

# General Elections in the Netherlands

## 9<sup>th</sup> June 2010

### ANALYSIS

1 month before  
the poll

On 20<sup>th</sup> February last, for the first time in the world, a government collapsed over Afghanistan. «*When confidence is not there it is difficult to work together. This cabinet can go no further,*» said Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende (Christian Democratic Appeal, CDA) before delivering the resignation of his government coalition. The head of government had accepted the upkeep of 1,950 soldiers deployed as part of NATO's international security assistance force (ISAF) (which is 85,000 strong) in Afghanistan until the summer of 2011 after NATO asked the Netherlands on 4<sup>th</sup> February to look into the possibility and opportunity of an extension to the presence of the Dutch contingent for another year in the shape of a smaller mission that would be responsible for training the Afghan forces. The Labour Party (PvdA), the CDA's partner in the government was against this measure and refused to review the calendar approved in 2007 that established the end of the mission in 2010. «*We promised the electorate two years ago that the last Dutch soldiers would have left Uruzgan at the end of the year. We have to keep that promise,*» said the Labour leader at the time, Wouter Bos. Sixteen hours of negotiating were not enough to make the PvdA come back on its position. Jan Peter Balkenende was therefore forced to hand in his resignation to Queen Beatrix who announced that early general elections would take place on 9<sup>th</sup> June next.

The election was due to be held in the spring of 2011. Of the four governments led by Jan Peter Balkenend since 2002 three have collapsed before the planned end of their term in office (the fourth being an interim government).

«*It is a good thing for the Netherlands that the government has collapsed,*» declared the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Mark Rutte adding, «*how low do you have to get to campaign at the expense of our soldiers in Afghanistan as Wouter Bos did?*» «*How could Maxime Verhagen (Foreign Minister, CDA) have allowed the Netherlands to become a point of ridicule in the international arena? Indecision and inertia have governed the country for the last three years, every major issue has been put off until later, the Netherlands has lost three years because of a lack of ambition,*» indicated Alexander Pechtold, Democrats 66 (D66). Agnes Kant, who was chair of the Socialist Party (SP) at the time said, «*I am happy that the electorate will now be able to have its say because we have difficult choices ahead of us.*» «*This government, the worst that ever existed, did not deserve to govern a day longer. We can raise the flag,*»

declared Geert Wilders (Freedom Party PVV) after the fall of the coalition. «*If the fall of the government is to benefit anyone it will probably more the opposition than the ruling parties,*» stressed Kees Aarts political expert at the University of Twente, who adds, «*the CDA and the PvdA have not shown much impressive ability for leadership over the last few weeks.*»

### The Dutch Political System

The States General, Parliament of the Netherlands, is bicameral. They comprise: a first chamber (Eerste Kamer), the Senate, which has 75 members elected every 4 years by indirect suffrage by the members of the kingdom's 12 provincial States; and the second chamber (Tweede Kamer), whose 150 members are elected every 4 years by direct universal suffrage and total proportional representation, an electoral method which fosters the existence and representation of a

large number of political parties. Each political party that wishes to put candidates forward in the general elections must collate 30 declarations of support in each of the kingdom's 19 constituencies, i.e. a total of 570 signatures.

The present States General includes 10 political parties:

- The Christian Democrat Appeal (CDA), centre right party led by outgoing Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende which was born of the merger in 1980 of three parties : the People's Catholic Party (KVP), the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) and the Historical Christian Party (CHU), 41 MPs;
- The Labour Party (PvdA), founded in 1946 and born of the union movement rallying the social democrats. It is the main opposition party led by Job Cohen with 33 seats;
- The Socialist Party (SP), an extreme leftwing party led by Emile Roemer, has 25 MPs;
- The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), created in 1948, says it is inspired by Thorbecke, (1798-1872) the father of the constitutional revision of the Netherlands in 1848 and is led by Mark Rutte. It has 22 seats;
- the Freedom Party (PVV), a far right movement created in 2002 by Geert Wilders who to some extent succeeded in the wake of the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) whose founder was killed on 6th May 2002 ; the party has 9 MPs;
- The Green Left (GL), an leftwing ecologist party founded in 1989 after a merger between four leftwing parties is led by Femke Halsema - it has 7 MPs;
- The Christian Union (CU), a party born of the merger in January 2000 of the Reformed Political Federation (RPF) and the Reformed Political Alliance (GPV), led by André Rouvoet, has 6 MPs;
- Democrats 66 (D66) which rallies the reforming centre-left liberals. Led since 2005 by Alexander Pechtold; D66 has 3 MPs;
- The Reformed Political Party (SGP) founded in 1918 and led by Kees van der Staaij rallies an orthodox protestant electorate (strict Calvinists) and has 2 MPs;
- the Animals Party (PvdD) founded in 2002 it is led by Marianne Thieme and is devoted to animal well-being and animals rights ; it has 2 seats.

### The Campaign of the Government Coalition Parties

«*The CDA is a competent party but people see it rather more as being Jan Peter Balkenende's cause,*» analyses political expert André Krouwel. The outgoing Prime Minister, in office since 2002, is seen as a handicap by his party. Within the CDA many voices have been raised for the Christian Democrat list to be led by someone else in these general elections. The «*Prime Minister's advantage*» which means that in the Netherlands the outgoing Heads of government systematically win the general election in which they are standing may be overruled this time.

«*We are a particularly pertinent player in the world. When we look at national statistics a fantastic image emerges,*» stresses the Prime Minister. The CDA started its campaign with the slogan of «*Dynamism and Together*». It proposes to merge the Interior and Justice Ministries, to bring the maximum life prison sentences up from 30 to 40 years. It supports a rapid liberalisation of the healthcare sector and hopes to maintain fiscal rebates on property loans in order not to increase charges on owners or to disrupt the property market. The VVD and the PVV share the CDA's position on this.

The Christian Union (CU) is promising to recruit 10,000 policemen and social staff and 5,000 teachers. This religious party also wants to do away with the «*first kitchen*», the name given to the tax bonus granted to households in which one of its members does not work and exempt a certain amount of revenue from taxation in all households.

### The Campaign of the Party which left the Coalition

The PvdA which left the government coalition changed leader; Wouter Bos who said that he wanted to devote more time to his family relinquished his place as head of the party on 12<sup>th</sup> March, just one week after the local elections to Job Cohen. Aged 63 the latter has been mayor of Amsterdam since 2001. He has funded Muslim associations and launched work on the Westermosk, the large mosque run by Milli Gorus, - a Turkish organisation that has been banned in Germany

– will be highest building in the town. The mayor also likes to point out that he has made Amsterdam a safer place by installing closed circuit TV. Cohen, who was the lead candidate for his party in the general elections on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2003 against Jan Peter Balkenende will lead the PvdA on 9<sup>th</sup> June next.

With the slogan «*Here are the Netherlands*» the PvdA has committed to making unpopular reforms such as putting back the retirement age from 65 to 67 in 15 years time (66 years in 2020 and 67 in 2025), budgetary cuts (it wants to save a minimum of 10 billion euros in 5 years). It also wants to put 60% tax on revenues over an annual 150,000 euros, replace study grants by a loans system and reduce tax rebates on property loans by 30% as from 2014. The PvdA has promised not to modify the amount or the length of unemployment benefits.

«*The last thing that this country needs is this grand provider of multicultural hugs,*» declared Geert Wilders when Job Cohen was appointed head of the Labour Party. «*If Job Cohen were to do nationally what he has done in Amsterdam it would be a total disaster. As Prime Minister he would open the doors to radical Islam,*» he added. On a political level the PvdA has excluded any type of coalition with the PVV. «*The integration of immigrants might be achieved more easily via their religion. It is their only point of focus when they enter Dutch society,*» declares Job Cohen. «*How I understand it is that people have had enough of the exclusion of groups in the population and they think that I may be able to calm things down somewhat,*» he added, «*I have a soft image but I can be very hard. Holding out a hand when it is possible, having an iron hand when it is necessary.*»

### The threat of Geert Wilders

Geert Wilders and the Freedom Party (PVV) seem to have been the main beneficiaries of the government crisis and are a threat to the two «*main*» parties, the CDA and the PvdA. The PVV claims to be progressive and secular, in favour of gender equality and defender of homosexuals. Its criticism of Islam is undertaken in the name of values of equality and feminism and the party refuses to be qualified as populist and an-

ti-Islam. «*I want to defend freedom, it is truly my mission and I am personally paying a high price for it,*» highlights Geert Wilders who has lived for several years under police protection because of the threats made against his life.

Defender of the freedom of expression Geert Wilders claims the right to criticise religions. However he reduces Islam down to its most violent aspects, notably the manner in which some fundamentalists treat women. His approach which is particularly effective in a society which has been suffering a deep identity crisis for the last ten years is causing a problem within the electorate attracting, for example, some orthodox Protestants who are afraid of Islam.

The PVV wants all immigration from Muslim countries to stop and to send all unemployed foreigners back to their homeland, withdraw the Dutch passport from recidivists who enjoy dual nationality and fight against what he qualifies as the «*Islamisation*» of the Netherlands by imposing a multitude of measures against Muslims living in the country: ie refusal to build new mosques, a fine of 1000 € for women wearing the veil, a ban on the Koran which Geert Wilders qualifies as a «*fascist book*» etc ... «*We dare to address sensitive issues such as Islam and we use normal, clear words which the voters who read the newspapers can understand,*» says Geert Wilders. As with any populist party the PVV is fighting the elites the corruption of which it denounces; it idealises the people saying that it would be the only one to defend it and to whom it wants to return to power. «*We want to take the Dutch away from the leftwing elites which protect criminals and which supports the Islamisation of the country. These leftwing elites believe in multiculturalism, in a European Super State and in high taxes but the rest of the Netherlands thinks differently and this silent majority now has a voice,*» stresses Geert Wilders who accuses the PvdA of «*not speaking the language of the man in the street but Arab.*»

In the European elections on 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> June 2009 the PVV became the second most important political party in the kingdom taking 16.97% of the vote (the CDA won 20.05%). It undertook a campaign against the European Union («*Less of Europe, more of the Netherlands, Never with Turkey*») and the Islamisa-

tion of Dutch society. In favour of abolishing the European Parliament it asked for the exclusion of Romania and Bulgaria from the Union and the limitation of the European executive to one Commissioner, since in its opinion the 27 countries should only take care of the single currency and economic cooperation.

### Local elections in the guise of primaries?

On 3<sup>rd</sup> March last the Dutch renewed 8,700 representatives in 394 towns. In the Netherlands local elections usually focus on extremely local issues but this year national leaders became closely involved in the electoral campaign because of their proximity to the general elections on 9<sup>th</sup> June. Immigration, security and the war in Afghanistan were the main themes. «*The local elections became real primaries in view of the national elections, in any case this is how the national parties have seen them,*» indicated André Krouwel, a political analyst at the University of Vrije in Amsterdam.

Independent candidates won 28% of the vote in this election. The PvdA came out first with 15.6% of the vote and seems to have taken advantage of its position with regard to the conflict in Afghanistan. «*Some said we were dead and buried but with our fighting spirit, our humility and our ideals we have made a comeback,*» declared its then leader, Wouter Bos. The PvdA took the lead over the CDA which won 14.9% of the vote (the PVV ate into the CDA's electorate in its bastions of Limbourg and Brabant), the VVD (15.5%), D66 (8%), the Green Left (6.5%), the Socialist Party (declining with 4.1% and the Christian Union (3.8%). The latter party is the only one in the government coalition to have progressed.

Turnout in the local elections was the weakest in the country's history rising to 53.3% (-2.2 points in comparison with the previous election of the same type on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2006).

The PVV was taking part in these local elections for the first time and won 0.8% of the vote nationally. This is not really a significant result since like the British National Party (BNP) the PVV also chose to put candidates forward in two towns only, Almere and The Hague. «*We chose these two towns because*

*we know we have good candidates there,*» said Geert Wilders. «*Geert Wilders chose these two towns very carefully. There were good candidates and MPs there who are very close to him,*» stresses Kees Arts, a political analyst from the University of Twente. The PVV came second in the county's administrative capital, The Hague. Led by Sietse Fritsma it won 8 seats just behind the PvdA which won 10. In Almere the country's sixth town 30km to the east of Amsterdam with a population of 187,000, the PVV led by Raymond de Roon won 21.6% of the vote, taking 9 of the town's 39 seats. It came out ahead of the PvdA which won 17.6% of the vote and 7 seats. The PVV defended a security policy with the implementation of citizen commandos, a decrease in local taxes and a 10% reduction of the number of local civil servants. «*The vote shows the electorate's deep discontent, Geert Wilders will certainly use these results as a springboard for the national elections,*» analyses Kees Arts, adding, «*however we must not read too much into the local elections. In 2006 Labour achieved very good results in the local elections but performed badly in the general elections.*» «*What is possible in The Hague and Almere is possible across the rest of the country. It is a springboard for our victory,*» declared the PVV leader when the results were announced.

In these general elections the PVV is campaigning on security and the fight against immigration and what it qualifies as the «*Islamisation*» of the Netherlands. The party wants to set 1 billion € aside to improve Dutch security and recruit 10,000 additional policemen. It has also promised to increase minimal prison sentences and expulse criminal foreigners. «*We are ready to make agreements on everything except on one point: we shall not touch the basic pension,*» said Geert Wilders. A subject which is a matter of consensus within the Dutch political classes anyway, the PVV is the only party to be against extending the length of time someone has to work in order to be eligible for a full pension.

### The other parties

The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) wants to reduce State spending by 30 billion €. It

intends to fight against waste and limit administrative costs. It also hopes to reduce the Netherlands' contribution to the European Union. The VVD is using a programme based on reductions in social charges and taxes as its prop. *«People know better than the government of how to spend money,»* says the party's leader Mark Rutte. The latter who considers the general elections on 9<sup>th</sup> June as *«the most important in a generation»* is very critical of the CDA. Whilst he accuses Jan Peter Balkenende of *«being spineless»* he also accuses him of *«having applied the PvdA programme for the last 3 years.»* Mark Rutte did however say that he wanted to cooperate with the CDA in the future. *«The VVD is ready to clear away the ruins. It is what people are expecting of us,»* he stressed.

The Democrats 66 (D66) also support a postponement of the retirement age which they want to take up to 67 in 2024. D66 is in favour of the progressive limiting of fiscal rebates on interest on property loans and the long term abolition of taxes on the transfer of property. It plans to save 15 billion € and invest 2.5 billion in education. On an institutional level the party wants to abolish the First Chamber of the States General which it qualifies as *«a relic of the 19th century.»*

*«Neoliberalism has plunged the Netherlands into economic, social and political confusion. The CDA and the VVD but also PvdA are responsible for the country's present situation,»* declared Emile Roemer who succeeded Agnes Kant as head of the Socialist Party (SP). The SP is running under the banner of *«In support of a major clean up»* and a programme entitled *«For a Better Netherlands with less spending»*. The far left party wants to save 14 billion € in public spending notably by making budgetary cuts in defence and raising 6 billion € in additional taxes – it promises to reduce the budgetary deficit by 10 billion €. *«We are socialists but also realists,»* says Emile Roemer who plans to spend 10 billion more via the launch of *«social reconstruction»*. The SP would also like social benefits (family and sick pay) to be indexed against revenue and are asking that a work permit be obligatory for people who come from the States of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Green Left (GL) is promising to bring the budgetary deficit down to 1% of the GDP in 2015. The party is promising to save 16 billion € and make 7 billion € in investments (including 2.5 billion for education). The GL is suggesting that the retirement age be brought up to 67 for everyone born after 1971 and to increase unemployment benefit paid by the State and limit this to one year only. Finally the party wants to abolish the First Chamber of the States General and reduce the number of MPs in the Second Chamber by one third down to 100.

Running under the banner *«Confidence and application of the law»* the TON party (Trots op Nederland) [1] intends to establish itself and exist on the Dutch political scene which is relatively full on the far right. TON was created in April 2008 by former Integration and Immigration Minister (2003-2007), Rita Verdonk, former VVD member from which she was ejected in October 2007 – she is nicknamed the Iron Lady. During her term in office as minister she was greatly criticised by the opposition party and Human Rights organisations because of her hard policy towards immigrants and asylum seekers. *«The State is too costly, not modest enough and not neutral enough,»* declared Rita Verdonk who is suggesting putting an end to this situation in two terms in office ie 8 years. The former minister suggests making cuts in the civil services notably in areas of healthcare and education, making 6.2 billion € savings in 4 years. TON is also fighting for the creation of the post of Security Minister, the reduction of the number of members of the Chamber of the States General from 150 down to 75, the election of mayors and the Prime Minister by direct universal suffrage.

The Reformed Political Party (SGP) wants to reduce the Netherlands' contributions to the EU and the civil service budget to save 18 billion €. This religious party wants to invest 3.6 billion in education and innovation. Last April the Appeal Court ordered the State to guarantee that the SGP would allow women to stand in the general elections. Indeed the party has only just accepted women as members (in 2005 the court in the Hague asked the State to stop subsidising the SGP as long as it refused to accept women as mem-

bers). There is not one female candidate amongst the 30 registered on the SGP list.

The Animals Party (PvdD) intends to do away with the Ministry of Agriculture and give its portfolio to the VROM, which would rally Housing, Urban Planning and the Environment. The PvdD also said it wanted to reduce the defence budget by 20% and postpone the retirement age to 67 but not before 2044.

Apart from the defenders of animals there are those who defend plants united in the Plant Party (PvdP) led by former National Herbarium Director Pieter Baas, will be standing in the election on 9<sup>th</sup> June. The fight against global warming, the protection of sustainable growth and biodiversity are the central themes of the PvdP's programme.

### **The «Pirate Party» and the «For nothing Party» will also be taking part in this election.**

The latest poll by the Maurice de Hond institute published on 6<sup>th</sup> May credits the PvdA and the VVD with 33 seats each in the first Chamber. The CDA led by outgoing Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende is due to win 27 seats followed by the PVV (17 seats), Democrats 66 (11 seats), the Socialist Party and the

Green Left (10 seats each) and the Christian Union (6 seats). The SGP is due to win 2 seats and the PvdD 1. Finally Rita Verdonk's TON will probably not be able to enter Parliament.

The dispersal of the political landscape in the Netherlands makes a coalition obligatory rallying three or four groups. After the election the government parties may choose to form a security belt around the PVV and hold it at distance from any government coalition; a new coalition with the CDA and the PvdA does however seem impossible. However if the PVV achieves a high score on 9<sup>th</sup> June Dutch democratic tradition means that it would enter government.

*Translated by Helen Levy*

**Reminder of the General Elections on 22nd November 2006 in the Netherlands**

Turnout 80.40%

Political Parties	N° of votes won	% of votes won
<b>Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)</b>	2 608 573	41
<b>Labour Party (PvdA)</b>	2 085 077	33
<b>Socialist Party (SP)</b>	1 630 803	25
<b>People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)</b>	1 443 312	22
<b>Parti de la liberté (PVV)</b>	579 490	9
<b>Green Left (GL)</b>	453 054	7
<b>Christian Union (CU)</b>	390 969	6
<b>Democrats 66 (D66)</b>	193 232	3
<b>Animal Party (PvdD)</b>	179 988	2
<b>Reformed Political Party (SGP)</b>	153 266	2
<b>Others</b>	100 919	0

Source : <http://www.nlverkiezingen.com/TK2006.html>

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