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European Constitution

Netherlands: A vote against neo-liberalism

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The outcome of the Dutch referendum on the European constitution is a clear stand against the neo-liberal project. It is not a vote against Europe, European co-operation, integration or union, but rather a vote against the neo-liberal Europe that this constitution was an attempt to set in stone. This does not mean that the vote was unambiguously left wing or progressive. Traditional, Christian, nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments also played a role. But they certainly did not dominate the campaign. The victory for the no opens up new possibilities for the Dutch global justice movement.

With turnout at 63%, almost 62% of eligible voters voted against the European constitution. Turnout for this first national referendum in the Netherlands was half again as high as in the last elections for the European parliament in 2004 (when less than 40% of Dutch voters went to the polls). It was higher than in the 2002 municipal elections or the 2003 provincial elections. There were only twenty-odd smaller municipalities with wealthy inhabitants in the country's centre and south where the yes won. Everywhere else no voters were in the majority.

A class vote

The class basis of the no was clear. The less educated voters were, the likelier they were to vote no. Of voters with higher education 51% voted no; of voters with only primary education, 82%; of voters with only secondary education, 72%. The lower voters income as well the likelier they were to vote no. At the highest income levels the no had a narrow majority, while two-thirds of median- and below-median-income voters voted no. Women were also significantly more likely than men to vote no.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/H1.jpg>]

Dutch premier Jan Peter Balkenende

In the country's poorest municipality, Reinderland in eastern Groningen, 84.6% voted no. Only one other municipality was more solidly against: the hard-core Protestant fishing village Urk, where 91.6% voted no.

The only yes majorities were in a few of the very wealthiest municipalities in the central and southern Netherlands. The greatest yes majority was in Rozendaal, with 62.7%. In the cities as well the trend was evident: the more prosperous a neighbourhood or borough, the more people voted yes; the poorer it was, the more people voted no.

Among supporters of the social-democratic Labour party, 55% voted against the constitution. Among supporters of the Green Left party, a narrow 52% majority voted yes. Even among voters of the very pro-EU liberal D66 party, 45% voted against. Only among supporters of the ruling Christian Democrats was there a big yes majority: 80%. Among supporters of the right-wing liberal VVD party, almost 40% voted against.

Among parties that called for a no vote, by contrast, the number of yes voters was very limited. Only among supporters of the orthodox Protestant Christian Union did slightly more than 10% vote yes.

Anti-establishment

The result is all the more remarkable when one bears in mind that the traditional political parties that called for a yes

vote - the governing Christian Democrats and liberal VVD and D66, plus the opposition Labour Party and Green Left - between them occupy 85% of the seats in parliament. The only MPs to oppose the constitution represent the Socialist Party (a party of Maoist origin that has grown in recent years to become the biggest political force left of social democracy, with 8 of the 150 seats in parliament), the two small orthodox Protestant parties, the remains of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn's party, and one maverick right-wing MP who has split from the VVD, Geert Wilders.

In addition virtually the whole of civil society supported the constitution: in any event the leaderships of the trade unions, the biggest environmental organisations, the small and medium employers' association, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and even the automobile owners' association and development NGOs. Only a very limited number of smaller environmental and animal rights' groups were against.

The outcome reveals not only a looming gap between citizens and politicians, but also a vertical divide in virtually all large social organisations. Their leaderships supported the constitution, while a high proportion of their members rejected it.

The culture of the polder

Understanding this situation requires looking back at political developments in the Netherlands over the past several years. Since the Second World War, Dutch governments have traditionally been coalitions formed around the Christian Democrats, in alliance either with the liberals of the VVD or with the Labour party. The Christian Democrats' hold on power ended in 1994 when they suffered a spectacular defeat in that year's elections, whereupon a coalition government of liberals and Labour took office.

Under the leadership of former trade-union leader Wim Kok, this coalition carried out major neo-liberal reforms over the course of eight years. One consequence of this 'purple' period (so-called after the mixture of social-democratic red and liberal blue) was a far-reaching de-politicisation.

Political differences among the major parties, particularly between the traditional adversaries of Labour and the VVD, became almost invisible. The culture of consultation and consensus (the 'polder model'), always strong in the Netherlands, covered the political landscape like a suffocating blanket.

With the rise of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn, this blanket was suddenly snatched off. Fortuyn's crusade against multiculturalism and tolerance for Islam (which he described as a backward religion) rallied middle-class layers who had improved their economic position considerably over the years, and were now ready to lay claim to political influence.

But Fortuyn's breakthrough was due to the fact that he also appealed to many less-educated white Dutch people, whose sense of security had been undermined by the dismantling of the welfare state and liberalisation of the economy. Traditionally these groups had been Labour's property, but now they had completely lost faith in the left.

After Fortuyn's dramatic assassination just before the 2002 elections, Fortuyn's revolt found expression partly in an increased vote for the Christian Democrats led by Jan Peter Balkenende. Balkenende formed a new cabinet with the liberal VVD and initially the remnants of Fortuyn's LPF party, but after a few months of the LPF's inevitable blunders and scandals traded it in for the slightly less right-wing liberals of D66.

This Balkenende cabinet, still in power today, is without a doubt the most right-wing Dutch cabinet in living memory.

Each of the parties taking part in it has moved further to the right - and this is true of the opposition parties as well. The general assumption has been that Fortuyn left behind a political landscape in which all the available political ground to be fought over lay to the right.

Last year however massive protests against the cabinet's pension reform plans showed that reality is not so simple. The trade unions, much weakened in recent years, were forced to mobilise.

To everyone's surprise this led to the biggest trade-union demonstration in Dutch history, which set an estimated half-million people in motion. The political impact of the mobilisation was largely cancelled out when a Muslim extremist murdered filmmaker Theo van Gogh a month later. Once more fears of an Islamic danger determined the face of Dutch politics.

Now however the referendum has shown that there are other issues and a different political approach that can put the Dutch on the move.

The course of the campaign

Before the campaign got under way, approval of the constitution seemed a foregone conclusion. In the first polls roughly 20% was ready to vote yes and only 10% no. Given the overwhelming support from political and social organisations, getting the constitution adopted seemed no problem.

The proposal for a referendum came from three centre-left MPs, who submitted a bill calling for a one-time, non-binding referendum. The government was against, but the bill passed with the support of the ruling right-wing liberal VVD. Support for the referendum was in part an expression of discontent over the adoption of the euro. Although there were calls for a referendum then, at the time there was no parliamentary majority for it.

Frustration about the switch to the euro and its consequents is still running high and still having an impact. Various politicians reasoned that it was better to hold a referendum in which people could make their voices heard rather than bottling up still more frustrations.

The big miscalculation made by the constitution's supporters was their assumption that overwhelming support from political and social organisations would also win over the population.

In fact the yes campaign derailed early on. Supporters hesitated for a long time before actually beginning to campaign. This had everything to do with divisions within the yes camp and the Balkenende government's unprecedentedly low popularity. Only when the no camp began coming out ahead in the polls did the cabinet feel compelled to play an active role.

They did so in an unusually crude, intimidating way. They dug deep in the treasury in order to finance their own campaign, and their statements seemed designed to browbeat the Dutch into voting yes.

One minister declared that rejecting this constitution would jeopardise peace in Europe. Without any subtlety Auschwitz and Srebrenica were deployed as arguments for a yes. The Dutch were told they would be the laughingstock of Europe if they voted no. Coming from a government with an approval rating of 18%, these arguments only helped the no campaign.

The no camp consisted of four components. The most extreme and dangerous standpoint came from maverick liberal Geert Wilders. As an independent MP he is working hard to establish a new far right political formation and position himself as Pim Fortuyn's successor. His campaign focussed on the dangers of Turkish EU membership and a consequent Muslim takeover of Europe.

The small Protestant parties waged a very different sort of campaign. Except for objecting to the constitution's failure to mention Europe's Judeo-Christian tradition, they had a relatively clean campaign in which they argued that further European integration makes no sense at this moment and that in any event this constitution is not necessary for it.

The strongest political force in the no camp was undoubtedly the Socialist party, which waged a very active campaign both in the media and on the streets. Their campaign stressed the need to save the Netherlands. This constitution would turn Europe into a superstate and Holland into a province, they argued. They illustrated the concern that the Netherlands might disappear from the map with a map of Europe in which the country literally disappeared into the sea.

Finally there was Comité Grondwet Nee (Constitution No Committee), a small ad hoc alliance of left-wing activists who waged a clear progressive no campaign. Grondwet Nee argued that a different Europe is possible and necessary as an alternative to this, undemocratic, neo-liberal and militarist Europe.

Despite its small size and very limited resources, Grondwet Nee played a considerable role in the campaign and clearly contributed to the visibility of a left no, preventing the no camp from being dominated by right-wing nationalism.

Which no won?

Of course all sorts of motives, intermixed with each other, played a role in the victory for no: widely shared aversion to government policy, and to politicians in general; opposition to constant interference from Brussels; fears of loss of national identity; Christian and nationalist motives; and intense irritation at the arrogance of the yes camp. It is difficult to judge which elements were decisive and which no won.

It is clear in any event that Wilders and his anti-Turkish, anti-Muslim campaign did not play a predominant role. There is also a quite broad consensus that this was not an anti-European campaign, but rather a campaign against the way the existing Europe functions.

A fair picture can be distilled from a survey done barely a week after the vote. The survey showed that a week later the no majority would have been even bigger, 64%. The shifts in support for different political parties in the campaign's wake give a pretty good picture of its impact. The big loser is apparently not the right but Labour, which declined in the polls from 50 MPs before the campaign to 41 now.

Today 70% of Labour voters would vote against the constitution. The biggest winner is the SP, rising in the polls from 13 to 21 seats. The Christian Union grows from 6 seats to 9, while Wilders' party loses a seat. Questions about the popularity of different politicians confirm the overall picture.

In general the outcome can be interpreted as an unambiguous rejection of the neo-liberal project, and that the left in particular has made its mark with the campaign.

Consequences of the no victory

The referendum's outcome will have far-reaching consequences. First, after the double no in France and Holland this constitution is clearly as dead as a doornail. Second, the outcome will have major consequences for Dutch politics. The left has a chance now to take new initiatives in the discussion on Europe. Grondwet Nee's proposal to convene a national convention, which would hold a democratic discussion about the future of Europe and the place of the Netherlands in it, has not evoked an immediate response.

The parliament has however passed an SP motion for a broad social discussion on Europe. It is not yet clear what form the discussion will take, but in any case we will have to fight to ensure that it does not become a pointless talking-shop, and that the proposals that come out of it are submitted to the people for approval in a referendum. It is also important that initiatives be taken on a European level to hold discussions and arrive at common positions on Europe's future.

Lack of synchronicity among the debates and the press of time made the referendum campaigns very much national campaigns. In the coming months there are possibilities for deciding on joint international initiatives, with rejection of this constitution as the starting point. The European Social Forum is one place where this could happen.

After the experience of this first national referendum, it seems likely that the referendum tool will be used on other occasions. This obviously makes it very important to fight for genuinely democratic referenda, in which advocates and opponents are given an equal chance and the government cannot make unrestricted use of public revenues for its own campaign.

Third, the legitimacy and representativeness of many political parties and social organisations in the yes camp is now subject to question. Calling for a vote for the constitution, unembarrassedly avoiding any internal discussion, and then finding out that your own base is against should be a problem for any serious organisation. The discussions that will doubtless break out in many organisations should create more space for critical left-wing ideas.