

Two Sides of the Same Coin: GroenLinks Needs Allies in the Fight for Climate and Social Justice

Article by Bas Eickhout

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The elections that took place earlier this year in the Netherlands brought disappointing results for Dutch Green Party GroenLinks and evidence of a significant fragmentation of the country's political scene. After months of negotiations, efforts to agree on a governing coalition remain unsuccessful. Green MEP Bas Eickhout reflects on how GroenLinks might craft a winning message for the next election and the potential for greater cooperation with like-minded forces on the Left.

This interview is part of a [series](#) that we published in partnership with [Le Grand Continent](#) on green parties in Europe.

Green European Journal: Elections took place in the Netherlands in March 2021, but a government has yet to be formed. What does this ongoing political vacuum reveal about the state of Dutch politics?

Bas Eickhout: Dutch politics is the canary in the coal mine. Its parliament is highly fragmented and has no threshold whatsoever; you can gain one of the 150 seats with 1 per cent of the vote. This has advantages and disadvantages. Some trends that we see in other European countries first emerged in the Netherlands in the 1980s and 90s. Belgium, France, and Italy currently each have more than 10 parties in their national parliaments, for example, and the *ancien régime* no longer holds power. In that sense, Dutch politics provides clues as to what may lie ahead for other countries. That's the positive side. The downside is that the fragmentation seen today in the Netherlands has gone beyond the optimum. It took until the end of September to settle the question of who should be around the table for coalition negotiations.

Having 19 parties in parliament, of course, complicates the negotiations. A majority government will need at least four parties – five or six parties isn't out of the question. In Germany the prospect of a three-party coalition may be shocking but for the Netherlands, that was the 1990s.

An additional complication is that the outgoing prime minister, Mark Rutte, will soon leave office and he dominates the centre-right of the political landscape. There's competition on the right from Geert Wilders and [Thierry Baudet](#), but both leaders are so extreme they may as well be living in parallel universes. So there is no alternative to Rutte, and the main question is: who will fill that void once he leaves? The reality is that parties are already looking towards the next elections, even while negotiating after the last ones.

GroenLinks didn't have a good election, losing almost half of their seats from the

previous term. What's your reading of the result?

It was very disappointing and, in the end, if you don't do well in an election, you have to look inwards for answers. Everyone had to deal with pressures such as the Covid-19 pandemic, so this is not an excuse.

Our biggest problem was twofold: first, our message didn't stand out. There are now more parties competing around the climate. It is comparable to what happened in Germany, where the Greens positioned themselves as changemakers on climate and Olaf Scholz [of the Social Democratic Party] pushed back as the moderate alternative. We didn't manage to create the feeling that while other parties talk about climate, the Greens are the ones who would deliver. Many climate voters went to [the social-liberal Democrats 66] D66, for example.

Second, GroenLinks has never been in the government. So understandably, voters start to wonder "when will you take responsibility?" D66, our biggest competitors this time, has a more credible claim to power because they have been there before.

This challenge also relates to the image of Jesse Klaver as our party leader. He was very successful four years ago as a new, fresh face. Four years on, he's no longer a fresh face so he has had to change tack towards taking responsibility. But, as we lack the credibility of leadership that comes with being in government, we ended up attempting to straddle both positions. We were left without a narrative that worked. That confusion cost us the election.

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Is the fragmentation especially pronounced on the green-minded left side of the political spectrum? It appears to be quite a crowded field with the climate-conscious liberals at D66, the Animal Party, the pro-European party Volt, the new anti-racist party BIJ1...

That's a bit too easy – the fragmentation hits everyone. On the Right, there is Thierry Baudet's party as well as its splinter group, a farmers' party, and two Christian parties. So, it would be unfair to say the fragmentation hits the Left harder. However, it does make it more complicated for centre parties to find a distinctive narrative that can fully cover all bases. We have a Black Lives Matter Party, an Animal Party, and Volt challenging us, and they always emerge as stronger on each of these issues, because they are single-issue parties.

There is one difference on the Right, however. The greatest advantage that Rutte has is that the competitors to the right of his party make statements of such lunacy that they do not hold up in a serious debate. While the Animal Party is quite rational and makes strong arguments, Thierry Baudet says "build back better" is about world domination. It's easier to argue against that.

What about environmental awareness within society more broadly? Whether or not the Greens are winning enough votes, are environmental and climate issues shaping the debate and influencing voters' behaviour?

Polling shows that climate is the main issue for Dutch voters, after healthcare and employment. So yes, it is an important topic in the Netherlands, but so far that hasn't been reflected in elections when multiple subjects are competing for the attention of voters.

Europe wasn't a prominent part of the campaign, as is often the case in national elections, but what role does Europe play in Dutch politics and how does GroenLinks position itself on this issue?

It's absolutely true that Europe wasn't discussed, and I think Volt benefited from this absence as a party of the new generation. They put out a narrative on Europe that resonated with some people and their rational, new brand of politics helped win them support, and they managed to win three seats in the elections.

Much like in many other countries, and to my great sorrow, the majority of Dutch people do not care about Europe. Rutte has struck a tone on Europe that chimes with the majority view: he says that Europe is needed and that leaving the EU is nonsense, but there's no love. Trade and economics come first and that's it. What is slightly changing for left-wing voters is the awareness that when it comes to the climate and foreign affairs, Europe makes sense. Increasingly, there are debates on a stronger Europe. Rutte has even indicated that the Netherlands would drop its foreign policy veto – which would have been unthinkable five years ago. This is progress in limited areas but progress nevertheless. It's easier in these areas, as well as on trade and economics – we are a trading country which earns money in the EU.

Over the past year, rule of law has entered mainstream debate in the Netherlands. Quite cleverly, Rutte immediately picked up on the trend: encouraged by the prevailing mood in the country, he became the most vocal European leader in attacking Orbán last year. Bashing Orbán is completely acceptable in the Netherlands now. The positive side of this tactic is that Rutte is talking about European values, which is also a significant shift. So there is growing support for a Europe that is more than just a market and trading community. But money is often the sticking point. Any talk about the budget – especially on the Covid-19 [recovery] fund – is very unpopular. In the end, Rutte agreed to the fund without much public or government support.

In these discussions, Greens are the most vocal. For instance, our message on the recovery fund was clearest: we wanted Europe to commit to it. The centre-left Labour Party (PvdA) supports us, but quietly. D66 is very much in agreement but they have been cautious because of their place in government and their chances of entering the next one. We put these topics on the agenda but, to be very honest, we can only do it with Labour. Together, the two parties hold 17 seats out of 150.

Where do you situate the Netherlands in the European political landscape? In recent years, the Netherlands has aligned itself with fiscally conservative alliances such as the New Hanseatic League and the Frugal Four with Austria, the Nordic nations, and the Baltics. Is this position now entrenched, with the current

balance of forces?

We're entering an interesting phase, in this respect. There's still a big feeling of loss after Brexit. We've always felt very close to the UK. We are the most Anglo-Saxon country remaining in the EU – more than Ireland, I would say – because we view the bloc as primarily a trading community. We felt most comfortable sitting between the UK and Germany. But the UK has gone and Germany is changing. When Germany suddenly changed its position on the recovery fund and sided with France, that was a shock for the Netherlands. It became clear that we can no longer rely on Germany. So, the immediate reaction was to look for new allies in the Baltic states, the Nordics, and Austria. But no one is happy with this pivot because we all realise this coalition is too vulnerable. Rutte recognises this weakness too and is now investing in our relationship with France. We have always had a very peculiar view of France. We don't take them seriously. That is a mistake, which the Dutch governing parties are slowly beginning to realise.

In the EU, the Netherlands felt most comfortable sitting between the UK and Germany – but the UK has left and Germany is changing.

The growing attention paid to foreign policy issues in the Netherlands that you touched upon is part of the wider debate about US-China relations and what it means for Europe. How does GroenLinks see Europe's place in the world?

In the Netherlands, there's a perpetual dilemma between investing in becoming a global trading partner and a stronger alliance at the European level for protection. The latter is often regarded as protectionism, which is very negatively perceived. If you want to kill a political argument in the Netherlands, label it protectionist. The Greens were quite scared of this for a while. But I'm glad to see this is changing. We have moved from taking a "wait and see" approach to a more proactive one. We have become much more critical of trade deals; there's strong opposition to TTIP within GroenLinks, for example.

Today's context is also more receptive to these challenges whereas 10 years ago, going against CETA for instance, would have been more difficult. On top of that, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Trump era have made people realise that we need to think of a strategic industrial agenda in Europe. Even a liberal party like VVD [People's Party for Freedom and Democracy] is becoming more cautious and strategic, and increasingly supportive of keeping industry within Europe. We've been pushing industrial policies for a while and we now have an incentive to be the avant-garde in this area.

Returning to the national level, there's still uncertainty about the next Dutch government, and important local elections coming up next year. What are the strategic priorities for GroenLinks in the years ahead?

For the upcoming municipal elections, we need to stay in power in the cities where we are already. We are very strong in progressive and student cities, such as Amsterdam and Utrecht, and our greatest ambition is to remain so. Interestingly, we are doing better in cities like Rotterdam where Greens struggled in the past because it is a port city – rougher

and more industrial than the student cities like Amsterdam and Utrecht where we do well. So one of our priorities is expanding across the Netherlands.

Strong climate policies implemented in an unequal society will only widen inequalities.

Another priority is further collaboration with progressive parties. Looking at the fragmentation in our political landscape, we have a responsibility here as a party to show that we are serious about cooperation. This is why, in the negotiations, we have joined forces with the Labour Party and made it clear that we will negotiate together and go in as a team should we enter the government. The party has taken this position because we recognise that the fragmentation is not good for anyone, and progressive voices need to be stronger.

There's another reason why collaboration with the Labour Party makes sense; a big challenge is not only ambition in climate policies but also ensuring that we are changing our economic and taxation policies. Strong climate policies implemented in an unequal society will only widen inequalities. We need to address both aspects, and this goes further than just saying, "climate policy needs to be just". No. We have a totally unequal society and that needs to change; it's a much stronger agenda.

Political developments in other parts of Europe suggest competition with Labour parties will be a key challenge for Greens in the years ahead. Between the two movements there is convergence but also important differences in the visions for a green transition for society. As the policy implications of the climate agenda become sharper - in terms of energy costs, petrol prices, etc. - navigating this relationship could become even more salient for Greens.

I have a similar analysis, but I would stress that it needs to be more than saying that we need climate policies with a bit of redistribution. It's not as simple as retrofitting buildings. Climate policies should not be conditional on social policy or vice versa. Inequality is a fundamental issue in our society and the battle for strong climate and social policies are truly two sides of the same coin. In that sense, a stronger collaboration between Labour, who have a better track record on fighting inequality (at least in principle if not not always in practice), and GroenLinks could be a natural marriage for the future.



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