

# Be Bold, or Remain Silent Forever

## Reshaping the Future of Progressive Politics in the Netherlands

By Hans Anker

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### Introduction

On the eve of a new parliamentary election on March 17, 2021, it is hard to understand contemporary Dutch politics, and especially the position of progressives, without understanding the impact of the assassination of Pim Fortuyn in 2002. The flamboyantly gay Fortuyn was a populist maverick who successfully cast himself as the playful alternative to a class of boring technocratic leaders who spanned the entire political spectrum from left to right. Fortuyn's message consisted of a powerful two-pronged argument, focusing first on the welfare state's inability to provide essential social services—especially loving elderly care—in spite of massive public wealth as indicated by a budget surplus, and second on putting an end to immigration. This message resonated very strongly then and still does today.

Just minutes before Fortuyn was shot, a young reporter from a youth station asked him if he supported the idea of reducing the ticket price for movie theatres. “No way,” he snapped. “Are you out of your mind? You guys should find a job, make yourself useful and stop whining. Go fill the shelves in the grocery store. Work hard, study hard, and have some fun once in a while, that’s all fine...as long as you use your own money to pay for it.”

High-ranking Labour politicians confided to me afterwards that they were jealous of Fortuyn's candid answer. They knew that, if asked the same question, they would not have dared to press Fortuyn's streetwise reciprocity buttons. Instead, they would have found themselves pandering to the youth vote, by lamenting the fact that prices were going up (who the hell knew, anyway?) and that the government should do something about it.

Fast forward to 2020: Today, a whopping 70 percent of the Dutch electorate subscribes to the view that, in order to put the country in order, the Netherlands needs a leader who is willing to break the rules. (see Figure 1)

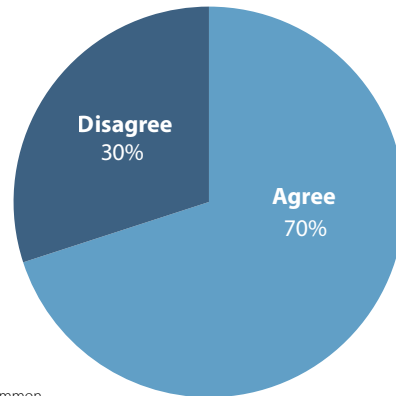
FIGURE 1

## There is clear support in the Netherlands for a strong leader in government

Share of Dutch respondents who believe the Netherlands needs a strong leader who is willing to break the rules

Question: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?"

Statement: "To put the Netherlands in order, we need a strong leader who is willing to break the rules." (N = 2,006)



Permission granted by More in Common.

Source: More in Common, "The New Normal?" (2020), available at <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/y2clqzwx/more-in-common-the-new-normal-comparative-7-country-en.pdf>.

This broad desire for a strong man raises the question: Where did Dutch progressives' messaging fail to resonate, and what does the future of progressive politics look like?

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## Electoral support for the PvdA, 2002 to 2020

Over the past two decades, the PvdA has experienced many ups and downs in electoral support. But over time, the party's detractors appear to be winning. (see Figure 2) Following a resounding defeat in the election following Fortuyn's assassination, the PvdA staged an impressive comeback. With new party leader Wouter Bos, they almost succeeded in making the PvdA the largest party in the country, in what would have undoubtedly been the most dramatic political comeback in Dutch political history.<sup>1</sup>

The party reached its next peak in 2006, when it successfully framed the municipal elections as a referendum on the embarrassing existence of food banks in such a wealthy society. The party, however, failed to sustain this stratospheric level of support, and the 2006 parliamentary elections brought a disappointing result. This did not stop the PvdA from reentering government, as the party benefited from one of the major quirks of the Dutch political system: Electoral outcomes are not always reflected in the composition of the government that follows.

After joining government, the party began hemorrhaging votes again. For the 2010 parliamentary elections, the party engineered a solution by changing its leader: Wouter Bos was out, replaced by popular Amsterdam Mayor Job Cohen. The ploy almost worked, but Cohen fell two seats short in the 150-seat assembly, and the PvdA retreated into the opposition.

FIGURE 2

**Electoral support for the Netherlands' Labour Party (PvdA) has clearly declined over the past two decades**

Electoral support for the PvdA, 2002–2020



Permission granted by Peil.nl.

Source: Based on regular surveys conducted by Peil.nl, a Dutch polling company, from 2002 to 2020. More information can be found at Peile.nl, "Informatie over Peil.nl," available at <https://home.noties.nl/peil/informatie/> (last accessed December 2020).

After falling three seats short in the next election in 2012, the only feasible government coalition to form a parliamentary majority lumped the Conservative Party (VVD) with the PvdA, the two archenemies from the left and the right. The fallout of the financial crisis left no time to prepare voters for this surprising plot twist, and many found it hard to comprehend how two opponents could be at loggerheads with each other during the election campaign only to form a coalition two weeks later.

Electoral support for the PvdA took a nosedive after the party formed this coalition with the VVD. (see Figure 3) But rather than doing the hard work of coming to compromise on thorny policy issues, the coalition parties took turns choosing their favorite policies to pursue. While the original idea was that coalition partners should grant each other some political successes, the resulting “success stories” did not match up with the partisan color of the government ministers. Consequently, PvdA ministers ended up defending the VVD’s sacred cows and VVD leaders ended up defending the PvdA’s articles of faith. This proved to be incredibly damaging in the Dutch context.

Moreover, the PvdA’s organization had atrophied further, no longer able to provide fresh policy ideas. The party’s rhetoric emphasized the abstract notion of “ideals,” which quickly started to sound hollow. The party was also in denial about the very essence of politics: conflict. While voters do not like quarrelling politicians,

they do want to see their representatives taking clear positions and fighting for all they are worth. Instead, Dutch voters were presented with policies that came out of the blue, reducing the political process to a black box, and leaving voters bewildered initially and alienated shortly thereafter.

Within six months of the start of the cabinet, the PvdA's support was down to an historically low—and hitherto unfathomable—10 seats in the polls. Toward the end of the term, the party even ceased to defend its own record in government, adding further poison to an already toxic mix. The poisonous icing on the cake was an untimely internal leadership election, won by the current party leader Lodewijk Asscher, who curiously found himself accused of mustering the courage to draw a contrast with his opponent.

FIGURE 3

**Support for the Netherlands' Labour Party (PvdA) declined precipitously after it joined a coalition with the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)**

Electoral support for the PvdA, from November 2012 to January 2017



These data are publicly available in the Netherlands.

Source: Peilingwijzer, "Peilingwijzer 2012-2017," available at <https://d1bjgq97if6urz.cloudfront.net/Public/Peilingwijzer/20170314/Peilingwijzer+2012-2017.html>.

This perfect storm had turned the 2017 parliamentary election into a mission impossible. After all votes were counted, the PvdA ended up with just nine seats, by far its worst performance ever. But even under these difficult circumstances, focus groups and internal surveys showed a clear path out of the misery. Rather than talking about abstract ideals, the electorate was encouraging the PvdA to talk about moving the country forward by taking responsibility for its record in government and asserting that the party had laid the foundation for doing so by putting public finances in order. This would have allowed the party to call for change by reclaiming the issue of work—which the party had ceded by buying into the right-wing talking point that governments do not create jobs—by claim-

ing credit for falling unemployment, while also jumping on Asscher's European policy successes in ending the abusive exploitation of workers. Combined with an agenda that sought to punish bad corporate behavior, such as not paying taxes and questionable behavior by banks, and by addressing Fortuyn's second pillar of migration—better screening of refugees and a reciprocity policy that provides clear guidance for those who are allowed to stay in our country—this approach presented a clear and credible path forward for the PvdA. PvdA's policy should have been:

*Moving the country truly forward, we can do that now. We put our public finances in order; unemployment is falling. Now it's time for the next step. Ending the exploitation of workers. Making large companies pay their taxes, like all of us. Bringing the banks further under control. Better screening of refugees and better guidance for those who are allowed to stay in our country. Progress is possible, and together we can do it.*

This narrative defeated the conservative message hands down in electorate surveys. Unfortunately, the party failed to get this message out. In retrospect, it seems the PvdA had been beaten down so much that it may have been hard to believe that the impossible was actually entirely feasible.

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## COVID-19 in the Netherlands: Renewed appreciation for essential workers

In the beginning of 2020, the Dutch government—a four-way coalition of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD, conservative liberals), the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), Democrats 66 (D66, progressive liberals), and Christian Union (orthodox Protestant), under the leadership of Prime Minister Mark Rutte—was slow to react to the emerging pandemic. When the virus started to spread, the country was still shipping its certified medical masks to China as a token of goodwill, adding to the shortage experienced during the first wave of the pandemic.

For the first time in almost half a century, the prime minister addressed the Dutch population directly. With expectations sky-high, the speech was less memorable than expected and also seemed to hint at a strategy focused on developing herd immunity. This position was quickly abandoned and traded for the now-familiar measures of washing hands, social distancing, and working from home. By mid-March, the policy had morphed into what the government dubbed an “intelligent lockdown”—a semantic invention that left some government ministers very pleased with themselves.

The government's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic is aimed at "keeping the virus under control as much as possible in order to protect vulnerable groups and make sure the healthcare system can cope."<sup>2</sup> During press conferences, the prime minister stands in front of a background with the slogan "Only together can we get corona under control." During the first wave, all government measures enjoyed high levels of popular support. Rutte's job approval and electoral support for his party shot up, as indicated by political opinion polls.<sup>3</sup>

But cracks in government support became visible with concerns expressed about the pandemic's impact on the economy, resulting in a false juxtaposition between public health and the economy. These critical voices gained particular traction after the first wave of infections was brought under control.

Transparency concerns have also plagued the government response. Daily talk shows on TV with virologists provided platforms for sharing information, but many experts struggled to respond to legitimate questions from some groups of citizens. Some have questioned the stand-alone policy to not require masks; they also identified aerosols as a missing piece in understanding how the virus spreads. The government tried to reach out to these groups but did so mainly behind closed doors. The government's inability to create transparent mechanisms is also reflected in the formation of the Outbreak Management Team (apparently, nobody was able to find an appropriate Dutch name), which is primarily staffed with medical experts, especially immunologists and virologists. Behavioral experts, economists, psychologists, data scientists, and communication specialists are all missing from this group, which meets behind closed doors. Probably Rutte's biggest mistake was promising to carry out all recommendations from the Outbreak Management Team. In doing so, he voluntarily ceded his democratic mandate to an opaque group with a very one-sided composition.

At the end of the summer, the government once again was slow to react when the infection rate started to go up. Rather than instituting successful measures to get the spread back under control, the government's coronavirus app was a fiasco, and instead turned to scapegoating young people and trying to use social media influencers to spread public health messages. Notably, the government has shown little interest in the COVID-19 policies of other countries or in sharing such insights with the Dutch people. Instead, the government has made it their priority to teach others, translating its coronavirus campaign material into Arabic, English, Spanish, Polish, Turkish, Papiamentu, Papiamentu, German and French.

With the onset of a second wave of coronavirus infections, the government appears to be on the verge of losing control. An overall grid for policy measures—allowing for regional flexibility depending on the relative number of infections, like a traffic light system—is sorely lacking. Another huge challenge concerns the COVID-19 testing program, which forces people to drive hours in order to obtain a test. A systematic test, track, and trace policy is still not in place.

It should be noted that Prime Minister Rutte has not announced whether or not he will stand for reelection, even though all signs point in that direction. It is a public secret that, in spite of pretending otherwise, he is keen on breaking Ruud Lubbers's record as the longest serving prime minister of the Netherlands. For that, he will need another year in office. On balance, Rutte and his party still stand to gain electorally from the COVID-19 pandemic, but he remains vulnerable. The tectonic plates could easily shift and cause a political earthquake.

#### Performance during the COVID-19 pandemic

An overwhelming majority of the Dutch population views commonsense coronavirus measures, such as social distancing and washing hands, as a civic duty. More than four out of five respondents, or 83 percent, supported the statement, "It's my duty as a citizen to follow social distancing and other rules."<sup>4</sup>

The Dutch population expresses real appreciation for all front-line workers directly involved in bringing the coronavirus under control, including nurses, doctors, other caregivers, and volunteers. There is great appreciation for the job done by intensive care nurses (99 percent of people surveyed described their performance as "good," with a hugely impressive 64 percent reporting "very good"), nurses (98 percent responded "good," of which 53 percent selected "very good"), and essential workers (98 percent answered "good," of which 42 percent responded "very good").<sup>5</sup> (see Figure 4)

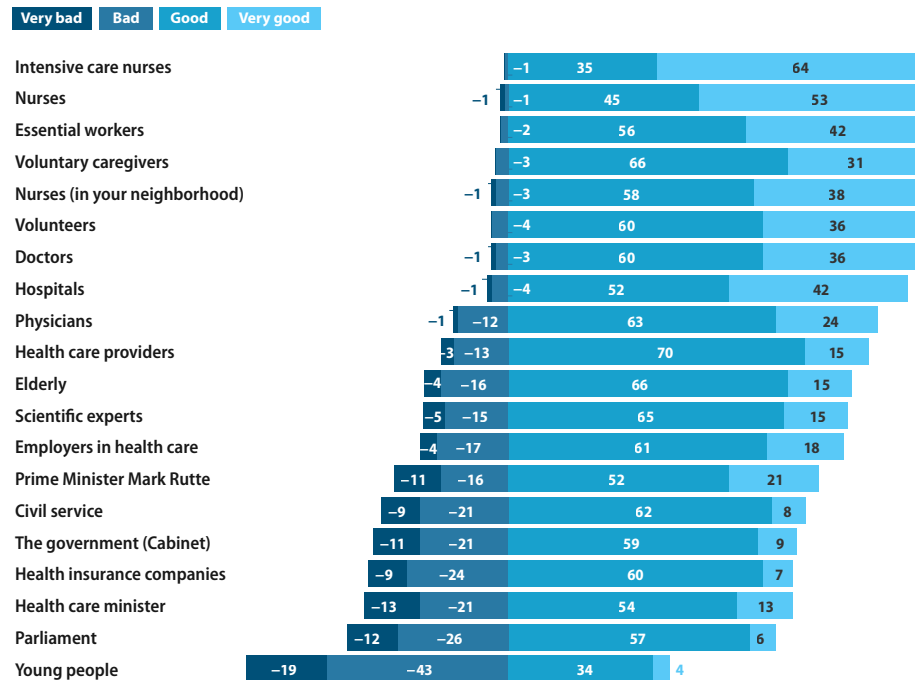
Many political actors also receive positive ratings (see Figure 4), including Prime Minister Rutte (73 percent of participants described his performance as "good," with 21 percent reporting "very good") and Christian Democratic Health Care Minister Hugo de Jonge (63 percent "good," of which 13 percent was "very good"). Young people, scapegoated by the government, are the single group with a net negative performance score, at just 38 percent "good" and 62 percent "bad" (a net score of -24 points, seen in the bottom row).

FIGURE 4

## Health care staff and essential workers have very high performance ratings among Dutch respondents

Performance ratings of health care staff, essential workers, government officials, and others during the coronavirus crisis, by occupation

Question: "How would you rate the performance of the following actors during the coronavirus crisis?" N=1,011



These data are publicly available in the Netherlands.

Source: Peilingwijzer, "Peilingwijzer 2012-2017," available at <https://d1bjgq97if6urz.cloudfront.net/Public/Peilingwijzer/20170314/Peilingwijzer+2012-2017.html>.

## The COVID-19 pandemic as a magnifying glass

As with any major crisis, there has been a lot of talk in the Netherlands about what the COVID-19 pandemic will do to the country's culture and political system. Will things swing back to normal, or will there be a new normal? Progressives are understandably eager to emphasize the need for a new normal but must be aware that voters do not necessarily agree. In fact, a majority (54 percent, as seen in Figure 5) want things to return to normal, while only 46 percent of the Dutch population would want to seize the opportunity to make important changes to the Netherlands. Progressives, in other words, are vulnerable to crossing the swirling river to find out that they left more than half of their company behind.

Progressives elsewhere, especially in the United States, have tried to solve this conundrum by emphasizing the need to "build back better." This mantra, however, inevitably leads the public back to the past rather than the future, even though a future-oriented narrative is virtually always key to gaining political ground. The call for a "reset" falls in the same category.

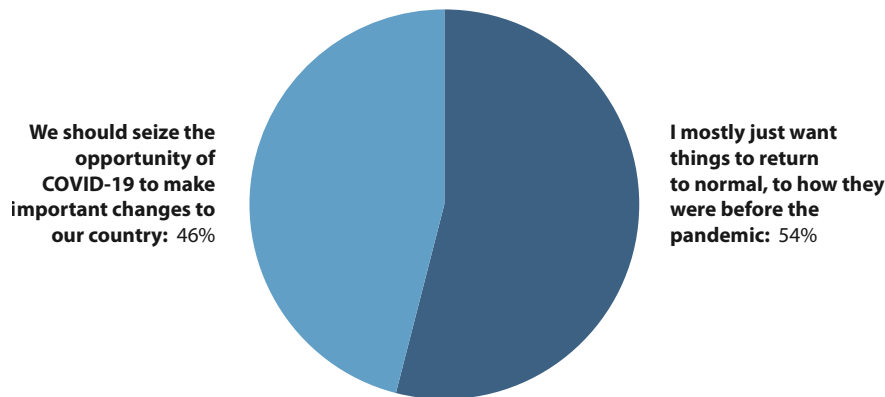


FIGURE 5

### More Dutch respondents would prefer things to return to how they were before the pandemic.

Share of Dutch respondents who believe it is time for a new normal

Question: "Which of the following statements do you agree with more?" (N = 2,006)



Permission granted by More in Common.

Source: More in Common, "The New Normal?" (2020), available at <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/y2clqzwx/more-in-common-the-new-normal-comparative-7-country-en.pdf>.

Progressive parties in the Netherlands appear to be enjoying some success with the analogy of the pandemic as a magnifying glass. The premise here is that the most important way in which the COVID-19 pandemic manifests itself is by highlighting preexisting wrongs in society. A deep-rooted respect deficit for front-line workers is one of them; excessive gaps between the richest members of society and the middle class is another. The pandemic has highlighted poor living conditions for too many people, particularly children, and has also exposed serious shortcomings in care homes for the elderly.

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlights new opportunities: With commuter traffic down, this could be a good moment to give the streets back to children and their parents, to acknowledge that when the gym club moves its equipment on the street it strengthens the community, and to realize that this might also be the right time to start to convert office space into affordable housing.

Figure 6 shows the Dutch preexisting condition, revealed by the COVID-19 magnifying glass: a dramatic attention deficit for poor people (39-point gap), medical staff such as doctors (38-point deficit), the elderly (33-point gap), small-business owners (28-point gap) and front-line workers such as supermarket and public transport employees (24-point gap). In sum, the government is failing to pay proper attention to the very same people who have been helping others through the pandemic and to the small businesses that create most of the jobs in our country.

So, then, are there also groups in society that receive *too much* attention, and if so, what would they be? The answer is a clear yes: wealthy people (37-point surplus) and big-business owners (29-point surplus). Our magnifying glass also shows that attitudes toward immigrants (6-point surplus) continue to remain layered and still lean toward immigrants receiving too much attention from the Dutch government.

These numbers form a clear indication that COVID-19 times call for progressive policies. The current Dutch center-right government understands this; they have moved conspicuously to the left, accepting a much stronger role for government and, for now, pausing their austerity mindset. Dutch politics is entering a new phase, with interest rates on the national debt rapidly approaching zero. There is broad consensus that new funds should be directed toward increasing the country's earning power. But when it comes to action, the center-right is still slave to its impulses, recently issuing a giant €4 billion blank check for corporations in spite of negative recommendations from venerable government institutions.<sup>6</sup>

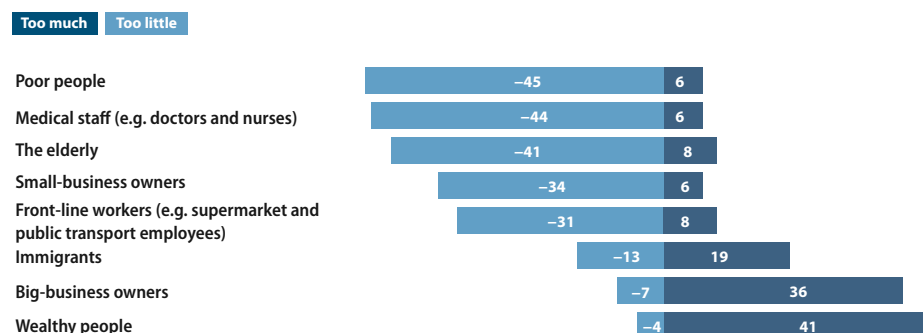
There is, then, a clear opportunity to advance truly progressive policy ideas.

FIGURE 6

### More people feel that the government in the Netherlands cares too little about poor people and essential workers and too much about wealthy people

More people feel that the government in the Netherlands cares too little about poor people and essential workers and too much about wealthy people

Question: "Please indicate how much the Dutch government seems to care about the following groups in its response to the COVID-19 situation: The government cares about this group ..." (N = 2,006)



Permission granted by More in Common.

Source: More in Common, "The New Normal?" (2020), available at <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/y2clqzwx/more-in-common-the-new-normal-comparative-7-country-en.pdf>

The magnifying glass points to another critically important element in the positioning of progressive ideology: It must align with small businesses. Today, increasing numbers of Dutch workers are sole proprietors, some of them voluntarily and many against their will, with employers trying to cut fiscal corners.

## Outlook

Seven out of 10 voters believe that, in order to put the Netherlands in order, the country needs a leader who is willing to break the rules. Does that mean that the Netherlands—that tiny, liberal country on the North Sea—is close to converting to fascism? Can we already hear the boots clicking through the streets of Amsterdam? Will brown soon be the color of fashion?

Not so fast. What Dutch voters detest—and in this they are probably not alone—is the technocratic way of governing. Over the past few decades, economists have achieved hegemony. The neoliberal paradigm achieved dominance, thereby undermining—eradicating might be a better word—the belief that government can be a force for good. In addition, economists have acquired pivotal roles in evaluating almost every decision the government makes, and their power goes mostly unchecked. Many traditionally schooled economists, however, find it difficult to put a price tag on key aspects of a flourishing society, such as a vibrant and robust democracy, a thriving civil society, and people simply being happy. These aspects are routinely left out of their models, which means that they disappear from the decision-makers' radar screens entirely. When politicians surrender to these models, common sense disappears from their decisions. This was one of Fortuyn's major grievances back in 2002; now, with hindsight in 2020, it is fair to say that he was right.

Dutch people want to have their politics back, in the good sense of the word: deliberation, real information being put on the table, active listening skills, and government actors showing responsiveness to people's needs. This is where, interestingly enough, there is a lot of common ground between communal parties such as the PvdA and Christian Democrats on the one hand and the populist right-wing parties on the other.

The reality in Dutch politics is that the party system is imploding, or perhaps has already imploded. Together, the PvdA and the Christian Democrats currently have around 30 seats in the polls, a far cry from the 106 seats they occupied after the 1986 elections. New parties have risen to great heights; there have also been wild swings in electoral support for newcomers in between elections, many of which did not materialize, or did so only partly, on Election Day.

Contrary to popular belief, party mergers are an essential element of the Dutch political system, which is marked by proportional representation with an exceptionally low electoral threshold. The CDA, the Christian Union, and the GreenLeft are all examples of smaller parties uniting to win elections. In the 2019 European elections, the organization that provides an electronic voter guide was forced to announce a delay after the PvdA and Greens submitted, unbeknownst to each other, identical answers to all 30 policy statements. Without a tiebreaker, voters would not have been able to differentiate between the two parties. This is a clear sign that closer cooperation can benefit both parties.

The combined total number of seats for both parties gives us an optimistic ballpark estimate of what the PvdA and the Greens could accomplish together. We can easily see that by joining forces, PvdA and the Greens are well-positioned to mount a serious challenge against Rutte. That opportunity, however, has not been seized. Both parties are entering the elections with their own manifesto and their own slate of candidates. That means the PvdA will likely choose plan B: going it alone.

The PvdA may not realize this, but the party is in the midst of an epic battle between relevance and oblivion. With the party system imploding and most politicians behaving like technocrats, voters find it hard to see any meaningful differences between a broad swath of system parties, all the way from the Greens on the left to the VVD on the right.

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### Where does this leave progressives?

When voters ask for a leader who is willing to break the rules, what they are really asking for is a leader to espouse bold policies that will offer a sense of direction and break the current paralysis. The COVID-19 magnifying glass also shows that voters want to move to a fairer, more honest society. This creates an enormous electoral opportunity for a bold candidate capable of building consensus in the center.

Progressives must learn to be bold again. In principle, this applies to all policy domains, but three policy areas are absolutely essential. Two of these issues are what Fortuyn identified all those years ago: work and immigration. And today, affordable housing is also crucial.

#### Work

First, progressives must take a bold stance on work. Figure 6 shows that work and work-related issues, such as honest taxation, evoke very strong emotions. These emotions far outweigh the emotional intensity surrounding reducing carbon emissions and protecting the environment. (see Figure 7, lowest bar) Unemployment in the Netherlands has already doubled after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public opinion tends to indicate that the Partij van de Arbeid, the Party of Labor, is no longer resonating on the issue it was founded for: work.

FIGURE 7

## Work evokes strong emotions

Share of Dutch respondents who strongly support measures to support average workers

Question: "The government is currently working on measures to help the economy and support businesses. What do you think: To what extent would you support or oppose requiring companies to fulfill the following criteria if they are to receive government aid?" (N = 2,006)

Stop using overseas tax havens and pay the proper taxes in the Netherlands

53%

Guarantee fair wages for all their workers

45%

Put a ceiling on pay for senior executives

44%

Make commitments to reduce their carbon emissions and protect the environment

28%

Permission granted by More in Common.

Source: More in Common, "The New Normal?" (2020), available at <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/y2clqzwx/more-in-common-the-new-normal-comparative-7-country-en.pdf>.

A bold progressive agenda on work should build on the following elements:

- **500,000 new green jobs.** The PvdA must dare to take responsibility for job creation. Progressives must focus on creating a system that produces jobs; it is not about the party leader going around and magically pulling new jobs out of a black hat. For example, in 1998, the PvdA was able to claim the creation of half a million jobs and promised half a million more. Progressives should push for similarly bold promises in the runup to the 2021 election and demand that the government play an essential role in laying the foundations for businesses to prosper and provide jobs.
- **Leading people from work to work.** The Dutch government is currently helping companies survive the pandemic but should be much bolder in asking for something in return: a commitment to lead redundant workers to jobs elsewhere. This is also about corporate citizenship and reciprocity. PvdA has already begun to articulate this position, with very positive reactions.
- **A savings system to earn rights.** The government should be bold in applying the logic of video games and loyalty programs to the welfare state. Progressives should insist that the next government design an out-of-the-box point system that enables workers to earn points that represent a monetary value. Workers should then be able to spend their points in a virtual store, filled with courses, job coaches, sabbaticals, and more. As a result, workers would see an increase in their employability, and employers will benefit from a better trained work force. Moreover, the government will be equipped with a new currency that conceivably allows for targeted policy interventions—for example, granting credits to people who are currently not employed, including long-term unemployed workers and immigrants. The currency could also come in handy by enabling workers with more physically demanding occupations, such as street builders and people in the military, to retire earlier than certain white-collar workers.

## Affordable housing

Second, progressives must reconnect with its central tenet of affordable housing. In the first decades of the 20th century, social democratic aldermen initiated bold housing programs for the big cities, thus changing the country in fundamental ways. In the 2006 municipal elections, I got an early peek into what now has exploded into a major issue: affordable housing. At the time, this issue was not really on the agenda, but in focus groups, voters were screaming at me about how they saw their life goals, especially those of their children, go up in flames by out-of-control housing prices. I remember redoing the focus groups, because of the unexpected emotional intensity and this possibly being a quirk of the recruiting process, only to find the exact same pattern play out again. Now, 15 years later, things have taken a turn for the worse.

A bold affordable housing agenda could be built around the following elements:

- **End speculation once and for all by introducing the Bernhard tax.** A government that is on the side of ordinary, hardworking people must take bold action to stop housing speculation across the whole country. There is a villain for this policy: Prince Bernhard, the king's cousin, owns 590 Dutch properties, 349 of which are in Amsterdam.<sup>7</sup> No one needs 590 houses, and the current tax code treats housing speculators as if they are royalty. A simple solution would be to impose a capital gains tax (e.g., 30 percent) on profits obtained on real estate that is not a primary residence. The proceeds could then be funneled back to the cities and municipalities where the tax is levied.
- **Build, build, build.** The government should promise to launch a large-scale building program aimed at building affordable and green houses in close cooperation with prospective owners and tenants.
- **Eliminate mortgage deduction.** Interest rates are negative. By now, virtually every property owner has been able to refinance their mortgage. That creates an excellent opportunity to do away with the mortgage subsidy for good.

## Do not forget immigration

Voters have big hearts but hate being taken advantage of. Voters have put the PvdA under a special surveillance program to make sure they do not apply preferential treatment to immigrants. First and foremost, any progressive reform efforts must start with being honest and open about these issues. The government should embrace reciprocity as its guiding principle when it comes to immigration.

- **Favorable loans to pay for government services.** Asylum-seekers make use of the government apparatus to process their asylum applications. By simultaneously sending a bill—not unlike the way Dutch citizens see hospital bills before their health insurance kicks in—and providing a student loan-like option with favorable payment conditions, newcomers would be socialized into a system that tells them their rights and responsibilities. Successful immigrants will pay back their loan in time.

- **Public deliberation with local citizens.** Fast-tracking refugee families for housing and other services should not be off the table but should be the outcome of an open-ended deliberation process with other citizens. This allows local citizens to be heard, while also encouraging the exchange of arguments (e.g., children not being able to concentrate on their schoolwork in asylum centers). Engaging in informed discussion will also improve the overall quality of the decision-making process.

Finally, gaining political traction depends on more than just policy agendas. It is also about how policymakers go about decision-making. Voters are rattling the doors of public institutions and want to play a bigger role. Willy Brandt is more relevant than ever: This is about “daring more democracy.”<sup>8</sup> When progressives succeed in popularizing a progressive policy agenda, their first assignment will be to find novel ways to share that newfound power with other citizens. Doing so successfully will yield another scarce commodity in Western democracies: mutual respect between political leaders and citizens.

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## Conclusion

On the eve of a new parliamentary election, progressives in the Netherlands are still figuring out how best to respond to the challenge put forth by Fortuyn two decades ago. This soul-searching has come with wild swings in the electoral future of the PvdA. The party is currently polling at less than a third of its high-water mark. Better times lie ahead if a progressive movement is inclusive of middle- and working-class dreams. To that end, progressives must regain agency on the issue of work, take a very bold stance on housing speculation, and articulate a clear position on immigration with reciprocity at its core. The imploding party system leaves no alternative: Be bold or remain silent forever.

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## About the author

**Hans Anker** is a pollster and strategist and CEO of Epiphaneia, a political research firm. He has conducted message development for progressive leaders and causes in more than 50 countries across five continents. Anker, a Dutch national, currently resides in The Hague, Netherlands, after a 13-year stint in Washington, D.C., and New York. He received his doctorate from the University of Amsterdam. Anker has written extensively for both academic and nonacademic audiences.

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## Endnotes

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- 6 Mike Corder, Associated Press, "Dutch government pledges new support to virus-hit businesses," *Star Tribune*, December 9, 2020, available at <https://www.startribune.com/dutch-government-pledges-new-support-to-virus-hit-businesses/600000108/>.
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- 8 Willy Brandt Stiftung, "Quotes," available at <https://willy-brandt.de/en/willy-brandt/quotes-speeches-opinions/quotes/> (last accessed November 2020).