement solidly in the national tradition. The SDAP transformed itself from a workers' party into a people's party, which also embraced the new (professional) middle class. These changes prepared the ground for the newly founded Partij van de Arbeid in 1946, which was to unite all progressive forces in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, this progressive union was only partially successful, since making inroads into the confessional »milieus« once again turned out to be a mission impossible.

From 1946 to 1958 the PvdA and the catholic KVP formed the axis of broad coalition governments, responsible for very effective economic reconstruction and industrialisation after the war, and for the establishment of the Dutch welfare state. The Dutch social democratic Keynes – Nobel Prize-winner Jan Tinbergen – together with the Van Rhijn Committee (which followed the recipes of Beveridge) were responsible for the PvdA input; Willem Drees, prime minister from 1946 till 1958, and his colleagues for the political implementation. Although not without tensions, this was the most successful period of co-operation between the social democratic and Christian democratic *Volkspartijen* in the Netherlands during which a modern economy and a welfare state were established.

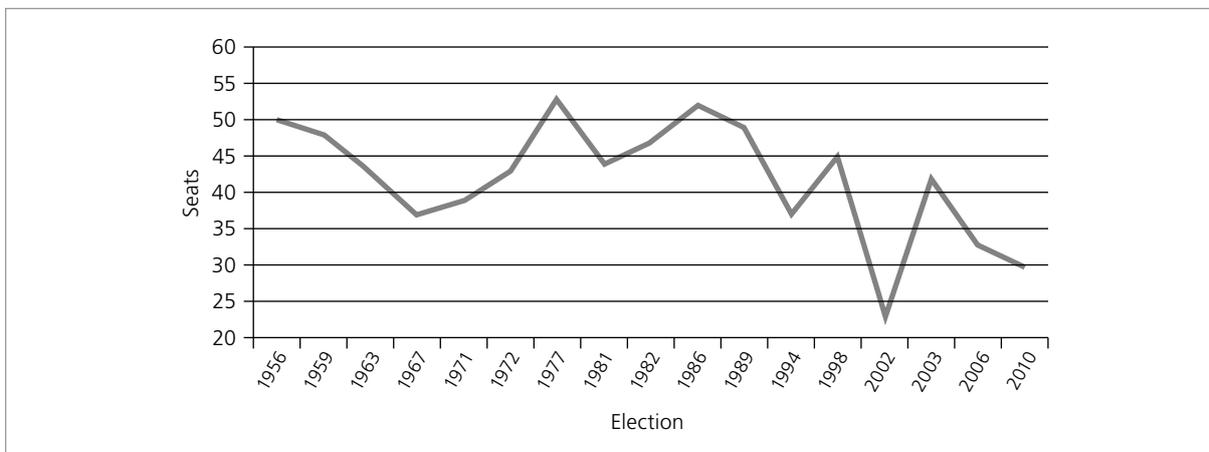
The sixties and seventies were a period of radicalisation in the Dutch Labour Party, within which a strong New Left movement emerged demanding new social movements outside the PvdA. Party leader Joop den Uyl, a political friend of Willy Brandt and Olaf Palme, tried to reflect the new *Zeitgeist* with a program favouring a strong public sector (inspired by the American economist

J.K. Galbraith), the democratisation of politics and society (Anthony Crossland) and a fair distribution of knowledge (education), income and power. Quality of life (»Om de kwaliteit van het bestaan«) was the unifying concept for this program, which the legendary Den Uyl-cabinet (1973–1977) sought to realise. It was formed around a progressive alliance, with the (increasingly reluctant) support of two Christian democratic parties. The cabinet represented the progressive mood of the moment, but had great trouble realising its goals.

This radical period lasted some time. It was Wim Kok who, as party leader, went back to the more classical consociational style of compromise and pragmatism and brought the PvdA back into office, serving as minister of finance in the Lubbers III cabinet (1989–1994) and as prime minister of the purple coalitions – with the conservative (VVD) and progressive (D66) liberals (1994–2002). This was the period of the successful »poldermodel«, which combined social stability, economic growth and growing employment, particularly in the form of part-time jobs. Having »shaken off the ideological feathers« of the PvdA in a famous speech in 1995, Kok was perhaps a trifle too pragmatic, but he represented one extreme of the party's characteristic vacillation between ideological rigour and pragmatism in which it engaged in alternating cycles.

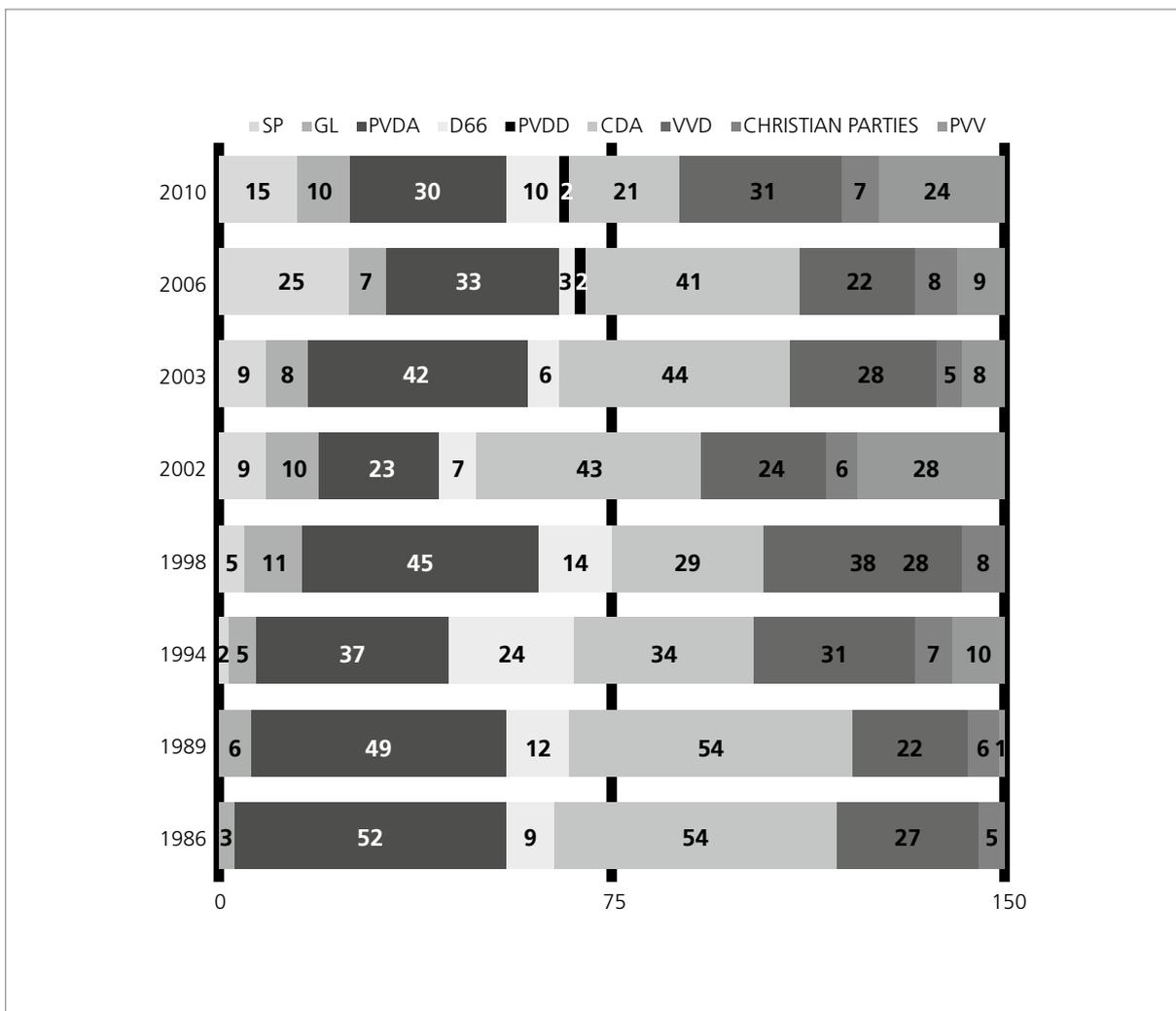
A critical report about the Dutch UN peacekeeping mission during the fall of the Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica – long after the shocking events had happened – brought an early end to the second Kok government and ushered in the phase of Dutch politics that has lasted until now.

PvdA election results



(Source: Pim Paulusma)

Distribution of seats in parliament (1986–2010)



The current situation of the party

The year 2002 was one of the most remarkable in recent Dutch politics and proved the unreliability of research based on general data. While in 2001 the public was still expressing enormous satisfaction with the government in charge – the purple coalition – the rise shortly thereafter of Pim Fortuyn, who may be labelled as a post-modern populist, suddenly turned everything upside down. With his tough criticism of Islam as a backward culture, his all-out attack on the »established« parties for what he claimed was incompetence in running the public sector and a strong anti-labour sentiment, he trounced the social democrats in local elections in Rotterdam and looked set to make similar gains in the national elections when he was suddenly shot dead. His party nonetheless performed very well in the elections, but fell apart while in government soon afterwards. The PvdA, on the other hand, lost half of its electorate and only won 23 seats in parliament, an all time low.

This ushered in a period of political instability, which has yet to come to an end and certainly has not favoured social democracy. For attentive political observers, the turmoil did not come out of the blue. Local elections in the big cities from 1990 onward had already shown a deep distrust of social democratic city politicians – and specifically in Rotterdam the rise of the extreme Right.

On the national level, it is clear that the Dutch electorate has gone adrift since 1994 – with large fluctuations in the vote. What is especially striking is the growing fragmentation and the hollowing out of the two main-stream parties: the Christian democrats and the social democrats. Ultimately the only established party to benefit from the dismantling of the traditional pillars since the seventies have been the conservative liberals. New parties, especially on the ends of the political spectrum, have challenged the centre parties: the Socialist Party on the left, and the LPF and the PVV on the right.

The year 2002 was not only an all time low for the PvdA, but also for the progressive parties as a whole, including D66. In general, the Left, or if we include D66 the progressive parties, has achieved a fairly constant 60 to 70 seats in parliament. But this conceals major shifts within the Left. With the exception of 2003, when Wouter Bos was the »new kid on the block« as party leader and re-

stored the PvdA to 43 seats, the social democrats have lost their monopoly, or even their majority within the Left.

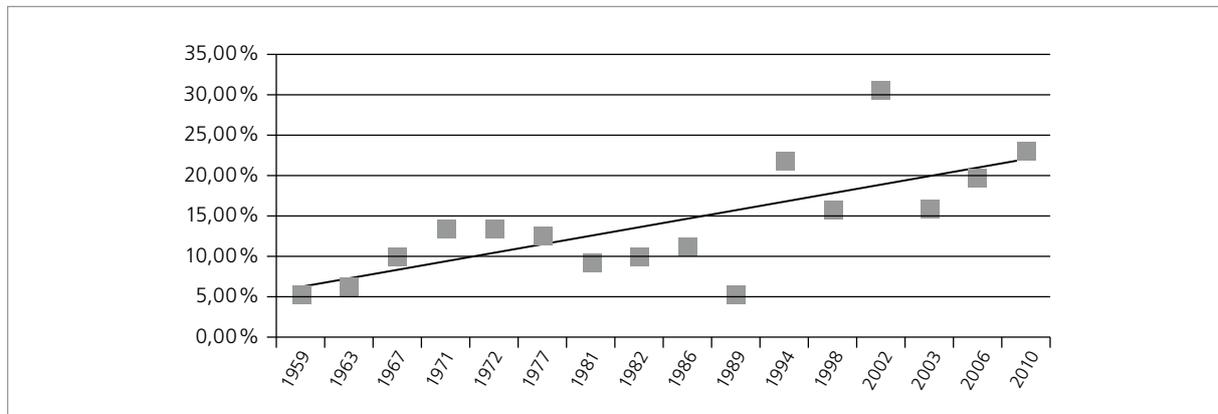
Seats in the 150-seat parliament

	2002	2003	2006	2010
PvdA	23	42	33	30
SP	9	9	25	15
GL	10	8	7	10
D66	7	6	3	10

In general, the volatility of the voters – which began with floating voters around 1970, although recent elections have resembled more of a sandstorm – has been explained as a liberation of the electorate following the steady and loyal vote that characterised the period of the three pillars in the fifties and early sixties. Voting has become an individual expression of individual emotion. The open, representative electoral system in the Netherlands is, moreover, extremely sensitive to shifts among the electorate. As true as this may be, it is clear that some parties have lost while others have gained. This volatility has, in other words, assumed a particular direction. The Christian democrats have suffered most, but the social democrats are a good second-best. Since the nineties, both the best and worst votes polled by the PvdA in national elections have been considerably lower than those in the decades of Drees and Den Uyl. Has Dutch social democracy lost its distinctive profile under the leadership of Wim Kok and Wouter Bos? What we can say is that the potential electorate of the PvdA has diminished and that leaders have become much stronger brand names than the party.



Electoral volatility (1959–2010)



What Has Happened to the PvdA?

What explains the electoral fate of social democracy in the Netherlands? Which causes are at work? First of all, there are some general explanations that may be valid for social democracy throughout North-Western Europe.

■ The success factor: As old societies based on class division have moved in the direction of middle-class societies and the children of the former working class have become upwardly mobile, their interests and social and cultural perspectives have shifted away from social democracy.

■ The individualisation factor: Defending key social democratic concepts such as the collective spirit, solidarity and social security seems to be an uphill struggle against the rising tide of individual responsibility and negative freedom expressed in the mantra »Get out of my way. Don't interfere with my personal choice and taste«.

■ The loss of political identity factor: Having completed the welfare state project in the seventies, social democracy had to reinvent itself in the wake of the economic crisis that followed and the shift from Keynesianism to Reaganomics and Thatcherism.

■ The pragmatic adaptation factor: One outcome of the revisionist project was Third Way politics – an attempt to adapt to the new, global economy and mainstream economic thinking about welfare state reform and supply side economics – what one might call social democracy's »fatal flirtation« with neo-liberalism.

While there may be some truth in all of these explanations, we would like to add a few others. In terms of sociology, the new trends seem to have complicated the PvdA's electoral position. As Hans-Peter Kriesi and others have shown, a new type of sociological division is appearing in European societies: a division between on the one hand, those who are optimistic about the future – in terms of personal development and the direction society is taking – and who profit from the new chances internationalization offers and who embrace the internationalisation of cultural life – what might be called *the new cosmopolitans* – and on the other, those who are much less optimistic about their future chances in life and about possibilities for social improvement for themselves or their children, who are specifically pessimistic or angry about the major changes immigration has brought about and who are distrustful of politicians and political parties. Not only globalisation, but also new technologies and management styles seem to have aggravated this new social, cultural and psychological divide. The dividing line cuts right across the middle classes – and right across the social democratic electorate.

There is no doubt that since the concept of a broad people's party was put into practice by the PvdA, it has always been difficult to include both blue-collar workers and the middle classes, both bread and butter interests and post-materialistic interests in one party. Now, however, under the conditions of accelerated globalisation, mass migration and the new post-industrial knowledge-based economy, the task of maintaining such a coalition has become immeasurably greater for the Dutch labour party. The PvdA is now not only losing ground among the

traditional working class, with the PVV, the SP and the VVD as rivals for its support, but also among the more post-materialistic middle classes who have turned to the progressive liberalism of D66 and the GreenLeft.

So the PvdA is losing ground on two sides: both on the side of the cosmopolitan academic professionals, and on the side of »the neglected voters« who formed its traditional constituency. In nearly all European countries, populism is on the rise. In some countries we encounter the phenomenon of left-wing populism, while in many others right-wing populism, or even extreme right-wing populism is taking hold. These movements have become increasingly attractive for the social democratic constituencies, exploiting and mobilising fear, discontent, anti-elitism and anti-immigration sentiments. Some analysts are already speaking of bidding »farewell to the leftist working class«.

The question is how can social democracy bridge the meritocratic divide between the more educated cosmopolitan segments of society and the »communitarian, national-populist« less educated ones? How can it fight both populism itself and the causes of populism, including genuine feelings of degradation and discontent, in a rapidly transforming society? How can it make policy discourse and politics less elitist and less technocratic and restore a style of communication that inspires trust? How can it design alternative scenarios for a globalised world, restoring the left-right divide as a substitute for the populist cleavage?

The new cleavages in the electorate clearly centre on new issues or previously dormant issues that have now come to the fore, mobilised by public intellectuals, politicians and political parties. These issues include immigration, integration, national identity and European integration. Political scientists have made much of these new cleavage lines, indicating that there is an electoral wasteland to conquer in the cultural-conservative, social-economic progressive quadrant of the electoral map. Yet there are at least two other aspects of this map that should be taken into account. First, social democracy has lost its electoral card in terms of socio-economic issues. The lower middle class in particular does not feel adequately represented by the PvdA: neither in terms of income, nor in terms of public services. They tend to be critical of welfare state spending and of the benefits of the public sector. The »old« program of public sector social democ-

racy might be ideologically sound, but it is in sore need of a strategy for selling it to the electorate.

A second element we need to take into account is what we might call the shadow side of meritocracy and its effects on the electoral map. The basic idea that people merit their function not because of birth, wealth or rank but because of talent and effort is a sound one, but its implications are in some respects dubious. Education has become not only the most important carrier of social mobility, but also of new inequality and new cultural and social cleavages and segregation. As Dutch education expert Jaap Dronkers has put it: education is the backbone of inequality. It has become harder to move up the social ladder, and low skilled work has lost the respect it deserves. Meritocracy has changed the pattern of social mobility from a ladder to an hourglass. By emphasising the knowledge economy and meritocratic mobility, the social democrats have alienated part of their constituency.

Part of the explanation has not so much to do with the sociology of politics as with the performance, style and representation of the labour party itself. During the eighties, while the PvdA was in opposition on the national level, social democratic city politics was more and more dominated by political managers who promoted large-scale city plans as a way of giving themselves a high local and international profile while simultaneously losing touch with their more traditional constituency. They developed a style of governance that was »in-crowd« directed, perceived as arrogant and compared with authoritarian rule (»Brezhnev at the Amstel river of Amsterdam«). The party became a career machine instead of a political movement – resulting in a loss of trust that manifested itself at election time in the early nineties.

As often before, local politics foreshadowed what was to happen nationally. The welfare state reform, the introduction of market principles in public services, privatisation and deregulation, including New Public Management in the public sector, became part of a rather technocratic style of government. Managing the public sector – maybe with the best intentions – instead of representing the aspirations of its constituency became the party's day-to-day business – to make matters worse some of this management was poor. The educational reform of that period is one of the most notorious political projects of the Dutch labour party. In the last decade, moreover,

the party has lost organisational capacity and competence and no longer meets the professional standards the ordinary citizen has now become used to. The most recent election campaigns were poorly run; the party is eroding in terms of social roots; and its political style is simply not appealing. Competition has become tougher and tougher, helped by the extremely open Dutch electoral system, which reflects the mood of the electorate like a barometer.

The left political spectrum has also experienced increased competition and fragmentation. All flavours are represented: a socialist-populist party close to the trade unions (SP); a social liberal party (D66) and a green party (GroenLinks) for academic professionals only; an animal rights party; and a progressive Christian party (CU), all alongside the PvdA. Currently this league of parties on the left is neither willing nor able to co-operate closely or to form a new united progressive movement. (Even the most right-wing-government at the moment – the Mark Rutte cabinet, consisting of conservative liberals (VVD), the conservative wing of the CDA, supported by the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Geert Wilders – does not seem to have triggered a progressive momentum.)

The Remarkable Adventures of Wouter Bos

After the 2002 disaster, Wouter Bos, the PvdA's charismatic new leader launched a campaign to re-establish touch with the party's lost voters, showing serious interest in their concerns: He succeeded in winning 41 seats in parliament, a respectable political comeback, albeit not enough to govern without entering into a coalition with the Christian democrats. This proved to be an insurmountable barrier. The Dutch Christian democrats have not often formed coalition governments with the social democrats and have never been particularly enthusiastic about doing so, let alone with the PvdA as the majority partner. In recent decades, however, the relationship between the two parties has deteriorated – reaching Antarctic temperatures in the last government. The Christian democrats have clearly moved to the right preferring centre-right coalitions over centre-left ones and at the time of writing were participating in a minority coalition with the conservative liberals of the VVD supported by Wilders' PVV. In socio-economic terms they have moved in a neo-liberal direction and in socio-cultural terms to

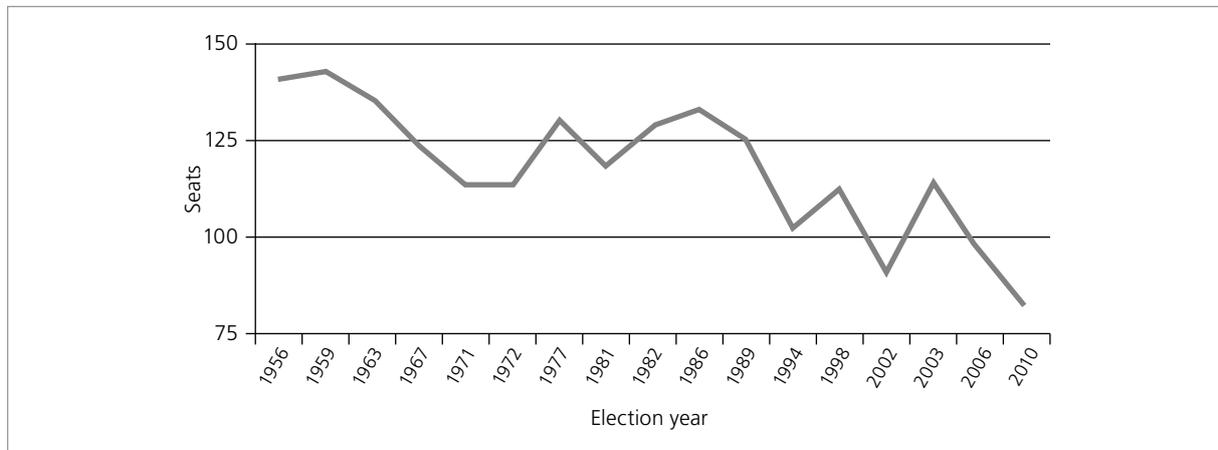
the conservative side of the political spectrum. Having abandoned their traditional centrist position they are losing touch with the left wing of Christian-democracy albeit while still maintaining a pivotal position in power politics, since the Left as well as the Right needs them for a majority coalition.

The constituencies and lifestyles of both historic mainstream parties have grown apart as well. The social democrats remain fairly strong in their traditional habitat, the big cities of the Randstad (the metropolitan area of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht and The Hague), as well as in the countryside and cities in the North, just like the other progressive parties. The Christian democrats are almost absent in the metropolitan area, but until the last elections appealed mainly to the traditional middle class voters in the south and in the countryside in the east, south-west and centre of the Netherlands.

During the centre-right Balkenende government, Wouter Bos, who had already been secretary of finance in the last Kok government, led the PvdA in opposition, without becoming the clear-cut opposition leader, since the GreenLeft and SP leaders performed very well in parliament. The process of evaluating the Third Way decade of Dutch social democracy that had started right after 2002, did not come to a halt but seemed to have lost much of its urgency and momentum after the electoral comeback. Moreover, in the merciless light of media democracy, the party leadership was not very keen on open debate. The Dutch *Ill fares the land*, which was published by the Wiardi Beckman Foundation's director Paul Kalma with the title *The left, the right and the idea of progress* in 2004, was a serious critique of the neo-liberal influence on social democratic thinking and was ill received by the party leadership.

The turmoil in Dutch politics affected not only the Left, but also the right. In 2006 the Balkenende cabinet once again had to call early elections. As an opposition part the PvdA was high in the polls, and expected to poll around 60 seats in parliament in spring 2006. Despite doing well in the local elections held at that time, the combination of a lousy election campaign, fierce attacks by the Christian democrats and tough competition from Left, especially from the more radical SP produced the party's second worst postwar result and exposed the structural weakness of the PvdA, as was documented in the book we edited ourselves, *Verloren slag* (a summary

Center Parties (CDA, VVD, PvdA)



has been published on the websites of FES and British Policy Network as »The political center under pressure«).

In terms of constituencies, Dutch social democracy appeared to have increasing problems holding together the coalition of the working class and the lower and upper middle classes – in other words, the coalition of power feminists, immigrants, left-wing academics and the large group of average and below-average earners. In terms of policies, the PvdA lacked a clear profile – at times embracing a more neo-liberal welfare state reform strategy, at others espousing a more traditional social-democratic direction – while the Wouter Bos effect seemed to have worn off/reached its limits offering little appeal for a broader public.

This was not the first time that a poor election result led to government participation for the social democrats. From 2006 until 2010 the PvdA was a minority partner in the Balkenende IV government, together with the Christian democrats and the Christian Union (CU). This turned out not to be a very successful adventure. The frictions between the two most important partners that had risen during the election campaign continued to haunt the governing team. Balkenende's leadership was extremely weak, and the few social democratic ministers performed poorly, especially the one responsible for one of the central themes of the PvdA: the improvement of backward neighbourhoods. One of the assets of Dutch social democracy – taking government responsibility – turned out to be a liability. The PvdA did not succeed in putting its mark on the cabinet and lacked political

profile, hopelessly divided as it was about the direction of further reforms. While supporting raising the retirement age, it turned down a liberalisation of the labour market.

As the financial crisis hit the major banks and financial system in Holland, Wouter Bos was to play an important – and in public opinion fairly successful – role, nationalizing ABN AMRO and bailing out other Dutch financial institutions in what turned out to be an extremely large-scale operation for the public purse. As the financial crisis impacted on the state budget, it became clear that the government was seriously divided about how to handle the aftershocks; and social democracy could not provide a clear answer either. In fact, Third Way social democracy was held partly responsible for the crisis because it had supported financial deregulation and had maintained the system of greed represented by the massive bonuses paid to banking executives.

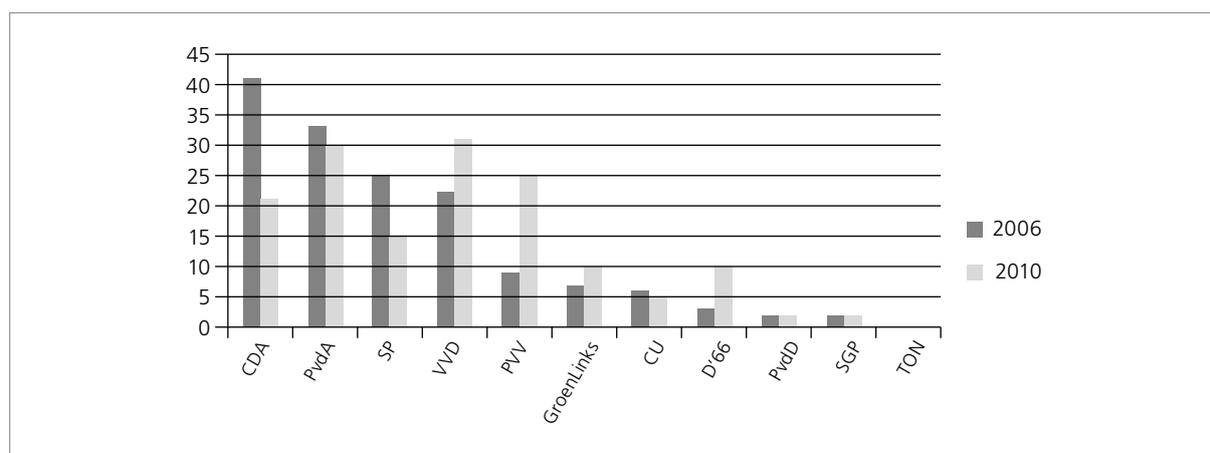
The credit Wouter Bos had built up melted away very fast, as the polls showed week by week with the PvdA's poll rating falling to around 13 per cent. In spring 2010, Bos forced an early end to the Balkenende government over the issue of Dutch military participation in Afghanistan. This helped to limit the party's losses in the 2010 elections, but eroded confidence among governing circles about the long-term governmental credibility of the PvdA.

The Elections of 2010: A Failed Catharsis

Early in 2010, Wouter Bos took stock of the Third Way period of social democracy – a period, a program and a style of governance of which he had been a clear representative. He gave a critical assessment in the Den Uyl Lecture (2009): »My view is that many followers of the Third Way, and with them many politicians of other movements, underestimated the market dynamics in combination with globalisation. No doubt, they were sincere about their conviction that the market could be tamed and could be a servant of society. That, however, turned out to be wrong. It is especially the combination of deregulation and globalisation and the ensuing sharp rise in competition of the past decades which have changed the face of capitalism. () The biggest tragedy of the Third Way, however, lies in the fact that the necessary shift in social democracy to a more positive attitude towards trade and industry, the free market and entrepreneurship took place at a moment when modern capitalism was changing its character. The normalisation of social democracy vis-à-vis the private sector and the recognition of the productive side of social capitalism thus became the victim of a tragic timing problem. To express it graphically, the Third Way progressives went to bed while there was a reasonably controlled free market, but woke to find an unchained monster.«

This was a clear signal, although rather at odds with Bos' earlier positions. However, like many other signals, it did not lead to a new coherent perspective. The PvdA does not seem capable of internalizing a common greed or taking a common direction. Would a new leader help? The PvdA tried the experiment. For personal reasons, Wouter Bos stepped down in favour of Job Cohen, mayor of Amsterdam and well known for his views on social and cultural cohesion and his moderate stance in the debate about immigration and integration. On the anniversary of the *Berliner Republik* he stated: »The central mission of social democracy is in my opinion to offer people the perspective of a decent society, a society with trust, social cohesion and mutual respect. The social democratic story is ultimately about binding, bonding and bridging. It is crucial to »keep people in society together« or to maintain a socially integrated society. To fight risky individualisation, fragmentation and polarisation. We should not tolerate a large degree of inequality, but should instead keep everyone in society connected to one another. This is the basic philosophy of European social democracy and a necessary correction of the political direction we have taken in recent decades. It is a call to be moderate – as an answer to fanaticism and hysteria, both from extreme populist voices and from disconnected elites who enrich themselves and preach overall adaptation to the globalised world, but who in the meantime pay little or no attention to the political, cultural and social costs of this adaptation. This is one of the root causes for the existence of populism – of discontent, fear and anger.«

Results 2006–2010



CDA = Christian Democratic Appeal; PvdA = Labour Party; SP = Socialist Party; VVD = People's Party for Freedom and Democracy; PVV = Party for Freedom; Groenlinks = GreenLeft; CU = Christian Union; D66 = Democrats 66; SGP = Reformed Political Party; PvdD = Party for the Protection of Animals; TON = Proud of the Netherlands. Graphic: Pim Paulusma

In fact, Cohen entered national politics to stand up against Wilders. His leadership initially aroused a swell of enthusiasm («Yes, we Cohen»), but the election campaign fell short of expectations. Cohen had trouble responding to the aggressive anti-PvdA campaign; and the campaign organisation was not up to the job for his type of leadership and failed to profit from his strengths. In the end, the PvdA managed to climb out of its deep depression in the polls but just felt short of taking the lead: with 31 seats as opposed to the PvdA's 30, the conservative liberal VVD just piped it at the post.

The result was a more fragmented political landscape than we have seen for a long time – with 20 per cent parties as leading, and a divided Right and Left, leaving the people's parties hollowed out. The VVD was able to take the lead in forming a new right-wing government and Wilders' PVV made a serious breakthrough. Anti-establishment, anti-social democratic, anti-immigration and anti-Islam feelings evidently played a mobilising role in these elections – among Wilders voters as well as among VVD and CDA voters. Indeed, the laboratory of Dutch politics continues to produce surprises, for these two parties formed a government with a special contract with Geert Wilders to get his parliamentary support. For the PvdA, a period in opposition offers an opportunity to get back on track.

But existential questions should be asked, given the However, the extreme electoral volatility, the fragmentation of the political centre – i.e., the erosion of the post-war people's parties – the historic majority of the Right, the

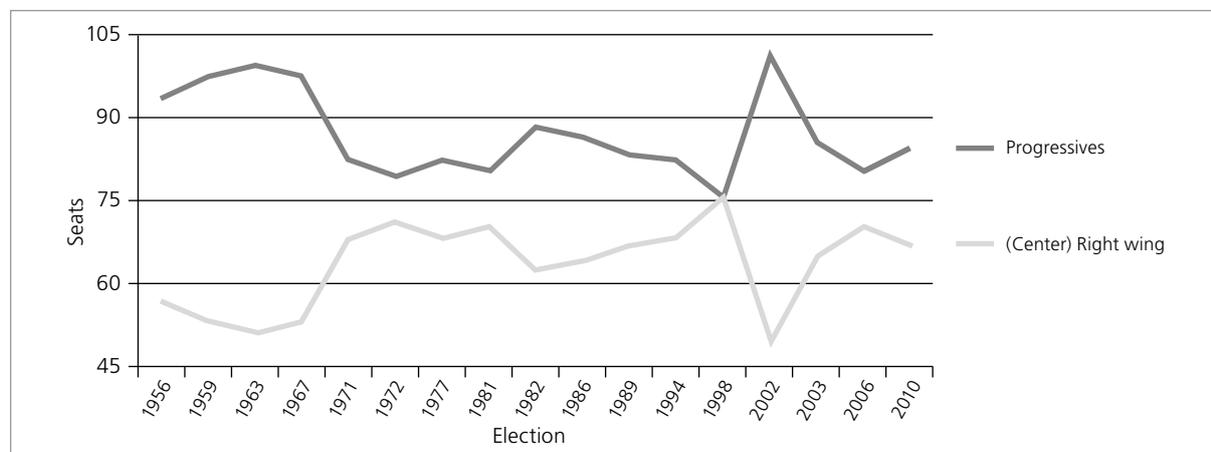
vehement anti-Left and anti-baby boom cultural sentiments, as well as the fragmentation and division within the Left itself between reformists and anti-reformists begs a number of existential questions. We therefore conclude this portrayal of the contemporary Dutch Labour Party, the PvdA, by outlining the different options for the future.

Where is the PvdA Going? Three options for the future.

Since the 2002 wave of populism in the Netherlands, new attempts have been made to get back in touch with the (presumably) lost electorate. Wouter Bos' critical evaluation in his Den Uyl lecture of the PvdA's accommodation to Third Way politics (2010) followed on the heels of a new party document on immigration and integration, proposing a much stricter approach. This document, however, proved to be divisive within the constituency of the Dutch Labour party, leaving the party in limbo: Neither the social-liberal Third Way adaptation to the economy, nor the integrationist adaptation to anti-immigrant populism have united and inspired the party with a new self-confidence or a new common sense of direction.

What are the strategic choices today? Are we trying to reanimate an anachronistic political movement (a workers' party in a post-industrial society), or does social democracy still contain hidden potential to reunite fragmenting and polarising societies? Although the trends may be compelling, we think that there is enough room for

Division of Seats between Progressive and (Centre) Right-wing Parties



manoeuvre to allow innovation and the redefinition of the social democratic project under new circumstances. Basically, three options are open for social democracy.

The first would be to make a clear-cut choice in favour of the »enlightened« professional middle classes as our most important constituency. They represent the future of the knowledge economy and are a growing segment of society, concentrated in the metropolitan areas. They are the carriers of optimistic, liberal and cosmopolitan views on internationalisation, multicultural integration and European unification. Such a choice would facilitate a coalition or even close cooperation with the other two liberal-left parties, D66 and GreenLeft, around a common project of further flexibilisation of the labour market, European political integration, green innovation, individual autonomy and stimulating talent. It would represent a cultural follow-up to the – primarily social and economic – Third Way, Dutch-style. As a side-effect this option might attract specific support from the new career and »power« feminists and migrant groups.

The second option would be to choose what, in contravention of all the laws of marketing and PR, has been labelled a »social democracy of fear« (Tony Judt). This would be aimed at regaining the support of the traditional as well as the new, flexible working classes and the lower middle class, and those dependent on public services, social security and welfare. It would defend the protection and security which the classical welfare state used to offer. It would be extremely critical of market forces, especially in the public sector, and of the European Union – at least of the market fundamentalist way in which it currently functions. It would be more activist, with strong local roots. This choice would entail closer cooperation with the Socialist Party (in the Dutch case) or Die Linke (in the German case). It would also restore a close coalition with the trade unions.

Then there is a third option – not to be confused with a new Third Way! This option would involve freeing ourselves – Houdini-like – from the constraints in which we currently find ourselves and restoring the broad coalition of the working class and middle class, flexible workers in the personal services sector and professionals in the new knowledge sectors, enlightened entrepreneurs and unionised industrial workers. This option would unite the aims of protection and emancipation with the aspirations and commitment of those who are succeeding in

contemporary society. It would address the responsibility, commitment, participation and citizenship of both those who have a lot to gain and of those who have already gained a lot. It would entail a broad coalition of the Left, bridging the gap between the conservative and the liberal left, and new alliances with the third sector and civic initiatives. Since we are true Houdini enthusiasts,¹ we definitely favour this third option, which we will present briefly.

As the 2010 Dutch national elections have shown once again,² social democracy is losing electoral support to the conservative left (SP) and the progressive-liberal left (Greens and social-liberal D66). It is even losing votes to the Wilders party, not directly at these elections, but certainly – in the long term – indirectly, being bypassed by abstentions or a vote shift to the SP, illustrating the farewell of the leftist working class. The Dutch Labour Party is still the main force on the Left (with 30 seats, compared to 10 for the GL and D66 and 15 for the SP), but it is having trouble defining an authentic position vis-à-vis its progressive competitors. It will be able to survive – whether as an independent force of the Left or as part of a larger progressive alliance – only if it comes up with a project of its own.

In order to restore a coalition of the different social democratic constituencies, a program is needed that connects the materialist perspective of fair pay, decent work, opportunities for advancement, and social and physical security with a post-materialistic or cultural perspective involving a sustainable environment, an open outlook on the world around us and a degree of acceptance of cultural diversity. Such a program would counterbalance the strong centrifugal forces in the economic, cultural and political realms: growing inequality, ossifying cultural cleavages, and division lines of distrust and abstention in our democracies. Moreover, it would halt the commercialisation of public goods, instead, strengthening *res publica* by introducing a new public ethic and orientation, also in the private and third sectors. It would also produce an agenda characterised by modesty, self-restraint and moderation, built around notions of eco-

1. Harry Houdini (1874–1926) was a Hungarian-American magician and escapologist who became famous for his daring stunts. He was also a famous debunker of self-proclaimed psychics and mystics.

2. See also Frans Becker and René Cuperus, *Politics in a fragmented society: the 2010 elections in the Netherlands*. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/07318.pdf>



logical, social and cultural »sustainability«, counteracting the hyper-consumerist rat race. This could be seen as a restoration of the concept of quality of life, but in an unprecedented fashion.

A fourth and final option, however, could be the formation of a progressive alliance, to counter fragmentation within the Left and to fight the centre-right/right-wing populist majority. This option –close cooperation between the Greens, social-liberals, socialist populists and social democrats – may be the best hope the PvdA has of restoring the progressive, tolerant, culturally libertarian world image of the Netherlands. The future will tell.



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Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
International Policy Analysis
Hiroshimastraße 28 | 10785 Berlin | Germany

Responsible:
Dr. Gero Maaß, Head, International Policy Analysis

Tel.: ++49-30-269-35-7745 | Fax: ++49-30-269-35-9248
www.fes.de/ipa

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ISBN 978-3-86872-662-6