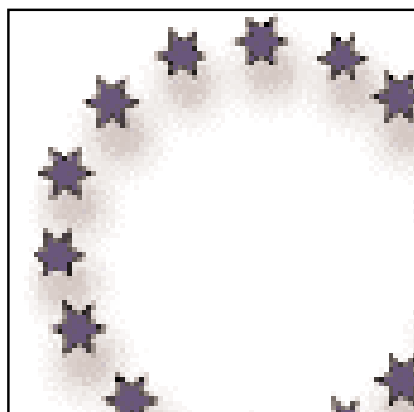


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## EUROPE AND THE DUTCH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF JANUARY 2003

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**Key points:**

- A consolidation by the Christian Democrats of gains made in the May 2002 election.
  - A surprising resurgence by the Labour Party after a historic reversal in May 2002.
  - The failure by the Christian Democrats and the Liberals to secure a desired two-party parliamentary majority.
  - A severe electoral setback for the Pim Fortuyn List, though with the party still enjoying a sufficient level of support to establish itself, potentially, as a niche player in Dutch politics.
  - A 'populist surge of the left' fails to materialize, as the Socialist Party does not make the gains which polls had been predicting for much of the campaign.
  - A high profile debate on European Union enlargement coincides with the early stages of the campaign, but enlargement does not become an election issue.
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TABLE 1: DUTCH SECOND CHAMBER ELECTION RESULTS, 2003 AND 2002

Party		Seats 2003 (/150)	% Vote 2003	Seats 2002 (/150)	% Vote 2002
CDA	Christian Democratic Appeal	44	28.6	43	27.9
PvdA	Labour Party	42	27.3	23	15.1
VVD	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Liberal)	28	17.9	24	15.5
SP	Socialist Party	9	6.3	9	5.9
LPF	Pim Fortuyn List	8	5.7	26	17.0
GL	Green-Left	8	5.1	10	7.0
D'66	Democrats '66	6	4.1	7	5.1
CU	Christian Union	3	2.1	4	2.5
SGP	Political Reformed Party	2	1.6	2	1.7
LN	Liveable Netherlands	0	0.4	2	1.6

## Introduction

On 22 January 2003 Dutch voters went to the polls in a national election for the second time in the space of less than a year. The election was necessitated by the break-up, after only 87 days in office, of the three-party centre-right coalition government formed by the Christian Democrats (CDA), the Liberals (VVD), and the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) in July 2002. The immediate cause of the break-up was a bitter and highly public row between two prominent LPF ministers, Eduard Bomhoff and Herman Heinsbroek.<sup>1</sup> Although the resignation of the two LPF ministers might have allowed the cabinet to weather the storm in the short run, the increasingly evident volatility of the LPF made this an unattractive prospect for their partners in government. In effect, one can speak of an 'assisted suicide', in which the accelerating implosion of the movement hastily formed by Pim Fortuyn in the run-up to the May 2002 election came to be seen by the Christian Democrats and the Liberals as an opportunity to form a more stable, two-party centre-right government. Yet, though the polls through to the end of 2002 pointed to the possibility of such a two-party coalition acquiring a (narrow) parliamentary majority, the year of surprises in Dutch politics had not yet drawn to a close. The Labour Party (PvdA), having suffered a historic defeat only the previous May, staged an unanticipated, late resurgence under its new leader, Wouter Bos. In the event, the election saw a neck-and-neck finish between the Christian Democrats and the revived Labour Party to see which of the two would emerge as the largest party in the new parliament, with an attendant claim on the

premiership. To this end, Labour, in the last week of the campaign, designated Amsterdam Mayor Job Cohen as its candidate for the premiership, in opposition to the incumbent CDA Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende.

## The results

As may be seen in Table 1 above, the Christian Democrats, narrowly, remained the largest party in the Dutch parliament. The CDA essentially consolidated the major gains it had made in the May 2002 election. The gain of a single seat over its May result was, however, something of disappointment relative to polls in the early stages of the campaign. The party had been hovering around the 50-seat mark, with a clearly dominant role in any future government in prospect.

The CDA's preferred coalition partners, the Liberals, too, were not able to make the gains which they might have anticipated. The VVD, under the leadership of former finance minister Gerrit Zalm, was able to make a gain of four seats over its May 2002 performance. The 28 seats won by the party were, nonetheless, well down on the 38 that it had held in the 1994–98 parliament. More immediately, this result also meant that the CDA and the VVD fell short of the two-party parliamentary majority which they had sought to obtain (the two parties together holding only 72 out of 150 seats). While squeezed by the very close race between the CDA and the PvdA in the last stages of the campaign, the VVD also appears to have paid the price for its failure to renew itself in the aftermath of the May 2002 election. Although it had suffered a

severe electoral setback then, the party, occupying a key strategic position, had emerged as the clearest winner in the ensuing cabinet formation (particularly in policy terms). Given this situation (and its participation in the previous two 'purple coalition' governments together with Labour and Democrats '66), the VVD could not entirely escape a campaign that appeared to present 'more of the same' to an electorate which was strongly (if vaguely) seeking 'renewal'.

Such a sense of 'renewal' was evident in the PvdA campaign. As already noted, the party had suffered a crushing defeat in May, dropping to a historic low of 23 seats (from 45 in the previous parliament). In the aftermath of this massive setback, the PvdA had entered what appeared likely to be a lengthy period of soul-searching and internal reform, with a view to reconnecting with the significant segments of its electorate which it had lost during its years in government. Until the end of 2002, the polls seemed to indicate that this would, indeed, be a long-haul process – predicting a modest recovery for the Labour Party to around the 30-seat mark, but still well off its previous levels of support. Early in the new year, however, the party's fortunes turned around dramatically. Largely spurred on by the growing popularity of its telegenic new leader, Wouter Bos, Labour jumped back up to the 40-seat mark in the polls and turned the election into a two-horse race with the Christian Democrats. The 39-year-old Bos, elected as leader by a newly instituted direct ballot of the party membership in November, was able remarkably rapidly to distance the PvdA from the discredit with which it had appeared tainted towards the end of the 'purple coalition' years. The watchword of the Bos campaign was 'modesty' – he stressed that Labour had learned the lessons of its 'arrogance' in power and now sought again to listen to and represent the concerns of its voters. The appeal clearly struck a chord, both bringing traditional Labour voters back into the fold and attracting voters from other camps. Exit polling showed that the PvdA's gains, relative to 2002, came in roughly equal measure from supporters of the three government parties, supporters of the smaller left-wing parties, and abstentionists.<sup>2</sup>

The biggest loser of the 2003 election was clearly the LPF. The party paid a heavy price for months of infighting and a failure to establish a stable profile while in government. The Fortuynists lost over one million of the 1.6 million votes which they had been able to garner in May 2002. Only a quarter of those who had voted for the LPF in 2002 opted to do so again eight months later; another quarter chose to abstain, while half of the LPF's 2002 electorate voted for established mainstream parties this time around (the VVD, CDA, and PvdA in descending order).<sup>3</sup> The

party's eight seats on 5.7% of the vote did, however, represent a somewhat better result than had been anticipated at the outset of the campaign, when the virtual disappearance of the movement seemed to be on the cards. From this base, the LPF may be able to carve out a permanent niche for itself in the Dutch party system, if it can stabilize its internal organization. There does, in any event, appear to be a small but significant space to the right of the VVD on the Dutch party spectrum which is potentially there for the taking.

At one stage in the campaign, it looked as if the 'populism of the right' represented by the LPF in 2002 would be succeeded, in 2003, by a 'populism of the left' in the form of the Socialist Party (SP). Polls through much of the campaign showed the SP poised to win around 20 seats, more than doubling its 2002 total (itself a historic high watermark). Originally founded in the 1970s as a Maoist movement, the SP had, from the 1980s onwards, refounded itself as a more broadly based protest party, with a strong grassroots network. The party seeks, in its own terms, to break with prevailing neo-liberal orthodoxies, restoring a sense of the public interest and social solidarity. It has been a strong proponent of better public services and opponent of privatization. Beyond the domestic sphere, the party has been active in the anti-globalization movement; it has also adopted a relatively 'hard' Eurosceptic stance, being a consistently vocal opponent of further transfers of powers to what its leader, Jan Marijnissen, has termed 'untransparent, bureaucratic, fraudulent Brussels'.<sup>4</sup> Although the European issue did not figure prominently in its campaign, the SP's more general stance as a 'people's party of the left', in contrast to a PvdA cast as a 'party of officials and advisers', did initially appear set to pay dividends.<sup>5</sup> The PvdA was, however, ultimately able to counter this image, both by moving moderately to the left and by stressing its newly found 'modesty'. The SP was thus held to its previous nine seats on a slightly increased vote.

The smaller parties in general were clearly squeezed by the bipolarizing effect of the extremely tight contest between the CDA and PvdA in the last stage of the campaign. Virtually all of the smaller groupings in the Dutch parliament saw their representation slightly reduced (by two seats in the case of Green-Left, by one seat in the case of both Democrats '66 and the Christian Union).

The overall result represents a return to the centre by the Dutch electorate, with the Christian and Social Democrats regaining their traditional pride of place. The result, initially, also appeared to point towards the formation of a two-party CDA/PvdA government, straddling the newly reaffirmed political centre. Negotiations surrounding the formation of such a

government, however, definitively broke up on 11 April 2003. Most immediately, the cause of this failure concerned the inability of the two parties to find a basis on which to restart discussions over budgetary issues after the Central Planning Bureau had delivered a negative opinion on their compromise financial agreement. Yet, more than this immediate issue, the negotiations collapsed because of the absence of an underlying climate of trust. In effect, the political distance between the two parties had grown significantly in the months immediately preceding the election - with the CDA anchored in a centre-right government and the PvdA conversely seeking to reconnect with its core electorate on the left. This political distance ultimately proved unbridgeable, despite the considerably more limited nature of the substantive policy differences at issue. At the time of writing, attention has again turned to the formation of a centre-right government composed of the CDA and the VVD together with a third, smaller party (the Democrats '66 having emerged as the early front-runner, though with considerable ground in a new round of coalition negotiations yet to be covered).

More generally, one must be careful not to overemphasize the 'normalization' of Dutch politics. Clearly, they have been 'normalized' in the sense that the established parties have largely regained their previous levels of support. They were, however, only able to do so by taking over many of the populist themes brandished by Pim Fortuyn. Most strikingly, there has been a general hardening of positions on immigration and greater insistence on measures for the integration of immigrants already in the country. Liberal leader Zalm, indeed, went so far as to repeat Fortuyn's (previously) controversial slogan: 'The Netherlands is full'. Fortuyn's influence was, however, felt well beyond the immigration issue. The renewed emphasis placed on the improvement of public services and, above all, the generalized impetus to take politics beyond 'The Hague' and back out into the country owe much to the unsettling of the political class produced by the May 2002 result. Much, in the coming years, will rest on the extent to which the 'old' parties are able to face the challenges highlighted by this 'new' politics.

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### The European dimension

Issues surrounding the enlargement of the European Union assumed a prominent place in Dutch political debate in the run-up to the October 2002 Brussels summit, which addressed the issue of financing EU enlargement. The debate coincided temporally with the downfall of the (first) Balkenende government and

its immediate aftermath. It is worth stressing, however, that European issues played no part in the downfall of the government. It should further be emphasized that Europe did not emerge as a major theme in the ensuing campaign. Initially, the VVD had signalled an intention to make enlargement a campaign issue, pressing in consequence for a December election prior to the scheduled Copenhagen summit at which the enlargement package was set to be finalized. Tellingly, however, the Liberals rapidly backed off from this position, concluding that the enlargement issue was unlikely to be a successful mobilizing theme.<sup>6</sup>

The enlargement controversy centred on the precise meaning and practical application of the relevant passages in the 'Strategic Accord' concluded by the CDA, LPF, and VVD as the basis for the governmental coalition. The Strategic Accord specified that the 'accession of new member states should be subject to the strict application by country of the Copenhagen criteria'.<sup>7</sup> It further committed the government to seeking agreement on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) prior to enlargement (either through the non-application of the existing system of direct income subsidies to the new member states or, as a fall-back position, through the gradual phasing out of such subsidies for existing member states). Precisely how these parameters were to be incorporated into the government's negotiating brief still needed to be determined. Particularly, the question arose as to whether the Dutch government would exercise a 'veto' as regards either individual countries deemed not to meet the accession criteria or the process as a whole in the event that a satisfactory result could not be achieved on CAP reform.

The drafting of a government position statement, to be placed before parliament prior to the Brussels summit, was a source of considerable (and widely reported) friction within the cabinet. It became clear that the CDA Foreign Minister, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, essentially wished to endorse the position of the European Commission with minimal qualification. While it was recognized that problems remained in the candidate countries, this represented a strong endorsement for a 'big bang' enlargement, maintaining the first wave of entrants on an equal footing and poised for entry in 2004. The VVD ministers in the government, conversely, expressed reservations (somewhat late in the day) concerning the 'big bang' approach. In particular, they sought to obtain the adoption of a range of safeguard clauses to ensure that candidate countries would continue to be held to account with regard to their strict adherence to the *acquis* both during the run-up to accession and in a transitional period afterwards. A compromise was eventually achieved between de Hoop Scheffer and the

VVD State Secretary for European Affairs Atzo Nicolai, setting out a series of demands for strict safeguard clauses but removing the threat of a Dutch veto on individual countries. The compromise was, however, immediately rejected by VVD parliamentary leader Gerrit Zalm. This set the stage for parliament's marathon thirteen hour pre-summit on the government's position statement.

In the debate, Zalm underscored the position of the VVD parliamentary group that a number of candidate countries (Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania and Latvia were named) were not yet ready for accession.<sup>8</sup> In the VVD view, these countries variously failed to meet minimum standards in such areas as the fight against corruption, the development of appropriate administrative structures to deal with EU legislation, food safety, taxation regimes, privatization and industrial restructuring. To this end, it was argued that the countries concerned should be required to undergo periodic re-examinations to determine whether they met the accession criteria; potentially, therefore, they might be excluded from the first wave of new members. The Dutch government was called upon to insist on the adoption of this strict 'country-by-country' approach at Brussels. The government was further called upon to demand the reform of the CAP, on the terms set out in the Strategic Accord, as a pre-condition for enlargement. In Zalm's words, the government would have to show itself a staunch ('*bikkelhard*') defender of the national interest at this critical juncture and had, in effect, undermined its own position by relinquishing the threat of a veto.

The government, in turn, argued the case for a more flexible position. It stressed the historic and economic opportunities represented by EU enlargement, as well as, more particularly, the undesirability of the Netherlands becoming isolated in the EU by an insistence on a politically untenable set of demands. In the end, the government position carried the day, but only by relying on the support of the opposition. The PvdA joined with the CDA and other smaller groups to back the government, while both the VVD and the LPF groups voted against the government position. The Netherlands was thus represented at the Brussels summit by a caretaker government (its resignation had preceded the EU debate) whose position, though supported by the (left) opposition in the chamber, had been rejected by two of the three parties in the outgoing coalition. The vote stands, if nothing else, as a strong (though by no means unproblematic) example of Dutch parliamentary/executive dualism.

Though sharp, the divide on the government's negotiating strategy nevertheless proved to be short-lived. On returning from Brussels, Prime Minister Balkenende was able to point to a number of minor victories. The Dutch government was able to play a significant role in shaping the mechanics of the

safeguard clauses put in place with regard to the new member states. Dutch influence may be seen in a lengthening of the time period after accession when such clauses may be invoked (from two to three years), a specification of the areas in which they may be imposed, and the consultative involvement of the Council of Ministers in their removal. While clearly unable to do much about the (to Dutch eyes) very unfavourable Franco-German budget compromise reached before the summit, the Prime Minister was nevertheless able to secure a reduction in the inflation correction mechanism in the CAP from 1.5% to 1%. Overall, this was enough to prompt Zalm to compliment Balkenende for his handling of the negotiations in Brussels, given the parameters within which the Prime Minister had to operate. Perhaps rather more to the point, the VVD had, by this stage, no interest in deepening a rift on an effectively closed issue with a party with which they hoped to continue in government after the January election.

The post-summit debate largely closed off discussion on the European issue. There was, however, one addendum worthy of note. The Dutch parliament, in early November 2002, backed two motions concerned with the holding of referenda on European issues. A majority backed a motion put down by Democrats '66 leader Thom de Graaf and others, which called on the government to consider the possibility of holding a referendum on EU enlargement and to report back to parliament on its feasibility by the end of the month. A majority also backed a PvdA-sponsored motion calling for a Europe-wide referendum on the results of the work of the Convention or, failing that, a national referendum in the Netherlands prior to the ratification of any resulting Treaty reform. In each case, the referendum motion was backed by the (left) opposition together with the LPF parliamentary group, against the CDA and the VVD combined. On 29 November 2002, the government, reported back to the chamber on the feasibility of an enlargement referendum, unsurprisingly making the case for insuperable problems of logistics and timing. Yet, although an enlargement referendum has been taken off the table, the motion concerning a 'constitutional referendum' stands. This is not to say that the Netherlands, will necessarily go down the referendum route. That the possibility is being discussed at all is, nevertheless, a striking gauge of the evolution of the Dutch debate on Europe in recent years.

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## Conclusion and prospects

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The Dutch election of January 2003 is perhaps best described as one of 'qualified normalization'. While the established Dutch parties have been able to

reaffirm their central role in the national political system, they have done so against the backdrop of a much changed policy agenda and climate of opinion. This holds true for Dutch European policy as well. While a hard-edged rhetoric of national interest finds its principal voice in the VVD and its main echo in a now much diminished LPF, this discourse has nevertheless assumed, with more moderate tones, a much broader resonance. Thus, whatever the composition of the new Dutch government, one can expect - with variations of tone - the continued pursuit of a more strongly and explicitly articulated sense of national interest within European fora. The Dutch government, as a significant net contributor, will continue to be a champion of budgetary reform.

Equally, the country will continue to search for its place in a post-enlargement European Union which will no longer offer the same level of 'natural congruence' with national interests as tended to be the case in the past. The 'critical turn' in Dutch European debate over the past decade will not be reversed.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the 2003 campaign yet again showed the manner in which European issues are becoming politicized. Although parties have not sought to use European issues as mobilizing themes, such issues are nevertheless coming to occupy a progressively larger place in national political debate. Mainstream Dutch opinion, while steadfast in a basic commitment to European integration, will continue to cast an increasingly critical eye on the terms of the commitment.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See particularly comments by Professor Rinus van Schendelen, as reported in the *NRC Handelsblad*, 16 October 2002. In a highly polemical (and bestselling) account of the CDA-LPF-VVD government and its downfall, LPF minister Bomhoff accused Liberal leader Zalm of effectively being the orchestrator of the crisis which brought down the government. See Eduard J. Bomhoff, *Blinde Ambitie: Mijn 87 Dagen met Zalm, Heinsbroek en Balkenende* (Gouda: Balans, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Interview/NSS, ANP exit polls, as reported in the *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Volkskrant*, 23 January 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Jan Marijnissen, *Nieuw Optimisme* (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2003), p. 131. All translations from the Dutch are my own.

<sup>5</sup> The terms are those of Professor Jos de Beus (affiliated with the PvdA), as reported in the *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 November 2002.

<sup>6</sup> *NRC Handelsblad*, 17 and 21 October 2002.

<sup>7</sup> *Werken aan Vertrouwen, een Kwestie van Aanpakken. Strategisch Akkoord voor Kabinet CDA, LPF, VVD*. 3 July 2002, at p. 27. Text available at <http://www.minaz.nl/kabinetsformatie/20020703akkoord.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> The full text of the parliamentary debates, as well as of the relevant government position papers, may be accessed via the Dutch parliamentary website at <http://parlando.sdu.nl/cgi/login/anonymous>.

<sup>9</sup> See further Robert Harmsen, 'Europe and the Dutch Parliamentary Election of May 2002', *RIIA/OERN Election Briefing No. 3* at [www.riia.org](http://www.riia.org); and Robert Harmsen, 'Euroscepticism in the Netherlands: Stirrings of Dissent' in Robert Harmsen and Menno Spiering (eds), *Euroscepticism: Party Politics and European Integration*, *European Studies* no. 20 (Amsterdam/New York: Editions Rodopi, 2003 forthcoming).

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