

# 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 re-cidivists 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-

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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), De-

mocrats 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.

#### **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>

D-7  
7 days before  
the poll

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## A round up one week before the election

On 20<sup>th</sup> February last the Dutch government collapsed over problems caused by the peace mission in Afghanistan. The Netherlands already experienced a similar situation like this on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2002 when Wim Kok's government (Labour Party, PvdA) resigned after the publication of an official report by the Dutch Documentation Institute which was critical of Dutch army activities during the fall of Srebrenica enclave in July 1995 and which admitted «*the joint political responsibility of the Netherlands,*» in the massacre of the civilian population. 8 years later Afghanistan was the source of the political crisis, 21 soldiers (including the son of the Chief-of-Staff, General Peter van Uhm) have been killed since August 2006.

The government led by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende (Christian Democratic Appeal, CDA) therefore collapsed after the departure of the PvdA. It was against the Prime Minister's decision to maintain 1,950 Dutch soldiers deployed as part of NATO's international security assistance force (ISAF) (that totals around 85,000 men) in Afghanistan until the summer of 2011. This extension of the mandate of the Dutch contingent was requested on 4<sup>th</sup> February last of the Dutch authorities by NATO which wanted the Dutch soldiers to train the Afghan forces.

Around 500,000 Dutch living abroad are allowed to vote - by mail or by proxy - in these general elections. During the last general election on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2006, 26,000 of them fulfilled their civic duty.

All of the Dutch political parties support cuts in public spending, a vital measure to reduce public deficits. Most parties are planning budgetary cuts to a total of 15 billion € on average by 2015.

The PvdA wants to increase taxes on the wealthiest by setting a 60% rate on income of over 150,000 € per year and reduce the tax rebate on interest on housing loans by 30% as from 2014.

The Liberals of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) want to reduce social charges likewise the sums devoted by the State to international aid and to the European Union. They intend to limit administrative costs.

All of the parties are promising to foster employment. The PvdA confirms that it will create 200,000 jobs; the Greens are promising 300,000 and the CDA 320,000 - the latter also want to reform the Labour Laws. The VVD is promising to create twice as many jobs as the PvdA: 400,000.

Finally as far as pensions are concerned the unions and managers came to an agreement on 27<sup>th</sup> May with regard to the main orientation of the law on pensions. The law governing the elderly stipulates that the retirement age will be brought up to 67 by 2025 (66 in 2020 and 67 in 2025). It lies at 65 at present. This age will then be associated with life expectancy which is reviewed every 5 years. The majority of the political parties support the delay of the retirement age.

According to studies by the Central Bureau (CPB) on electoral programmes the Socialist Party (SP), the Labour Party and the Green Left (GL) which lie to the left of the political scale - would protect Dutch buying power the most. «*The work requested of the parties is much greater than that announced during the general elections in 2006. The political classes are able to rise to this major challenge. It is good news for the electorate which has to choose,*» declared the director of CPB, Coen Teulings. «*The Socialist Party, which is the party planning for the least savings still manages to forecast an economy of 10 billion euro. The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy is asking for the greatest cuts: the Liberals are announcing 20 billion € in savings and are showing the best result with regard to financial strength: in the party's projects the budgetary deficit would be transformed into a surplus in 2015,*» he added.

The CDA is suffering from the poor image of outgoing Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende. Traditionally in the Netherlands the party leader of the outgoing government benefits from his position and wins the elections - it is what is called the «*bonus*» of the outgoing Prime Minister. Political observers are talking of Jan

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Peter Balkenende's «*malus*». «*It is impossible for Jan Peter Balkenende to catch up with Mark Rutte (VVD leader) and Job Cohen (the PvdA leader) in the polls. The Prime Minister's image is far too damaged to reverse the situation. Jan Peter Balkenende does not seem strong but it is exactly what people look for in times of economic crisis,*» stresses the marketing specialist Frank van den Wall Bake.

Struggling in the polls the CDA has to face the offensive by the Christian Union (CU), member of the outgoing government coalition. Its leader André Rouvoet declared that during his mandate as head of the country Jan Peter Balkenende had taken more of the CDA's interests into account than those of the country.

But Job Cohen has not had an easy time either. Hence on 27th April last during the first TV debate organised with the general elections on 9th June in view, the Labour leader was not really convincing. He was notably cornered on not knowing how many Dutch had a housing loan, since the issue of tax rebates on housing loan interests is at the heart of the electoral campaign. There are many of his adversaries who point to Job Cohen's lack of knowledge in terms of the economy and also highlight his lack of competence in this area.

During the second debate that took place on 5<sup>th</sup> May the Labour leader was again the subject of criticism – he said he had received an SMS from one of the programme organisers Paul Witteman which bore the following phrase: «*Be yourself*». Finally just a few days ago Job Cohen was confused about the retirement age saying that his party want to raise the age of retirement as from 2020 whilst the PvdA programme plans for the application of this measure as from 2015 which represents savings of an additional one billion euros. This confusion and other slips explain in part the decline of the PvdA in the latest opinion polls.

Just a few days from the election the VVD is flying high. For the first time in more than 9 years it is leading in terms of voting intentions in the polls. According to analysts the VVD is mainly attracting former CDA and PVV voters notably because of its economic programme which inspires greater confidence than that put forward by the other two parties. According to the latest survey by Kieskompas (Electoral Compass) half

of the CDA's electorate is going to vote for the liberals. This figure totals 60% amongst the PVV voters. «*The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy in its role as a bridge between left and right can win three seats in the same way as it can win 24,*» declared political expert André Krouwel, a political expert from the Vrije University of Amsterdam.

Mark Rutte indicated that he did not support an alliance with the PvdA: «*the differences with the Social Democrats are too great,*» he declared in an interview with the Dagelijkse Standaard. The present European Commissioner for Digital Society, Neelie Kroes is not ruling out becoming Prime Minister if her party comes first on 9<sup>th</sup> June.

The Freedom Party (PVV) led by Geert Wilders is experiencing some difficulty notably in the recruitment of candidates for the general election. «*This kind of party attracts gold diggers in the main, outsiders who cannot find a place anywhere else,*» indicated André Krouwel. MP Hero Brinkman, who features 11th on the national list on 9<sup>th</sup> June criticised Geert Wilders and said that the PVV «*was not democratic*» asking for greater opening. He wants voters to be able to become members of the party which is not the case right now and therefore give their opinion about its programme and its work. «*Geert Wilders has lost ground and some people are slightly tired of his personality, his logic and the polarisation he creates,*» indicated Dirk Oegem, professor at the Vrije University. Many Dutchmen are also wondering about the PVV's ability to govern notably after the local elections on 3<sup>rd</sup> March last. Whilst the PVV came second in The Hague and first in Almere, the country's 6th biggest town, out of intransigence and political tactics it chose to remain in the opposition on both towns. «*If we make no compromises we would become a second Socialist Party (a Dutch far left party) which makes a lot of noise but never achieves any change,*» declared Geert Wilders who stressed the day after the local elections that «*the electorate has spoken and said that we must take democracy seriously.*»

«*The populist leader is going to try and stay out of government and take advantage of being the main opposition party,*» maintains Dirk Oegema. Alfred Pijpers, of the Dutch Institute for International Relations, Clingendael believes that the breakthrough by Geert



Wilders will have the effect of strengthening cohesion between the government parties who in 2002 governed with Pim Fortuyn's party (the populist leader was assassinated in May 2002, nine days before the general elections on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2002 when his party the Pim Fortuyn List came second with 26% of the vote). «*Even if the PVV wins 25% to 30% of the vote it will not enter government,*» maintains the political expert.

The PVV indicated that the fact that the CDA is turning the issue of tax rebates on housing loans into a «*breaking point*» was increasing its chances of entering government. Indeed if the Prime Minister's party wins the election it will have to call on parties which share its opinion (maintaining tax rebates on interest on housing loans in order not to increase the burden weighing on owners or to upset the housing market), i.e. the VVD and the PVV.

Declining in the polls in which he lies fourth at present Geert Wilders again spoke on one of his favourite themes: immigration. He made calculations public in which «*non-Western*» immigrants are said to cost the State 7 billion € per year because of the unemployment they suffer and the high crime rates they are supposed to create saying «*the Dutch are going to have to decide: are we a country of immigration or a country of social services?*»

The Democrat 66's chairman (D66) Alexander Pechtold indicated that he wanted to see the Netherlands governed by a coalition that would rally the D66, the PvdA, the VVD and the Green Left after the elections on 9th June. «*By supporting Democrats 66 voters know which government they will have. A vote for us will prevent Mark Rutte associating with Geert Wilders and Job Cohen turning to the Socialist Party,*» he declared. He also said that his party would not join «*a coalition that left the housing market in its present state.*»

Mark Rutte was appointed the winner of the TV debate organised between the leading candidates that took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> May. 34% of viewers appointed him as such, with 23% voting for Job Cohen and 18% for Geert Wilders and Jan Peter Balkenende. The political leaders were each called to name both an adversary and a theme to debate. Mark Rutte and Geert Wilders chose Job Cohen and Jan Peter Balkenende chose Mark Rutte. «*Mark Rutte's projects are not social – he wants to balance public finances coldly and irresponsibly and his refusal to guarantee tax rebates on the interest on financial loans opens the door to another violent government (i.e. rallying the VVD and the parties on the left),*» declared the outgoing Prime Minister.

According to the polls everything will depend on Job Cohen's PvdA and Mark Rutte's VVD. Both parties are leading in terms of voting intentions (Mark Rutte's party is first) whilst outgoing Prime Minister Balkenende's party the CDA seems to be lagging behind.

According to a poll by Peil, published on 26<sup>th</sup> May last the VVD is due to win 36 of the 150 seats in the Estates General, the PvdA, 29, the CDA 25, the PVV, 17, the Socialist Party and the Green Left 11 each, D66, 9 and the Christian Union, 8.

A coalition rallying the VVD, PvdA and D66 (and possibly the Green Left) is the most frequently mentioned possibility on the part of political analysts. However there are many differences between the Liberals and the Labour, notably with regard to energy, the health-care system, labour law, taxation and the tax rebate on interests on housing loans (which the PvdA wants to reduce by 30% contrary to the Liberals). The VVD may also join forces with the CDA led by outgoing Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende and Geert Wilders PVV.

After the general election negotiations may be long. The next government coalition in the Netherlands may prove difficult to form.

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## Liberal and Labour run neck and neck in the Dutch general elections in which the populist party led by Geert Wilders takes 3rd place.

The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), led by Mark Rutte and the Labour Party (PvdA), led by Job Cohen emerged neck and neck in the general elections that took place in the

RESULTS

Netherlands on 9<sup>th</sup> June. The Liberal Party increased the number of its MPs in the Second Chamber of the States General (Tweede Kamer), the Lower Chamber in Parliament by nine in comparison with the last general elections on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2006 taking 31 seats whilst Labour which withstood the test better than forecast lost 2 seats and ended up with 30 MPs.

The Freedom Party (PVV), a far right party led by Geert Wilders won 24 seats (+16). The Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) led by outgoing Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, weary after eight years in power is the loser in this election. *"It is dramatic. The message is quite clear, voters are always right and they have inflicted a severe defeat on us,"* declared outgoing Foreign Minister, Maxime Verhagen (CDA). The outgoing Prime Minister announced that he was retiring from political life. *"The electorate has spoken and the result is clear. In an election there are winners and losers, this is how democracy works. I have announced this evening that I am giving up the leadership of my party immediately. I shall not be a member of the new Lower Chamber of Parliament. The results of these elections are very disappointing, it is a smack in the face,"* he declared.

The far left Socialist Party (SP) came fifth and won 15 seats (-10); the Green Left (GL) 10 seats (+3) ; the Democrats 66, centre left reform liberals won 10 seats (+7) ; the Christian Union (CU) 5 seats (-1) ; the Political Reform Party (SGP), 2 seats (=) and the Animals Party (PvdD), 2 MPs (=). Turnout declined in comparison with the general elections on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2006. It rose to 74.5%, i.e. -3.9 points. *"These are quite historic elections: for the first time since 1913 we are probably going to have a Liberal Minister,"* declared André Krouwel, a political scientist from the Vrije University in Amsterdam. The latter made a correct forecast when he said that the Liberals were well on their way to leading the country nearly one century after the government coalition led by Pieter Cort van der Linden (1913-1918). *"What an evening! How exciting! For the first time in history it seems that the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy is the biggest party in the Netherlands!"* rejoiced Mark Rutte.

The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) has set the goal of bringing the public deficit (which

reached 5.3% of the GDP in 2009) down to zero by 2015 by reducing annual State spending by 10% (i.e. 20 billion €). Opposed to any increases in taxes, VVD leader Mark Rutte is advising rather on limiting administrative costs as well as making cuts in social spending. He has also promised to negotiate a government agreement rapidly to present a strong budget by September next (this is due to be approved on 21<sup>st</sup> September). The Liberals are advising on the introduction of an austerity plan that includes the abolition of unemployment benefits after one year (instead of three at present), bringing the age of retirement up by two years (set at 65 at present) – a measure which most of the political parties agree with – halving of the cooperation budget and finally a reduction in the Netherlands contribution to the European Union. With regard to taxes the Liberals are planning to phase out inheritance duties long term and maintain major tax rebates for those who purchase a house. Finally with regard to immigration the VVD programme plans to make it obligatory to learn Dutch and to abolish all State aid for foreigners who come to live in the country for a ten year period.

*"Grandiose!"* exclaimed the Freedom Party leader (PVV), Geert Wilders when the results were announced. *"More security, less crime, less Islam, this is what the Netherlands has chosen,"* he added. Although the PVV has more than doubled its number of seats it only came third and its result is below the popularity rating it enjoyed just a few months ago. Undoubtedly the PVV suffered because of its attitude after the local elections on 3<sup>rd</sup> March last (when it chose to remain in the opposition in the town council of Almere, where it in fact won the election) thereby casting doubt about its ability to govern and above all because socio-economic issues (public finance, Greek crisis, uncertainty with regard to the euro, pensions – a key subject in a country where most of the population has placed its money in pension funds) took over from immigration and relations with Islam in order of importance in the minds of the Dutch.

These developments however benefited the VVD believed to be more credible in terms of the economy, notably with regard to the creation of jobs.

*"Geert Wilders could very well win more than 10% of the electorate and that cannot be ignored. But three reasons explain why he will go no further: he is not convincing in economic terms, his party has not taken its responsibilities in any of the places where it won in the recent local elections, its moderate electorate has fled when they considered the country's real interests,"* analyses sociologist Paul Scheffer. *"We want to govern and we should be prepared to make concessions,"* declared Geert Wilders, saying that he preferred an agreement with the VVD and the CDA of the outgoing Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende.

The voting method – full proportional representation – means that no party can ever govern alone in the Netherlands. The VVD therefore will have to undertake negotiations with other parties to form a government coalition. *"It will be very difficult to form a government with three or four parties, which will have to be taken both from the left and the right. It would be very surprising if we had a government within two months,"* declared pollster Maurice de Hond before the election. *"Although the Labour Party and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy are very close it will not be easy to see who is to form the government. The image of the party which launches the negotiations will be severely affected if the latter do not lead to a government coalition,"* indicated political science professor at the Twente University, Kees Arts.

When asked about his preferences Mark Rutte declared on 7<sup>th</sup> June in the last TV debate in the electoral campaign that *"he would exclude no party"*. Two ways are open to him: a rightwing government or in spite of their numerous differences a grand coalition with the PvdA which might however choose to stay in the opposition. *"I do not think we are going to work with Geert Wilders. That has always been my position and I have not changed my mind,"* indicated PvdA leader, Job Cohen.

Since the end of the Second World War Dutch politicians have needed three months on average after the elections to form a government. In 1977 the interested parties even took 208 days i.e. 7 months to come to agreement. Mark Rutte said that he wanted the new government coalition to be formed by 1<sup>st</sup> July next.

**General Election Results 9th June 2010 in the Netherlands**

Turnout: 74.5%

Political Parties	% of votes won	N° of seats
<b>People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)</b>	20.4	31
<b>Labour Party (PvdA)</b>	19.6	30
<b>Freedom Party (PVV)</b>	15.5	24
<b>Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA)</b>	13.7	21
<b>Socialist Party (SP)</b>	9.9	15
<b>Democrats 66 (D66)</b>	6.9	10
<b>Green Left (GL)</b>	6.6	10
<b>Christian Union (CU)</b>	3.3	5
<b>Political Reform Party (SGP)</b>	1.7	2
<b>Animals Party (PvdD)</b>	1.3	2
<b>Others</b>	1.1	0

Source : <http://www.nlverkiezingen.com/TK2010.html>

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