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Wilders' welfare chauvinism

The Netherlands' coalition agreement reveals the superficiality of right-wing populist claims to support the welfare state. How did this happen?

After months of tedious and contentious negotiations, the die has been cast, the ink spilt, and we have in our hands the much-fought-over coalition agreement proposed by the Netherlands' four coalition parties in mid-May.

The newly proposed prime minister is to be Dick Schoof, a top bureaucrat who has long worked at the National Coordinator for Security and Counter-terrorism (NCTV). While at the NCTV, he had a rather unsavoury history of spying on Dutch citizens — including illegally using fake social media accounts and conducting invasive undercover operations on mosques throughout the country.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Understanding how we got here requires taking a step back, remembering the electoral campaign, and what led us to a moment where Geert Wilders' right-wing populist Party for Freedom (PVV) became the largest party in the country (and whose popularity has grown since then, might I add).

Fourteen years of neoliberal leadership

The context of the 2023 election doesn't start with the collapse of the previous government. This shallow view betrays an understanding of what made the PVV such an appealing party for a large share of the voting populace in the first place.

The Netherlands has experienced over a decade of political leadership by the conservative-liberal VVD with Mark Rutte at the helm, marked by a catastrophic housing crisis, a near doubling of homelessness since 2009 and a failure to intervene meaningfully during the painful inflation crisis of last year. It is the suffering experienced by much of the population as a

result of these years of policy failures that led to right-wing electoral success.

Conveniently, the VVD was able to manufacture a crisis in refugee family reunification policies to break the coalition last year, setting the stage for the now infamous election that catapulted Wilders to his current position. Of course, a coalition collapsing out of a manufactured migration crisis would lead to a right-wing populist victory. How could it not?

Wilders' latest professionalised persona is a page out of the contemporary right-wing populist playbook to 'de-demonise' far-right wing policies.

Wilders is blatantly xenophobic, discriminatory, Islamophobic, and against solidarity with migrants and refugees. While Dutch talk shows may gush over 'the new Geert', I have not forgotten, and neither should anyone else, the Geert Wilders who led cheering crowds in their calls for fewer Moroccans and fought for the banning of the Quran and mosques.

And yet, much of the populace has been charmed by the idea of a newly polished Wilders. His latest professionalised persona is a page out of the contemporary right-wing populist playbook to 'de-demonise' far-right wing policies. We have seen this with Meloni, we have seen this with Le Pen, and we should not have been surprised to see it with Wilders.

But the PVV's new glossy public-relations savvy exterior isn't the only recent transformation that we need to pay attention to. Remember, Wilders' origins lie in the classically neoliberal and conservative party of Rutte's VVD and his economic rhetoric has long-followed it. And yet, the tune he sang when it came to economic and social policy in the election last year was far from the typical neoliberal ballad.

The threat of welfare chauvinism

Right-wing populist parties are not playing the same rhetorical games that they used to. In the 80s and 90s, these parties were explicit about slashing public budgets, cutting social programs, preventing multiculturalism and erasing bloated bureaucracies. While the animosity towards multiculturalism has held, many right-wing populist parties have proven to be nimble and have shown a significant reversal of their views towards social welfare policies. Or at least, that's what they're selling during elections.

This is being described by many experts as 'welfare chauvinism'. Welfare chauvinism is the explicit support of robust social welfare policies to a

chosen segment of the population — most frequently, the dominant ethnic/national majority group of the country.

Under this idea, the greatest threat towards social welfare policies are migrants and refugees. Welfare chauvinism allows right-wing populist parties to direct voters' anger from real falling wages and crumbling welfare states towards minority groups. This gives right-wing populist parties the ability to ignore the fundamental political failures that have led to degraded social welfare systems throughout the past decades.

Time after time in political debates throughout the campaign, Wilders boasted that the PVV is the 'most social political party' and outwardly called for an increase in the minimum wage, investing in the public health system, building social housing, reducing inequality and other deeply popular policies that have long been at the heart of left and centre-left parties. At the same time, he weaponised the country's fever pitch against migration as the reason why these social goods were under threat while accusing the left of being naive for ignoring migration.

Campaign promises vs. coalition agreement

Whether it's the result of negotiations with more fiscally conservative parties or whether the PVV actually was *that* disingenuous throughout the campaign, there is an enormous difference between what Wilders campaigned on and what we find in the coalition agreement.

The promised social welfare policies have been slashed, muted or are completely absent in the coalition agreement. His promise to raise the minimum wage is nowhere to be found. VAT tax reduction on fruits and vegetables? Gone.

If voters sought out social welfare policies, why turn towards Wilders and not the left?

But the coalition government was able to sneak in various anti-working-class policies that were less prominently advertised. This includes a budget cut in higher education of nearly €1 billion a year, a higher VAT on newspapers, torching the budget of the public broadcaster and cutting unemployment support. In a blog post, the largest labour union confederation of the country (FNV) called the coalition agreement 'an attack on the state, solidarity and labour unions.'

Despite the rhetorical appeals towards the working class during the campaign, it's clear: this is not a coalition agreement for the working class. But here is where the spectre of the election haunts us most profoundly: if voters sought out these social welfare policies, why turn towards Wilders and not the left?

Stale bread and spoiled butter: where is the left?

Social housing, increases in the minimum wage, greater support for the public healthcare system – this is the bread and butter of the social democratic left. And yet, *PvdA-Groenlinks* was completely unable to persuade voters. The Dutch left will have to do significant soul-searching to understand *why* they were not the party voters sought to reinvigorate social protections. The easy answers are the momentum from the farmers' protests, disinformation campaigns, new dominance of the right wing's social media presence, etc.

But there are more difficult and pressing questions at play.

In *Jacobin*, Loren Balhorn writes that the European left needs a wake-up call. While the Dutch labour party/green alliance garnered the most seats in the European Parliamentary elections, they are still dwarfed in size by the total collection of right-wing parties. Balhorn argues that there is a need for the left to channel and direct the anger felt by much of Europe's population into a productive form of class struggle. Rather than appeal to vague and higher policies, the left must provide a path towards meaningful material gains for citizens.

Of course, the opposition position gives Timmermans and co the responsibility to hold the right to account. But nonetheless, we have already seen that it is unwise to think the left can win upcoming elections by only decrying the fouls of the right. Instead, the left will need to harness citizens' demands for new transformative social policies and direct anger towards a vision for the future that can motivate voters.



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