

Rise and rise of the Dutch Socialist Party: new perspectives for socialism or naïve, hip, left parliamentarism?

Sunday 16 September 2012, by [DE JONG Alex](#), [WATERMAN Peter](#), [WROTH Will](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2012).

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September 1, 2012 – *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Although parliamentary elections are often billed as “historic”, and results hailed as “landslides” and “political earthquakes”, it usually turns out not to have been quite that dramatic when the dust settles. But the September 12 national elections in the Netherlands really do seem to be living up to expectations of that magnitude.

The unexpectedly early fall of the previous minority cabinet—the most right wing in living memory, and hostage to the support of xenophobic demagogue Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV)—has triggered an election that seems likely to usher in a radical realignment of the landscape on the left, and could realistically produce an outcome that poses some fundamental strategic questions for socialists in the Netherlands and beyond, while presenting an uncomfortable reality check for the country’s economic and political establishment.

At the time of writing the Netherlands’s most left-wing party, the Socialist Party of the Netherlands (SP), is leading opinion polls, with 23.3% support (35 seats in the 150-seat lower house), as against its nearest rival, the ruling neoliberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), on 21.3% (32 seats).

Could this large, strong, well-resourced and genuinely left-wing party really win elections in a wealthy country at the heart of the neoliberal project of the European Union? Could the established political system be forced to accept seasoned, hard-nosed, non-careerist socialists playing the leading role in government? Or might it all prove a premature – and potentially damaging – foray into managing capitalism with a human touch in a time of deep crisis?

Will Wroth reflects from Rotterdam on what, for socialists, might well be the most encouraging—yet

challenging—election result in a generation.

* * *

In March this year the Dutch media celebrated the 10th anniversary of what is surely the country's most famous—or infamous—post-election television debate. Openly gay anti-immigration populist Pim Fortuyn, well spoken and well dressed, wiped the floor with a handful of national leaders of the establishment parties. Fortuyn, who was assassinated two months later on the cusp of an historic national election victory, had just recorded an unexpected, overwhelming victory in the Rotterdam council elections, and he rubbed the noses of the visibly depressed career politicians firmly in it, with obvious relish.

This gripping display was watched by all of political Netherlands, conscious they were witnessing an historic watershed, whatever their party affiliation. What Fortuyn had seemingly managed single-handed was to finally break through the impenetrable institutional wall that had sheltered “The Hague” from the disappointments and frustrations of a generation of voters who saw themselves as outsiders—on the right or the left, or just politically unaligned and non-voting.

Traditional politics under pressure

Historically, post-war Dutch politics had operated within a system of political “pillars”—most importantly the Social Democrats, Catholics, Liberals, and Protestants—which broadly defined the social network into which one was born. Schools, clubs and newspapers were largely affiliated to one or other stream, and political representation and government coalitions were relatively predictable within a limited range of possibilities.

The social movements of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s steadily undermined this comfortable arrangement, and the final chapter was reached in the 1990s when a succession of “purple” coalitions between the VVD and an increasingly Blairite Labour Party (PvdA) ruled with broad, if sometimes grudging, support in the context of some “good” economic years. Fortuyn put his finger on the democratic bankruptcy and social failure of that cosy alliance, even while scapegoating non-European immigration into the Netherlands as the key factor in the decline of Dutch social cohesion.

But there was another player in the accelerating breakup of politics-as-usual at the beginning of the century—the SP. It had steadily been making inroads into the traditional electoral and campaigning territory of established Social Democracy, and by the time of the 2006 national elections, was rewarded for its political honesty and consistency, and refreshingly direct campaigning approach, with no fewer than 25 seats (16.7%). Although the SP would – temporarily, it now seems – lose electoral support in the next elections, the national political landscape had been changed once and for all.

Dutch political system and culture

A key factor facilitating the rise of the SP has been the Dutch electoral system, where proportional representation applies at all three levels of government (national, provincial and municipal) and there is no threshold other than a single seat—for the lower house requiring a very low 0.67% of the vote. At the same time local councils play a comparatively important role in the day-to-day running of public affairs and are a significant factor in national political sentiment.

This set-up inevitably produces a colourful, varied parliament with a few large parties, several

medium-sized parties, and a few one- and two-member fractions and independents (see Appendix 2). Public financing of those parties that are represented in the parliament is comparatively generous, making the influence of private (and trade union) money considerably less than in many other countries.

Because no single party ever comes close to a simple majority, the Dutch government is always a coalition of at least two, but usually three or four parties. It's universally accepted that all parties may have their own election programs, but will have to compromise if they enter into cabinet-forming negotiations. It's as though there's an inbuilt tolerance in the general Dutch psyche—by no means expressed equally on all issues (the recent rise of Geert Wilders makes that clear)—at least to the right of all to hold their own opinion and express it freely.

Once an election result is reached, however unexpected or unusual, it is respected, and the horse-trading begins. The rule is that the largest party gets to lead off the preliminary government-forming negotiations, and only when its prospects seem to have run out, does the next largest have a turn. One other factor—not unimportant, though not strictly democratic—is that a party that has significantly improved its share of the vote gets extra credit, and is given a slightly higher priority and a little more room to manoeuvre, as though reflecting a change in the political zeitgeist. The reverse is also true: a party that does very badly is likely to take a back seat, at least initially.

The media climate in the country is comparatively open, and there is a general expectation that the “respectable” broadcast media and press are at least even-handed in their distribution of air-time and column-inches, whatever the natural leaning of the broadcaster or newspaper may be. Although some sections of the media, for example De Telegraaf, revel in Murdoch-like headlines and the usual witch-hunts, even the business establishment paper NRC Handelsblad feels obliged to report relatively objectively on matters political, and to date has not campaigned in a really concerted way against the left in general, or the SP in particular. Within the limitations of the modern media world, the principle of objective, balanced reporting is widely expected to be upheld, certainly in comparison to the media of the English-speaking world. Just how the media will respond if the SP remains high in the polls as election day approaches remains to be seen. The predictable back-lash from the more rabidly right-wing elements of the press, together with the right-wing parties, has begun in earnest, and its effect could be telling, despite the widely held sympathy the SP enjoys.

Political repercussions of the crisis

The overall political effect of the current crises has been a hollowing out of the traditional Dutch political centre. The pressure of the global economic crisis, the euro crisis and the crisis of the neoliberal, undemocratic project of European integration has severely undermined the credibility of the worn-out centre-left and centre-right approaches.

Roughly speaking, there has been a flight to the flanks of the political playing field: the liberal VVD has gathered votes from the CDA, and the SP from the PvdA, GroenLinks, and to a certain extent the PVV, insofar as a vote for the SP is seen as a more effective way of protesting the political establishment. The VVD and SP have become the poles of right and left, and the “sensible, balanced voices of reason” are being drowned out in the increasingly confrontational rhetoric of an election campaign dominated by their diametrically opposed approaches. The only ostensibly middle-of-the-road party (in reality firmly on the economic right) as yet holding its own is the left-liberal D66, selling itself as insurance against “extremism”.

Many elections over the last decades have in the end turned into a competition between two of the traditionally strongest three parties—CDA, VVD and PvdA—to determine which will become the

largest, take the lead in the coalition negotiations, and (almost always) supply the prime minister. In more than one election, the SP has won wide support for its policies during the course of the campaign and even on occasion overtaken the PvdA in the opinion polls, only to see this position evaporate as the two- or three-horse race dynamic takes hold, and natural SP-voters vote “usefully” for the PvdA, in the hope of preventing either of the other leading parties becoming the largest. Now, for the first time, it’s becoming increasingly possible that the SP and the VVD will be in a two-horse race, and that the useful vote phenomenon may this time pull support from the PvdA to the SP.

The conscious choice of the PvdA to follow the example of Tony Blair’s New Labour and the neoliberal “third way” was the beginning of its steady ideological and electoral decline. Whereas in the UK, Australia and the US the political and electoral system puts huge obstacles in the way of a mainstream left alternative to social democracy (or the US Democrats), the situation in the Netherlands has facilitated the rise of the SP alongside, and then at times beyond, the PvdA. Not only is this a unique development in modern Dutch history, but—perhaps more importantly in the long run—a result that sees the SP become larger than the PvdA would be a real hammer-blow to the Social Democrats, which risks finally losing their 100-year-old hegemony on the left and becoming just another, semi-progressive party with a confused identity and worryingly uncertain prospects. Whether a recent shift to the left, both in leadership and image projection, will be enough to stem the bleeding of votes to the SP remains to be seen. Aside from the trumpeted “Social or Liberal” choice, it is the key battle for position in the election campaign, though neither party will admit it openly.

In the Netherlands, as elsewhere in the world, the green message has been particularly current since the 1980s, and Groen Links (Green Left), the other traditional left party, has been a parliamentary channel for that concern for the last 20 years. Over the last decade, it has increasingly presented itself also as a libertarian, lifestyle-based party, and only recently moved sharply right on a range of economic and work-and-welfare issues. Despite the global climate crisis and a broad acceptance of green ideas, the historic presence of the PvdA as a magnet for left votes, and then the growth of SP—also an expressly green party, by the way—has prevented Groen Links from taking advantage of the PvdA’s embrace of “third way” labourism and being seen as a significant, realistic social alternative. The party’s niche vote is now being critically undermined, and the pressure of the economic crisis has led to some surprisingly obvious opportunist parliamentary moves, and possibly fatal internal wrangling.

Of course, these intra-left dynamics must be taken carefully, as there are no guarantees that the situation will continue along this path. Strange things have happened in the last two weeks of past Dutch elections, and anything is yet possible. At this point the opinion polls can become a self-fulfilling tendency, and any nudge in a particular direction can have dramatic consequences.

SP roots, development, modus operandi

The SP party began life as the as the Maoist Communist Party of the Netherlands (Marxist-Leninist) in the early seventies, but soon shed any connection with Mao and China. It worked “among the people” for years as a network of loosely connected local groups, identifying problems, then formulating and presenting solutions. Such autonomous research and investigation still play a big part in its policy development and political culture.

The SP turned its attention to a serious national political intervention in the 1980s, and finally broke onto the parliamentary scene in 1992. Since then it has consistently increased its share of the vote, except on one occasion, in 2010. In the upcoming elections, it could possibly become the largest

party in the lower house, obviously an historic achievement. It is among the top three parties in membership terms (with around 47,000 members).

The SP maintains a dynamic and mutually productive connection between the local branches and the national leadership and organisational bodies. Two fundamental principles are proudly and firmly held to: there can be no local elected representation without first establishing active intervention into local, on-the-ground and sectoral campaigns; and all publicly elected, paid office-holders—from part-time local councillor to government minister—must agree in writing to submit their wages to the party and receive something like a normal wage (or pro-rata proportion of it) in return. Any surplus goes to the party to finance general running, publication and campaign costs.

Disagreements in the past regarding this last principle have led to several departures from elected fractions (and then the party itself), but the party membership and leadership remain adamant on this point, and there are no exceptions, something which enjoys broad respect and approval amongst the public.

From ‘vote no’ to ‘vote yes’

Until the late 1990s the SP presented itself as an alternative party working largely outside the established parliamentary system, and a vote for it was seen as a left protest (as symbolised by its red tomato logo) as well as a way of putting left pressure on the PvdA. The SP approach later changed from “vote against” to “vote for”, and the party began to establish itself as a left alternative with practical policy proposals of its own and, from the 2000s, with experience in administration at the local and provincial level.

On the national level, its big success in the elections of 2006 led to short-lived “negotiations” with the CDA and PvdA, but neither of those two parties wanted to allow the SP into the cabinet for the first time. The CDA could not bear the prospect of being a minority in a left-of-centre cabinet; and the PvdA felt obliged to resist the SP’s entry into government at all costs, fearing the loss of its primacy over the left-of-centre political space.

In the current campaign a whole packet of long-held SP policy standpoints, particularly those originally seen by many as unfashionable or unrealistic, are now bearing fruit. These include:

- Opposing the acceptance of neoliberal economic principles from the very beginning;
- Early warning of the folly of military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- Opposition to the introduction of the euro (although not in favour of withdrawal from or dissolution of the euro now);
- Successful opposition in the 2005 Dutch referendum against further undemocratic European integration (in opposition to almost all the other parties);
- Warning very early of the dangers of privatisation in the public sector, particularly health-care;
- Support for trade union and worker rights, with active involvement in key union campaigns in the virtual absence of the PvdA; and
- Highlighting the negative economic and social consequences of a deregulated labour market across Europe.

SP leader Emile Roemer has dramatised the choice for voters in the present campaign in these

words: "After September 12, will we be a liberal or social country? Will we continue cutting, or build a better Netherlands? We stand for a social route out of the crisis."

As outlined in its electoral program New Confidence, the SP's "social route out of the crisis" is based on increasing spending in housing, energy conservation, a clean environment, improved public transport, accessible health care and high-quality education.

The initial boost to public investment would be €3 billion in 2013, with an emphasis on dike repair and boosting energy efficiency. The rail system would be brought back under public control.

Living standard improvements promised by the SP include keeping the pension age at 65 (to be reviewed in 2020), an increase in the statutory minimum wage, gender wage equality, increased funding to disability, child and aged services and to council anti-poverty programs, and an increase in the housing grant for the low-paid. The public health insurance "excess" would be reduced.

The program also aims at increasing workers' rights: in the workplace (half of big company boards to be elected by employees); in wage negotiation (to be national by industrial sector); and in occupational health and safety.

On migration, the SP stands for the application of Dutch labour standards to all migrants, the fining of companies that violate these and for the temporary restoration at a European level of work permits for Eastern European workers. Development aid to the newer members of the European Union should be boosted (the SP calls for an overall foreign aid budget of 0.8% of GDP).

Funding of its program would partially be carried out by a new National Investment Bank. In addition, the SP program targets "the big end of town" to pay for its social welfare and investment spending. Banking would be re-regulated with savings banks separated from investment banks and an "anti-speculation plan" introduced; a financial transactions tax would be applied and the bank tax rate increased; the tax rate on incomes over €150,000 a year would increase to 65%; the capital gain tax would increase to 40% and a separate property tax introduced.

Bonuses for company directors would be banned and a limit set to maximum salaries in the semi-public arena. Dutch taxpayers would not be asked to fund European Union "bailouts" but the banks and other holders of the public debt of the European "periphery" required to take a larger "haircut" on non-performing loans.

The program aims to carefully draw the line between small and big business, with small business to be given better access to government contracts, relief with its social security contribution obligations and restrictions maintained on shopping hours.

The SP message combines consistent evidence-based analysis and very concrete proposals with a refreshing and energetic campaigning style—including an innovative and modern approach to e-politics. Another invaluable asset is SP leader, Emile Roemer. Roemer is viewed as an honest, straight-talking, non-careerist, man of the people, politically active for thirty years in order to achieve results in the interests of normal, working people and not for any personal ambition (something unusual in modern mainstream Dutch politics). A former teacher, Roemer became a successful local representative, then respected national parliament figure, and is now leading national political identity widely admired and firmly supported by broad sections of the population well beyond the traditional left electorate. He has been an important contributor to the party steadily increasing its share of the vote over the past two years.

An impossible coalition government formation?

Who would join a large SP in a new cabinet? The party has consistently said that it needs to become so big that it would be impossible for other parties, particularly those left of centre, to ignore the change in the political weather (as in 2006). Groen Links, the Christian Union (CU) and the PvdA would presumably feel bound to join in if a feasibly stable cabinet seemed at all possible.

The biggest problem is that many of the new SP votes are coming directly from Groen Links and the PvdA, so a clear, or at least easily manageable, left majority still seems unlikely (at present between 65 and 70 of the lower house's 150 seats in opinion polls). Only if the left in general, and most importantly the SP, can attract votes away from the parties on the right (or in the centre) will a left or centre-left cabinet become feasible.

In the current atmosphere of burgeoning support for the party the establishment of a cordon sanitaire to exclude the SP once again could easily meet with outraged disapproval on democratic grounds from large sections of the population, and not only those on the left. Any such move from the other "progressive" parties could well prove extremely damaging for them. Yet governing with the SP opens an historic door that has remained firmly shut for the last forty years, and many establishment politicians realise very well that the party is clever, experienced and careful enough to avoid the most obvious traps of a compromise-based coalition.

For the PvdA in particular, joining any coalition that is seen as more right than left could definitively undermine its position on the left. So a substantial result on September 12 throws up a few critical problems for the establishment parties, but they are not the only ones: the SP itself would also be confronted with some fundamental questions to ponder and problems to solve.

Old social democracy in new clothes?

The party recently informally described itself as the "real social-democrats: both social and democratic", filling the space which the PvdA has clearly abandoned, both politically and practically. And a clear move has also been made to rid the SP of its reputation as politically attractive but impractical, due to (1) the supposed unimplementability of some of its relatively "hard" policy proposals (2) its image of being unable to compromise its way out of a fundamentally ideological orientation; and (3) the assumption that none of the other parties are willing to enter into a coalition with it, thus rendering an SP vote a waste.

The party's current election program—combined with a clear message of "keen to govern, willing to compromise"—has managed to largely overturn the first two reservations. The third problem, that of its isolation deliberately maintained by other parties, has been undermined by the recent enormous increase in support, seeing the party become by far the largest left-of-centre force in the polls. Yet opinion polls remain just that, and if a week's a long time in politics, then a fortnight's an age.

But is this genuine, healthy, left-wing attempt to become a leading player in a hitherto overwhelmingly pro-capitalist, and recently neoliberal, parliament—and by natural extension government—another naïve, doomed, traditionally social-democratic strategy, one that can only lead to disappointment and disillusion amongst both members and electors as the limits of parliamentary democracy are reached? Or is it a conscious, carefully conceived process designed to deliberately expose, challenge and extend those limits, and bring its members and supporters with it into a next phase of socialist advance?

It's difficult to tell how deep historical and ideological awareness run within the SP's ranks, as its public image is consistently one of left-wing parliamentary realism and electoral progress, but among the core leadership and broader elected organs there is certainly a very strong analysis of the class-based reality of politics, coupled with decades of campaigning and party-building experience. Is the current phase part of a patient strategy of realistic and incremental, but not fundamentally reformist, advance, which includes a significant component of parliamentary and cabinet work? Or is the comparatively open and democratic Dutch system lulling the SP away from its original, fundamentally anti-establishment role and into the treacherous marshes of modern capitalist democracy and old-school parliamentary integration?

As usual, only time and the struggle will tell. But the SP's action in Dutch politics is definitely "one to watch" for socialists internationally, whatever happens on and after September 12.

Will Wroth

** Will Wroth was a member of Resistance and the Democratic Socialist Party in Australia from 1984 until 1992. He has been an active member of the SP in Rotterdam since 2005 and is a regular delegate at regional and national conferences but holds no elected position. This article is his own assessment, and does not necessarily represent the views or analysis of the party in general. For information on the SP in English, go to <http://international.sp.nl/>.*

Appendix 1: A rough guide to the Dutch political party landscape: the other major parties

VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy): Classical non-religious liberal party, on many social questions progressive (gay rights, abortion) compared to conservative parties in other countries, but has become even harder in economic terms over the last few years. The new right-wing pole. Support large and generally steady.

PVV (Party for Freedom): Founded by ex-VVD member Geert Wilders, who felt the VVD was too soft on (particularly Islamic) migrants. Has since refocused his populist demagoguery on economic migrants from Eastern Europe, now riding the anti-European integration sentiment. Presents himself as fighting corrupt and undemocratic establishment politics on behalf of hard-working normal people. Support may be gradually declining.

CDA (Christian Democratic Appeal): Traditionally the party of the countryside, not really a religion-based party anymore, has been the most regular centre-right member of the cabinet during the last decades, until now seen as a natural government party. Suffering as politics polarises, and paying dearly for having been part of the most recent cabinet, supported by Wilders, which deeply split sentiment among more socially oriented members and electorate. Support in steep decline for a few years.

D66 (Democrats 66): Formed in response to the breakdown of the "pillar" system, projects itself as the independent, thinking person's party, with education, democratic reform and civil liberties high on the agenda. Doing well again after some meagre years, now seen by many as a realistic coalition partner from the centre (describes itself as "radical-centrist"), although economic standpoints have clearly moved right in the last several years. Support growing and steady.

CU (Christian Union): The larger of the genuinely confessional parties, traditionally economically to the left of CDA, while still quite conservative on many social issues (same-sex marriage, abortion etc), but has also moved to the right economically recently. Support limited and steady.

GroenLinks (Green Left): A 1980s' fusion of (far-)left and green parties, it has never governed, or even really been able to qualitatively distinguish itself from the PvdA, and now bleeding support, particularly to the SP. Recent leadership changes, opportunist parliamentary manoeuvres, disastrous internal frictions, and an obvious move to the right—to present themselves as government material—have damaged them badly. May well be fundamentally weakened in the mill of polarised politics. Support limited and declining.

PvdA (Labour Party): Traditional social-democratic party, whose current decline really began with three consecutive coalitions with the VVD in the late 1990s, when they expressly “shook off their ideological feathers”, i.e. adopted the British New Labour “third way” and generally accepted—if not embraced—neoliberalism. Now widely resented as a bureaucratic party of career politicians, suffering from neutral or contradictory standpoints, and currently overtaken as the big left party by the SP, which has attracted much of their traditional support, including within the union movement. Recent leadership changes, and an attempt to (be seen to) move left may have only further underlined their insincerity and opportunism, but may yet bear fruit. A bad result will put further pressure on them. Support well below historic average, but has begun increasing recently.

Other parties represented in parliament or with a chance of entering on September 12 include the Reformed-Church Political Party (SGP), Party for Animals (PvdD), Over 50s (50 Plus), Independent Senate Group (OSF) and the Pirate Party (PP).

Appendix 2: Poll projections in seats at August 29

(The Dutch lower house has 150 seats)

(Approximately from “right” to “left”)

| Name | Closest Australian equivalent | Avg'e '82-now | 2010 | 2012 (projected*) |
|-------------|-------------------------------|---------------|------|-------------------|
| VVD | Liberal Party | 29 | 31 | 32-36 |
| PVV | +/- Pauline Hanson | 17 (2006 on) | 24 | 14-18 |
| CDA | +/- The Nationals | 44 | 21 | 13-15 |
| D66 | Democrats | 10 | 10 | 13-15 |
| CU | — | 5 (2002 on) | 5 | 6-8 |
| Groen Links | Greens | 8 (1989 on) | 10 | 4-6 |
| PvdA | Labor Party | 40 | 30 | 18-22 |
| SP | Socialist Alliance | 11 (1994 on) | 5 | 31-35 |

[Poll projections taken from the “peilingwijzer” of August 29th (<http://nos.nl/artikel/411880-peilingwijzer-pvda-aan-het-stijgen.html>), a weighted amalgamation of the four most important ongoing national polls.]
Europe Netherlands Socialist Party (Netherlands)

Comments

Wed, 09/05/2012 - 04:14 — Peter Waterman (not verified)

Naive, Hip, Left Parliamentarism!

Well, Will, why is there a question mark after 'Old social democracy in new clothes'? Or is this because the clothes are not new?

I have been following, on TV and online, the SP campaign and even on Wikipedia. The latter describes the SP as 'a social democratic' party. And neither your very informative piece, nor these other sources suggest to me that it is anything more than such.

Mind you, in these neo-liberal times, the victory of a coalition led by the SP should not be dismissed.

But you provide no evidence that such a coalition would not have the same liberalising (literal) effect on the SP, as has had Dutch coalition politics since WW2. Unless we are to take seriously your suggestion of some hidden anti-capitalist(?) agenda of the SP. But for for such to be more than speculation, perhaps you could provide us with an SP text, or a text from an SP leader, in which we might find the word 'capitalist/ism', whether used as characterising a particular economy, polity, society, culture, or simply as a pejorative.

Resident in the Netherlands for 40 years and therefore with the right to vote in at least local elections (possibly national ones also) I have never exercised that right. I have taken part in many campaigns. But it has so far seemed to me that there is a principle at work in Dutch political culture that you mention, though without giving the import I would. This is of compromise as the highest moral principle. Which might explain why a Maoist polariser could evolve into a Social Democratic compromiser.

So, I think that if any innovation is take place outside 'politics' (party, parliament, state) and in the sphere of social movements and civil society. Not that the signs here are promising. But, in emancipatory movements, no one ever promised us a rose garden, rather than a - highly-compromised - seat in parliament.

Peter Waterman

The Hague

Remarks on the SP

Wed, 09/05/2012 - 05:29 — Alex de Jong (not verified)

Remarks on the SP

The article mentions the setback of the SP after the 2006 elections. It's worthwhile to look more in depth at what happened back then in order to understand the strategy of the SP. Significantly, this isn't the first campaign for the SP in which the question of participating in government is posed. During the 2006 elections, a similar enthusiasm to what we saw the last few weeks propelled the party from 9 to 25 seats, attracting many Labour Party voters who were hoping for a coalition government of the SP, the Labour Party and some third party, most probably the christian-democrats(CDA). As the article describes, the other parties shut out the SP and managed to put the blame on the SP; it was their 'lack of realism' that supposedly made it impossible for them to govern. This was an important reason for the SP's defeat in the 2008 elections when they lost heavily: 10 seats.

The conclusion the SP-leadership drew from this painful defeat was that to avoid a repeat the SP had to be more cautious and be seen to be willing to give in on important points - points like to pension age. Where a few months ago, the SP defended keeping the pension age at 65 ('65 remains 65'), a raising of the retirement age with 2 years by 2020 is now accepted. The article says the SP promises to keep the pension age at 65 which is to be 'reviewed' in 2020 but it has accepted raising of the pension age with 2020 as the deadline, with some modifications for vulnerable groups. Party leaders have declared their willingness to consider raising the age already before 2020.

Another example is the European Stability Pact. The SP wants to implement this pact, which requires that countries have a budget deficit of less than three per cent. However, they want two more years to do it. After Roemer declared in an interview he would not be willing to pay the fine of the European Union as penalty for breaking the deadline, he was heavily attacked by the other parties and forced to backtrack.

Questions like the approach towards to EU backed austerity measures or the raising of the pension age are crucial issues for the Dutch left. A large part of Dutch society sees such measures as unpleasant but unavoidable. The SP has been the only party who argued that measures like these are political choices - but they have been unable to break the political near-consensus on these issues or to convince a social majority of the feasibility of alternatives.

A major question is whether a shift in the debate on such issues is possible at all in the absence of social movements that bring these discussions into society and popularize alternatives. The SP, virtually alone often, has been unable to do this and drew the conclusion that giving in was the only realistic option (as one of their parliamentarians said in a recent interview about their change on the question of the pension age; 'we still think it is silly to raise the pension age but we have no friends left that agree with us' and 'the law to raise the pension age has already been passed, we try to limit the damage').

The issue of the pension age is also important because disagreements over this led to deep divisions in the trade union movement and the dissolving of the old trade union central. Many trade-unionists who disagreed with the raising of the pension age but wanted to keep it at 65 looked to the SP as their ally in this fight. The article talks about the SP's 'active involvement in key union campaigns in the virtual absence of the PvdA' but this is not completely correct: it is true that more and more trade unionists are voting for the SP or becoming members but the SP as such has no organized intervention in the trade-unions. The party sees itself as an ally of the unions in parliament, not as part of the same movement.

Since this article was written, the picture changed again. The most recent polls give the Labour Party a significant lead of six seats over the SP (which now would get 24 seats, less than their previous highpoint) and the right-wing VVD would be clearly the largest party with 35 seats. One factor in this development has been the disappointing performance of Roemer in debates - but of course this not just about him. The SP tries to present itself as a partner for government but it lacks experience as a ruling party. In the absence of support for radical alternatives, many left-wing voters prefer voting for the Labour Party which they consider the more experienced, and thus more reliable, party. These voters are not convinced of the feasibility of a break with neoliberalism but are looking for the supposedly 'best option' while accepting the current framework of the political debate - a framework that leaves very little room for refusing the logic of austerity. For socialists, a fundamental question is whether taking part in a coalition government with centre- and right-wing (two or three other parties would be necessary to give a SP-Labour party coalition a majority, The Greens are at an historical low of 3 seats) can provide the opening for such a change in the political discourse.

I'm not optimistic about this and other experiences in Europe (most recently Danmark) give little hope for the potential of centre-left governments to resist rightward pressures in absence of social movements that can resist right-wing offensives and gather support for progressive alternatives. We need to look at what is happening in society as a whole, not just in the parliament. The SP is forced to operate within such narrow measures because of the balance of forces in Dutch society, it's unrealistic to expect of the SP that it can shift this balance by itself. A bigger and stronger SP will be a major step forward for the left in this country but the party alone will not be able to force a break with neoliberalism.

Thu, 09/06/2012 - 21:44 — Will Wroth (not verified)

Alex, thanks a lot for your

Alex,

thanks a lot for your thoughts, and spending the time to put them down so clearly. all very relevant concerns, and they raise many of the doubts and questions many in the SP also have. at the moment i'm too busy with lots of things — including campaigning! — to reply at length here, but i certainly will, after the election result is known. then we can discuss the actual campaign and its successes and failures as well, not just the strategic/tactical approach in general. great you're interested enough to share your reflections. i'll let you know when i've posted something substantial.

all the best for now,

Will.

Thu, 09/06/2012 - 00:32 — Peter Waterman (not verified)

Incrementalism and Compromise Mark the Dutch Socialist Party

'Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them'. (Paul Valery)

'[A politician is] a person skilled in the art of compromise.

Usually an elected official who has compromised to get nominated, compromised to get elected, and compromised repeatedly to stay in office'. (Dick Gregory)

Neither of these guys were/are Dutch, neither a politician, yet they put their fingers on issues that the Socialist Party (whose election slogans prefer the word 'social' to 'socialist') and its sympathisers can hardly contemplate.

I am grateful again for Alex de Jong's again informative piece. But it only further alienates me from the ritual about to recur in the Netherlands in just a few days from now. And increases my scepticism about the significance of any advance in the position of the SP.

It is evident that here 'socialist' or 'social' have been reduced to incremental changes - and to quantities that are up for bargaining away with whomsoever on the political spectrum the SP might decide to share power (actually powerlessness) with.

The SP is in apparent accord with the Marxist statement that 'These are my principles and if you don't like them I have others' (Groucho, rather than Karl).

I am only too aware of the dearth of radical-democratic social movements in the Netherlands, compared even with the neighbouring country of Belgium, which the Dutch like to joke about.

But the time and energy which those on the left invest in political parties and elections - particularly

at national level - seem to me only to detract from the self-empowerment of the radical-democratic social movements that we see innovating worldwide.

From Latin America and its indigenous movements we hear of a 'crisis of civilisation', by which they mean a crisis of a capitalist civilisation in all its aspects or expressions, not 'just' destruction of the human environment. From the World Social Forum we have the slogan, 'Another World is Possible'. From the Occupy movement the opposition between the 99% and the 1%. From the Assembly of Social Movements within the WSF, the concept of a 'global solidarity and justice movement'.

Each of these positions, slogans, campaigns, networks, is problematic. But, then, the problematic they pose is that of global (worldwide as well as holistic) social emancipation. Not, therefore, participation in and reproduction of rituals of liberal-democratic parliamentary politics, increasingly hollowed out.

It is this hollowing out that has given rise, even in the oh so tolerant Netherlands, of rightwing extremism, racism, xenophobic attitudes towards our Southern European neighbours. Boaventura de Sousa Santos talks (from somewhere between Portugal, the US and Brazil) of the global spread of 'political democracy and social fascism'. He also talks about a necessary 'democratisation of democracy'.

Maybe a defeat or decline for the SP in the coming elections would be better than a 'success'. Just maybe it would stimulate a dialogue about matters of more significance. Both for the Netherlands and also for the continued existence of human life on one small planet.

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3010>