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Populism Marches On

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RUSSELL FOSTER, MAR 28 2017

By evening on March 15th 2017 media outlets around the world were anticipating a victory not only for Mark Rutte's incumbent VVD party, but a victory for rational, liberal, establishment politics while popular media lauds the "crushing defeat" of Geert Wilders' snarling ethnic nationalists. In more sober fashion Rutte himself, in an address delivered after it became apparent that his party had ostensibly triumphed, declared that "the Dutch people have said no to the wrong sort of populism." But this is a badly misguided interpretation.

In this 'year of elections' which will indicate whether the EU can survive into the near future, the Dutch election received an undue amount of attention from the global press. Following from Brexit, Trump, a year-old Dutch referendum and anxious days surrounding the Austrian presidential election and Italian referendum, the media's focus on the Netherlands has been understandable. But it has also been skewed by the events of 2016. Brexit, Trump, and referenda were binary choices of Candidate A versus Candidate B, or simply "yes" versus "no". Coupled with the increasing Anglo-American dominance of international media (or at least transatlantic media in the wake of Mr Trump and Britain's chaotic politics), this has resulted in foreign media examining the Dutch election through a warped lens. The Dutch election was not binary – it was multipolar. Analysts and reporters used to first-past-the-post politics, two-party systems, and yes/no dualisms, emphasised the possibility of Geert Wilders' PVV winning the election. Coming second, the same media outlets have represented the election as a defeat for Wilders. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Wilders did not lose in a binary, Anglo-American system – he won in a multipolar, European system. The two governing parties of the Netherlands have lost. Mark Rutte's VVD lost eight seats, while Lodewijk Asscher's PvdA lost a staggering 29 of 38 seats. In the aftermath of the VVD's stumble and the PvdA's rout, the party standing most prominently was the PVV.

Only eleven years after its creation, PVV is now the second largest party in the Netherlands. It has not returned to its 2010 peak, but the challenge to VVD from other parties, and the evisceration of PvdA, have pushed the PVV's lower electoral margin into a far more prominent position. The rise of GreenLeft challenges the PVV's appeal, especially among young urban voters (who, in the highly urbanised Netherlands, form a substantial slice of the electorate). But at the same time GreenLeft has bled support away from the VVD. While PVV and GL (along with D66) could not be more different in terms of policies, they share a common characteristic that should worry Heer Rutte – they are evidence of the same phenomenon seen in the USA and UK, whereby voters who are disillusioned with mainstream parties formed in the aftermath of the Second World War turn to newer, millennial parties who offer a breath of fresh air from an apparently stagnant establishment. An additional cause for concern is that in large areas of the Netherlands the PVV is now the top party – or a worryingly close second. The emergence of PVV as the dominant party in Rotterdam calls into serious question the media illusion of Dutch cities as bastions of rational liberalism. The politician who has won the most in terms of his enemies' defeat, is Wilders.

The greatest cause for concern is the complex mechanisms of forming a coalition. The previous VVD-PvdA government saw only two parties struggling to appease a Dutch population that is increasingly weary of austerity and declines in social provisions. Rutte's new coalition will have to be formed of four, perhaps even five, parties who have so far been united mainly in their opposition to the PVV. Now that they have won, it is only a matter of time before the harsh realities of political manoeuvring and the (apparent) defeat of the common enemy causes cracks to emerge between the different parties. The honeymoon period will soon end. Forming and managing a multi-party coalition will be a significant challenge for Rutte, and it is not at all clear how a government so diverse in ideology, policy priorities,

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and views of the embattled European Union, will be able to react to the economic and political fallout of a potential Front Nationale win in France, a possible swing towards the Right in Germany in August, or another Eurozone crisis or migration crisis following a breakdown of EU-Turkey relations: crises which increasingly seem not only inevitable but imminent. While Rutte's tenuous coalition struggles to deal with the Netherlands' own problems and respond to outside economic forces, Geert Wilders will find himself in a strong political position. As no other parties will work with the PVV, the media-savvy Wilders will be able to sit back and snipe at the coalition, highlighting their every fumble and squabble while he basks in immunity from the inevitable criticisms of the government; an immunity granted by his isolation from policymaking. In a grim irony Wilders, whose solid, repeat-vote electoral base now makes him more "establishment" than Rutte and his coalition allies, is able to champion an anti-establishment dissatisfaction while entrenching himself deeper in the establishment. This will work in his favour. By the end of 2017 it is likely that we will see Rutte and his coalition companions facing increasing hostility from a disappointed Dutch population frustrated at politicking in The Hague, while Wilders preaches the repetitive but media-friendly message of the eternally outcast, self-righteous political martyr: *"I told you so."*

Admittedly, this is far from certain. The Dutch are not going to enter a "patriotic spring". Wilders has made serious gaffes, especially his refusal to engage with mass media. But if Wilders learns from these mistakes he will secure the formidable position of a popular figurehead channelling public frustration and public disappointment towards a creaking coalition. And because it is highly likely that an ongoing Netherlands-Turkey dispute, characterised by repeated invocations of the darkest days of the New Order, will only escalate further regardless of what happens in the 16 April Turkish referendum, a more media-savvy Wilders will be able to capitalise on Dutch disaffection and disillusionment to draw the overlooked, the disappointed, the angry and the fearful towards his banner.

The Dutch election does not represent the defeat of ethnic populism. At best, it is a Pyrrhic victory for the last remaining bastion of the Establishment. At worst, it is a sign of a disenchanted electorate which has expressed its unhappiness with the status quo. In that regard, the Dutch election is no different to Brexit and to Trump; neither a victory for liberalism nor a victory for racism, but a victory for frustration, anger, anxiety and resentment. This is a victory which deserves not a cheer, but a lament.

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