



Mark Rutte

Elections in the Netherlands

Blue And Red Join Forces

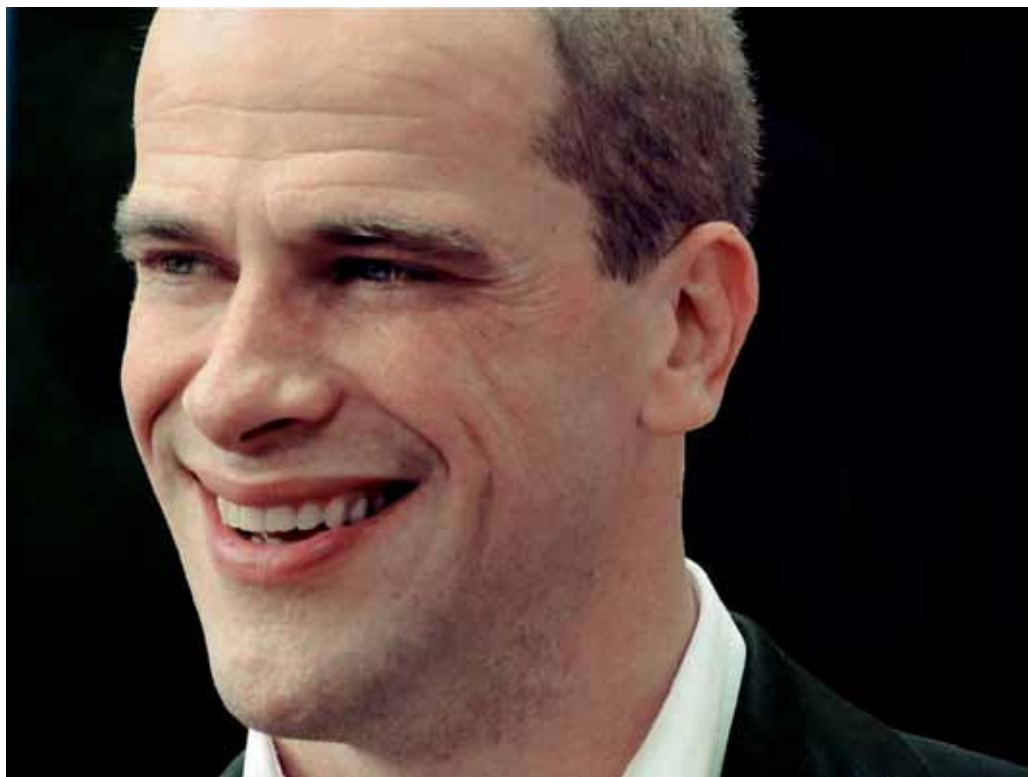
On the 12th of September 2012 Dutch voters went to the ballot box. For the fifth time in ten years the 150 members of the Second Chamber were elected. An election was necessary on account of the fall of the first Rutte cabinet. His party won the election. The liberals (VVD) had never done so well in the Netherlands before (41 seats). Just as two years previously, the social democrats (PvdA) were the party that came second (38 seats). So it looked as if little had changed, but that was just on the surface.

First let's go back to the previous elections. In 2010 it was also a battle between the VVD and the PvdA. Who would be Prime Minister, Mark Rutte or former mayor of Amsterdam Job Cohen? The latter lost the election by a narrow margin. Rutte became Prime Minister, but that only came about after an exasperatingly protracted formation period.

In the end the VVD was to take control together with the Christian democrats of the CDA. Both parties were far from having a majority, so they got support from the PVV, Geert Wilders' right-wing populist party. A new word made its entrance into Dutch politics: *gedoogsteun* (support on sufferance). The PVV didn't provide any ministers, yet did support the cabinet. Many of the rank and file of the CDA had enormous difficulty with this cabinet. They found it particularly difficult to stomach the co-operation with Wilders and his exceptionally harsh criticism of Muslims.

The Rutte I cabinet lasted two years. Eventually they could not agree over cuts. Wilders withdrew his support before the 2012 summer vacation, and on the 12th of September Holland had to go to the ballot box again.

The political landscape had changed somewhat in two years of 'Rutte'. At least, if you looked at the opinion poles. The traditional parties such as the CDA and PvdA were at around 15 (of the 150) seats and the liberals looked stable, but the SP, in particular, came out very high in the polls.



Diederik Samsom

The SP is the Socialist Party, which emerged in the early seventies from Maoists and Leninists. For years they were a party of agitators with a red tomato as their symbol.

The tomato has remained, but they are increasingly less 'anti'. The party has representatives in municipal councils and, more recently, at the provincial level too. The SP braced itself for participation in government in The Hague. The party leader, Emile Roemer, went into battle with Prime Minister Rutte.

For a long time it looked as if this would be the scenario for the elections. The leftist socialists and the liberals would fight for the top position. The old Christian and social democrats would be left behind and the greens wouldn't get a look in.

The election campaign proper started in Au-

gust, with a new leader for the PvdA. Because the former Mayor of Amsterdam, Cohen, was languishing in the opposition, he was replaced by the energetic Diederik Samsom, a former Greenpeace spokesman and campaign leader. The campaign was carried out mainly on television. Debate after debate was to be seen on the box. Suddenly, from an impossible position, Samson came to the fore. The social-democrats shot up in the polls, following his win in the first debates.

The former Greenpeace man looked like a statesman, according to the analysis. He stood above the parties, didn't get involved in rows with anyone, maintained that co-operation was needed in a time of crisis, not polarisation. This message got through, at least in the polls. From a battle between Roemer and Rutte it turned into a battle

between Samsom and Rutte. According to the viewers, Roemer, from the SP, wasn't doing as well in the debates, and his party dropped in the rankings. The further the Socialist Party dropped, the higher the star of the social democrats climbed.

In the final polls before the election VVD and PvdA stood at around 33 seats. But right up to the last minute more than forty percent of the Dutch population was still undecided as to how to vote. In the seventies it was clear who you were going to vote for, but in recent years Dutch voters seem to have lost all sense of direction. Populist parties became extremely popular. The party of Pim Fortuyn, who was shot dead in 2002, achieved a huge triumph in the election of that year (26 seats). When that party disappeared, Wilders, the Muslim hater, enjoyed enormous popularity (24 seats).

In the end, in 2012, the Dutch people voted for old established parties. Prime Minister Rutte's VVD grew even stronger and the PvdA followed close behind. The result was nothing at all like the polls from before the summer vacation. The electorate voted strategically, according to the analysis. Many voted for VVD to stop the PvdA from becoming too large, and vice versa. This did not give the SP the growth the party had hoped for (it stagnated at 15 seats), and the Greens were almost wiped out (down from 10 to 4 seats). Wilders' PVV fell right back (from 24 to 15) and the Christian democrats also had to lick their wounds (down from 21 to 13 seats). The only party of any size that seemed reasonably well able to resist the polarisation between VVD and PvdA was the leftist liberal D66 (from ten to twelve seats).

At the end of October 2012 the formation of a government with liberals and social democrats was completed. The Rutte II cabinet could get started. The VVD and the PvdA are parties full of contradictions, yet Rutte and Samsom were done and dusted in five weeks or so, unusually fast by Dutch standards. Savings of 16 billion euro had

to be made. Mortgage interest relief (a tax concession for people paying off property loans) was scrapped, against the wishes of the liberals, and against the wishes of the social democrats the money for development co-operation was cut by one billion euro. Give and take. The latter didn't happen without a few skirmishes. In particular, Prime Minister Rutte had a lot of opposition from his own rank and file over the government's plans for levelling, whereby those with the broadest shoulders are to contribute more than the lowest paid. After some modification of the plans, the government could really get down to work. There is a problem in this in as much as although the government has a clear majority in the Second Chamber this is not the case in the Senate, the First Chamber. This means that there will have to be regular negotiations with the opposition to get legislation through parliament. So there'll have to be give and take there too.

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Translated by Sheila M. Dale