

## **The Curious Collapse of the Forum for Democracy**

**Article by Tom Vasseur**

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**Barely five months away from the Dutch general elections in March 2021, the young hopeful of the Dutch radical right, the Forum for Democracy (FvD), suddenly imploded in the space of a single week. How did the undisputed winner of the March 2019 provincial elections – when it received the largest share of the vote – get to this point? To answer this question requires a look at the prevailing thinking within the Forum, influenced primarily by its founder and former leader, Thierry Baudet. Closer inspection reveals a deep web of interwoven conspiracy theories, at the fringes of rational thought, touching on areas ranging from religious minorities to the pandemic.**

On Saturday 21 November, the Dutch press reported that several members of the Forum's youth wing, the JFvD, had repeatedly made homophobic and antisemitic statements as well as flirted with Nazism. It was not the first time. Earlier this year, media reports of identical messages led to several suspensions and expulsions. In response to the new revelations, the JFvD board, led by Freek Jansen, number seven on the Forum list for the 2021 elections, announced an investigation, more suspensions, and eventually also their own temporary resignation.

For some, it was too little, too late. While Forum leader Baudet fully supported the JFvD, other Forum politicians demanded the immediate expulsion of the alleged culprits and a purge or dissolution of the organisation. The following Monday, a majority of the party board urged Baudet to consent to this course of action. Jansen's candidacy was to be terminated. Baudet refused and, to everyone's surprise, resigned as party leader that same evening.

What followed was a rapid succession of events in which Baudet first relinquished even more power only to attempt to regain control through a series of erratic moves such as the announcement of fresh leadership elections – despite having resigned from the board. Other Forum politicians initially tried to take over power in the party but failed to do so. The result was a snowballing of resignations and defections, leading to an apparent total collapse of the party. At the end of the week, five of the top ten Forum election candidates had resigned or left the party, as well as a significant part of its national and provincial representatives. The leadership election, reshaped into a party referendum on Baudet's leadership, was held the week after. Baudet won by a landslide, leaving him securely in power over a party in tatters.

### **The “Paranoid Style” revisited**

While the details of the JFvD scandal are shocking, in a sense they do not reveal anything new. It is public knowledge that Baudet had an audience with former Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in his younger years. In 2017 he had an infamous five-hour-long meeting with American white supremacist Jared Taylor. It was Freek Jansen who had arranged the meeting. A previous employer revealed he had spoken in praise of the Third Reich on several occasions. The Forum experienced its first split in September 2019, characterised by similar public feuding

and displays of Baudet's toxic leadership style.

What made this time different then? Mostly, the pandemic. Baudet's views have, until now, been covered with a thin varnish of intellectual analysis: he claims that the entire Dutch political elite, left and right, has been ideologically captured by "cultural Marxism", leading them to act against the interests of the Netherlands.

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of history.*

Baudet, a fair polemicist but an average debater, has always responded to contradiction either apologetically or by lashing out. Over the last year, he has chosen the latter when debating his opposition to Dutch public health measures. His statements have progressively degenerated to become what one can only describe as conspiratorial ravings. As a result, though the Forum still stands to gain seats in the March elections, the polls no longer look rosy. His new detractors, far from having grown a conscience, likely tried to use the opportunity of the antisemitism scandal to replace him in the hope of turning the tide.

This episode has also unveiled him as the primary exponent of what Richard Hofstadter dubbed the "Paranoid Style". Hofstadter conceived this term in the 1960s when he analysed the contemporary American radical right to signify a mode of politics characterised by "the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people," which sees conspiracies as the driving force of history.

## **The mask slips**

Just how far removed Baudet has become from his self-styled intellectualism became apparent in a [letter published](#) by now-former Forum senator Nicki Pouw-Verweij in the middle of the party's unravelling. It details the events at a dinner party of the Forum's top ten electoral candidates a day before the article's appearance on antisemitism in the JFvD. She described a vexed Baudet who had become obsessed with the notion that public health measures are a pretext to take away "our freedom". Jansen announced the upcoming article later that evening. Baudet not only viscerally dismissed taking disciplinary action but even launched a full-on defence of antisemitism, claiming that "almost everyone I know is an antisemite".

At the end of the evening, Baudet allegedly dismissed campaigning on themes such as migration as useless, [saying that](#) once George Soros and others "have taken our freedom and we are a communist state, they will still kick all those dumb negroes out of Europe anyway." It is a clear example of Hofstadter's observation that the apocalypticism "of the paranoid style runs dangerously near to hopeless pessimism, but usually stops just short of it." More eerily, it echoes his description of how the U.S. anti-Catholic movement thought that the Church used ignorant "ill-educated immigrants incapable of understanding the institutions of the United States" as part of their plot to undermine America.

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"scene" which has formed in the last year*

This episode also falls within the development of political agency by a hard conspiracist fringe which, like elsewhere in the world, has mushroomed since the pandemic. Baudet's blending of pandemic-related conspiracy theories with established conspiratorial tropes on migration, the EU, and Islam reflect the views of an activist anti-establishment "scene" which has formed in the last year. Emblematic in this regard were the late January curfew riots, which involved not only corona-conspiracists, but hooligans, Pegida Netherlands, yellow vests, and extreme right grouplets. Dutch politicians, recognising the connection between the rioters' grievances and Baudet's claims, widely accused him of instigating the riots. Yet, despite this alignment, it would be a mistake to call him the leader of this movement.

Meanwhile, Geert Wilders's Freedom Party is on course to consolidating his position, and possibly growing it. His electoral performance in 2017 was internationally labelled a "defeat". In reality, his party won seats and became the second party, but the increase was underwhelming compared to the polls. Still, after over a decade, Wilders had become somewhat stale, both to the media and voters. In the years after 2017, his popularity waned as Baudet's rose. Though both on the right, the two are very different politicians. Wilders is more polemical than ideological; for electoral reasons, he caters to a base which is culturally conservative but economically left-wing. All-round conservatives voted for him for lack of a better alternative. The appearance of the Forum offered them a new home. Its descent into chaos led them back to Wilders.

## **The conspiracist's world view: profound forces at work**

If there are any lessons learned from this episode, it is not that Baudet is a reactionary more than a conservative. That much was already evident since the launch of his political career. It lies at the basis of his drifting away towards the fringes of sanity. While Hofstadter was writing about the radical right, his contemporary, Isaiah Berlin, held a series of public lectures on the Romantic movement in which he identified the bond between nostalgia and paranoia. The Romantics, he said, thought reality to be pervaded by a certain quality, something of an "infinite striving forward". Though inexpressible, this quality has a hold over us which compels us to attempt to convey its depths. This drive can lead to nostalgia as "the infinite cannot be exhausted, and since we are seeking to embrace it, nothing that we do will ever satisfy us." However, for those with a fearful or pessimistic temperament, these depths instead lead to paranoia. They come to be regarded as a "huge, powerful, ultimately hostile force", and viewed through a conspiratorial lens.

It is in the tradition of right-wing politics growing out of the Romantic movement that Baudet stands. He has also repeatedly indicated that he does believe that there are more profound forces at work in the world. This is not, though, an abstract intellectual view. Instead, the lesson to be drawn is that whatever Baudet says has to be given the most crudely direct and conspiratorial interpretation possible. Far from seeing society as being affected by misguided notions which need to be overturned through argument, Baudet, to speak through Hofstadter once again, believes there to be "a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life."

## **A self-defeating alliance?**

With events so recent, it is hard to foresee their full consequences. The Forum's feuding so shortly before the elections has reduced Baudet's fortunes significantly. He has repelled many potential allies and voters with little time to find replacements for the relatively competent candidates who left.

The rupture might, however, represent a mixed blessing for the opponents of the radical right. Those who left over the antisemitism scandal are now surrounded by a false impression of reasonableness. Some have rightfully

compared the all-round public shock at the “revelations” on antisemitism with the glaring silence on similar statements made openly regarding ethnic minorities, Muslims, or migrants.

The question is whether a confederation of conspiracists has a future beyond the pandemic. Once Covid-19 ebbs away, conspiracists will need to find a new target. As Hofstadter pointed out, adherents to the paranoid style constantly live at a turning point. Their demands are unattainable, but ferociously asserted. This means that even if they do find a unifying element beyond Covid-19, disillusionment or internal strife are likely to tear them apart in the longer term.

For now though, conspiracists will likely continue to have an advocate in parliament which the media continues to platform disproportionately. The absence of any electoral threshold means that Baudet’s return to Parliament remains almost certain. Despite everything, Baudet might even gain seats. When he does, he will be marginalised but not silenced. It might seem unlikely now, but political disgrace is more fleeting than we would sometimes like it to be. The Paranoid Style might yet have a future in the Netherlands.

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