

### Ideas, Ideals and Pressure for Change

#### Fifty Years of D66

On the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1966 everything in the politics of the Netherlands changed. A band of 44 men, cut along more or less modern lines, and one woman, founded D66 - a party that intended to cock a snook at the political establishment which was still organized according to traditional blocks. Away with presorted electoral cohorts that ran their lives and welfare along Catholic, Protestant, Dutch Reformed, social democratic or liberal lines. In their place a party of ideas and ideals that wanted to kick hard and topple the house of cards that was vested interest.

The young party's first success was down to the leader. Hans van Mierlo (1931-2010) was a tall journalist with the stance of a statesman, a deep voice that inspired confidence, and a striking appearance. The images of the first election cartoon are iconic: Van Mierlo walking along the canals in Amsterdam, his long raincoat falling open, musing on how his party would shake up politics. Suddenly there was a party leader with the air of a new wave film star. Politics in the Netherlands leapt forward at least a quarter of a century with the visual metaphors of D66.

Van Mierlo and his lot were forerunners of the alternative thinkers who would shortly out themselves as Provos. D66 was also alternative, but in a more measured, consensus-seeking way. 'The reasonable alternative', that was to be the slogan for many years.

What did D66 really want? Government reform had been an important point for a long time. The rules of play of the democratic system needed to be changed, the (re)introduction of the district system, a directly elected prime minister who could choose the members of his own cabinet, mayoral elections, referenda - the complete package was referred to as the Crown Jewels of D66. Fifty years on not a single one of these things has got on to the Statute Book.



Hans van Mierlo (1931-2010)

Among the originators were deserters from the liberal VVD and social democrats. For a long time these two spirits would continue to toss and turn in the breast of the party. In the early years the leftist forces were the stronger. Van Mierlo wanted close co-operation with the social democratic PvdA and other parties of the left, a merger if need be. In the social-economic area, the D66 of recent years is pre-eminently a liberal party which places great value on the independence of the individual and accords the government a modest role. 'Social liberal' is the term that has been coined to denote this position.

D66 is most influential in the area of ethics. The D66 ministers and members of parliament have made a strong contribution to donor registration and homosexual marriage, and they have left their mark on euthanasia legislation in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> On these topics the D66 politicians show themselves as true children of the breakdown of the traditional religious and socio-political 'pillars'.

Gradually the party has also presented itself as the party most favourably disposed to Europe. Where VVD, PvdA and the Christian democratic CDA still express some reservations from time to time, for D66 the gateway to heaven on earth is in Brussels. For D66ers closer European integration is a logical consequence of the demise of the nation state. Nationalism is an alien concept to the true follower of D66, who is prepared to hand over more power from The Hague to the European Union.

What has all of this meant for D66 in fifty years? The first post-war cabinet with no Christian party participation (1994-1998) would not have been possible but for D66. *Paars I* (Purple I), as this coali-

tion of PvdA, VVD and D66 under the premiership of social democrat Wim Kok was called, introduced a fervour into politics in the Netherlands, in which much of D66's drive for change was recognizable. In *Paars II* the relationships seemed to have deteriorated too far for much more to be achieved.

In 2003 D66 stepped into government again, this time as junior partner in the Balkende II cabinet of CDA and VVD. It was a mixed blessing. D66 ministers lost credibility by supporting the hard right policy on immigration. The elected mayor perished in sight of the finish. The electorate was no longer interested either: in the 2006 opinion polls D66 were briefly down to 0 seats. Van Mierlo wondered aloud whether it wasn't 'enough after forty years'.

Under the present party leader, Alexander Pechtold, D66 has become a significant factor once more. Pechtold wants his party to behave responsibly, even if it's not in government. He doesn't vote against the plans of the Rutte government, and by negotiating with them ensures that D66 exerts influence on the policy. At the same time he is the fiercest opponent of the extreme right PVV leader Geert Wilders in the Second Chamber.

In the last municipal, European and provincial elections the party made gains overall. While all political parties in the Netherlands are experiencing a fall in membership numbers, D66 is on the rise. The party is led in a very professional manner, is involved in a number of local and provincial authorities, and has many representatives among the top civil servants. D66 has become part of the establishment - the only one of the new parties to do so. If that is what the founders had in mind in 1966, then their aim has been achieved.

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### The Tong Tong Fair

#### The Biggest Eurasian Festival in the World

The Dutch word *Indisch* has nothing to do with India, but with the former Dutch colony of Indonesia. It was here that the Eurasian or *Indo* culture began, a mestizo culture with characteristics of East and West. Indonesian independence in 1949 sparked an exodus of the approximately 350,000 Dutch Indonesians, most of whom had a mixed Indo-European background (which could usually be traced back to a European man and a Javanese woman). The bloody war of independence and the nationalisation of foreign businesses made it impossible for them to remain in the young Indonesian Republic. These people were moreover Dutch citizens.

At the end of the 1950s, the Tong Tong movement began in the Dutch seat of government, The Hague. At its heart was the Eurasian journalist, writer and activist Tjalie Robinson (1911-1974), a pseudonym of Jan Boon. Robinson believed passionately that the Dutch public knew far too little about Indo-Dutch people and their culture. He argued that the Indo culture was an inseparable part of the Dutch cultural heritage, and in his magazine *Tong-Tong* (1958) he exhorted his readers to continue writing about it. In 1959 he founded the Indische Kunstkring Tong-Tong (IKK - Tong-Tong Eurasian Artistic Society) and a short time later, together with Mary Brückel-Beiten, he launched the Pasar Malam Tong-Tong fair as a fund-raising vehicle for the IKK.

The first Pasar Malam Tong-Tong (literally 'Tong-Tong evening market') was held in The Hague from 3-5 July 1959 and was an immediate hit. The event drew around three thousand visitors, most of them with an Indo-Dutch background. This was the first time since their lives in the Dutch East Indies that so many Indos had gathered together in one place. This gave the event an emotional charge which left an indelible impression that lasts to the present day.

The Pasar Malam Tong-Tong has changed its name twice: in the 1970s it became the Pasar

1 See *The Low Countries*, IX, 2001, pp. 296-298.