

From Fortuyn to Wilders: The Far-Right of the Tolerant Netherlands

When we think of the Netherlands, what do we picture? A small, flat country; bicycles; windmills; fields of tulips; Anne Frank, maybe; marijuana and the red-light district of Amsterdam; and probably we imagine a very tolerant people. What many of us do not associate with this little country, which sits on the fringes of Europe, is a growing right-wing faction. Dutch politics, despite the country's self-image as tolerant and welcoming, has taken a turn toward the right since the early 2000s, starting with the breakthrough of Pim Fortuyn's anti-immigration party *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* in the 2002 elections.

This essay is going to examine the emerging radical (far) right of the Netherlands, discussing the Dutch relationship with multiculturalism, the political upheaval of the early part of this century, and then identifying specific key players within Dutch right-wing politics, with the intention of bringing to light some of its fascinating peculiarities.

Across the occident, the buzzword of the 1990s and early 2000s was 'multiculturalism', defined in the encyclopaedia Britannica as being "the view that cultures, races, and ethnicities, particularly those of minority groups, deserve special acknowledgment of their differences within a dominant political culture."¹ Multiculturalism as a political philosophy became popular as a challenge to liberal democracy's idea of the 'melting pot'; in other words, multiculturalism challenged the idea that immigrants should all be expected to assimilate into the dominant culture of the country in which they live, rather their specificities should be embraced and they should be able to maintain their collective identities and practices.² Nowadays, the negative connotations of multiculturalism have become many, and the policy has faced significant challenges. The primary objection to multiculturalism is that it compromises the common good for the benefit of minority interest; some people also believe that it undermines the idea of equal individual rights, thereby it devalues the principle of equality. It also raises other questions, such as whether it may lead to competition between minority groups, thus further reinforcing the dominant culture.³ In the Netherlands, multiculturalism policies have been fluid over the past four decades, and there have existed multiculturalism discourses, as well as counter-discourses, throughout this period. It seems that it is this complicated relationship with multiculturalism from which the Dutch radical right has emerged.⁴

It began to grow clear towards the end of the 1990s that something had "upset Dutch collective well-being."⁵ Issues began to arise during increased migration of asylum seekers to the Netherlands, and while they were facing problems with 'guest-workers' who had lost their jobs and now lived on welfare from the Dutch government. It was because of this unemployment among migrant workers that an underclass of (primarily Moroccan) youths who became involved in petty crimes began to grow and started to give immigrants

¹ Jennifer L. Eagan, "Multiculturalism | Definition, Impact, Challenges, & Facts", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2015 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/multiculturalism>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

² Sarah Song, "Multiculturalism (Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy)", *Plato.Stanford.Edu*, 2010 <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

³ Eagan, "Multiculturalism | Definition, Impact, Challenges, & Facts".

⁴ Peter Scholten, "The Dutch Multicultural Myth", in *Challenging Multiculturalism: European Models Of Diversity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp 97-119 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ct20q22fw.11>> [Accessed 15 January 2022].

⁵ Peter van der Veer, 'Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh, and the politics of Tolerance in the Netherlands', *Public Culture*, 18.1 (2006), pp 116.

a reputation for being criminals.⁶ In a 2004 survey, researchers found that 60% of autochthonous Dutch people felt anxious about the presence of ethnic minorities, with as many as 75% perceiving Muslim fundamentalism as a threat to Dutch society.⁷ This perceived threat of Islam had, of course, been amplified by the events of 9/11 three years prior to this survey, which had caused a wave of Islamophobia not just in the Netherlands, but all around the globe. Anti-Islamic ideas are not a recent phenomenon, however, as they have long existed in Western civilisation, fuelled by orientalist images of a barbarous, anti-Christian enemy.⁸ In early 2000s Netherlands, along with this wave of Islamophobia triggered by acts of terrorism across the Atlantic, Dutch society was feeling a great deal of fear for the future of their nation, and this became a major driving force in Dutch politics by the turn of the century. A section of the Dutch electorate felt threatened by globalisation, as they feared it would disturb their society.⁹

The multiculturalism debate and the feeling of threat on Dutch society go some way in explaining the almost overnight success of Pim Fortuyn – one of the most infamous Dutch politicians – and his party *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (hereafter known as LPF), which are a striking example of the rise of the far right in the Netherlands.¹⁰

Pim Fortuyn became increasingly involved in politics – both local and national – throughout his career as an academic, and though he had been a Marxist while studying at university, he “followed a very common trajectory from the radical left to neoconservative”, eventually joining the populist *Leefbaar Nederland* in 2001, leaving later the same year and subsequently setting up his own political party (LPF).¹¹ Many political scientists classify Fortuyn and LPF as being on the far-right of the political spectrum, a faction that had previously represented only a marginal, though stable, amount of Dutch political society¹²: Fortuyn exhibited a number of ideologies that can lead to this conclusion, with several quotes of his becoming infamous, for example, calling Islam “backward” and claiming that the Netherlands is “full” – ideas that many of us would associate with the politics of the far right.¹³ There are also arguments, however, that Fortuyn and his party were not actually on the far right, rather they filled (or exploited) a political vacuum that fell somewhere between the far right (who openly and vehemently opposed immigration), and the mainstream centre-right parties who declined to politicise immigration.¹⁴ So, some political scientists prefer to refer to them as the radical right, rather than the extreme right.

⁶ Ibid, pp 116-7.

⁷ Sociaal-Cultureel Planbureau, *In Het Zicht Van De Toekomst - Sociaal En Cultureel Rapport* (Den Haag: Sociaal-Cultureel Planbureau, 2004).

⁸ Michal Buchowski, ‘A New Tide of Racism, Xenophobia, and Islamophobia in Europe: Polish Anthropologists Swim Against the Current’, *American Anthropologist*, 119.3 (2017), pp 520-1.

⁹ Van de Veer, ‘Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh, and the politics of Tolerance in the Netherlands’, pp 121.

¹⁰ Han Dorussen, ‘Pim Fortuyn and the ‘New’ Far Right in the Netherlands’, *Representation (McDougall Trust)*, 18.1 (2006), pp 114.

¹¹ Van de Veer, ‘Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh, and the politics of Tolerance in the Netherlands’, pp 114.

¹² Dorussen, ‘Pim Fortuyn and the ‘New’ Far Right in the Netherlands’, pp 131.

¹³ Pim Fortuyn quoted in “Dutch Far-Right Leader Shot Dead”, *The Independent*, 2002 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/dutch-far-right-leader-shot-dead-9131410.html>> [Accessed 16 January 2022].

¹⁴ Van de Veer, Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh, and the politics of Tolerance in the Netherlands’, pp 116.

No matter how we refer to the LPF – as the radical right, or the far right – it is clear that Fortuyn was successful in his attempts to dispel concerns, felt by the public, that he made up part of the extreme right, using his charisma to do so.¹⁵ Fortuyn was able to be openly gay throughout his career, thanks to the famous Dutch tolerance, which was helpful when it came to his campaign. He was able to exploit his sexuality and use it to present his politics as simply common sense, using it as a kind of proof that he was tolerant, claiming his 'intolerant' views were born of a failure of multiculturalism in the Netherlands. The kind of racism and anti-Semitism which he fostered through his policies worked well in a country whose national identity is based off tolerance as it used the notion that certain immigrants (particularly Muslims) should be kept out, not because we are against them, but because they are too intolerant to be here. In other words, he used his identity as a gay man, an 'outsider' to present his ideologies as a defence of progressive Dutch politics against Islamic (and other) traditions¹⁶, for example, using "I don't hate Arabs, I sleep with them" as a response to an accusation of racism.¹⁷ This ability to dispel concerns of affiliation with the extreme right was important for Fortuyn's success, as it seems to be for any right-wing party, as popularity for these parties is significantly higher for those who distance themselves from the fascist legacy in a post-holocaust world.¹⁸

The success of Fortuyn and LPF was almost overnight: with its anti-crime and anti-immigrant policies, LPF gained a victory in local elections in Rotterdam in March 2002, ending the 80-year rule of the Dutch labour party.¹⁹ However, not long after this, Fortuyn was assassinated by Dutch man Volkert van der Graaf in a car park in Hilversum, on 6 May 2002. The Dutch public were divided by his death, and some of his followers attended van der Graaf's trial in order to heckle him, though he was reported as appearing "relaxed and confident" in court. Van der Graaf admitted to the shooting claiming he did so to protect the Muslim communities in the Netherlands, who he felt were already being used as scapegoats, and who were facing higher and higher levels of islamophobia as a result of Fortuyn's politics.²⁰ Despite this assassination, the 2002 Dutch parliamentary elections went ahead on 15 May with a 79% turnout: LPF gained 17% of the vote and 26 seats in the Tweede Kamer, falling behind only the Christian Democratic Appeal (who won the elections that year).²¹ The party did not continue to enjoy victory for very long, however, as it collapsed within a year of the elections, having failed to consolidate its place in Dutch politics.²²

¹⁵ Dorussen, 'Pim Fortuyn and the 'New' Far Right in the Netherlands', pp 133-4.

¹⁶ Van de Veer, Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh, and the politics of Tolerance in the Netherlands', pp 114

¹⁷ Pim Fortuyn quoted in Huw Lemmy, and Ben Miller, "Pim Fortuyn", *Bad Gays*, 2019 <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3scpzEUMHibDMsDFGuWDTJ?si=81e603f700b44198> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

¹⁸ Dorussen, 'Pim Fortuyn and the 'New' Far Right in the Netherlands', pp 138.

¹⁹ "Fortuyn, Pim | Encyclopedia.Com", *Encyclopedia.Com*, 2021 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/fortuyn-pim>> [Accessed 15 January 2022].

²⁰ Stephen Castle and Sara Weerts, "Gunman 'Shot Fortuyn To Help Muslims'", *The Independent*, 2003 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/gunman-shot-fortuyn-to-help-muslims-112692.html>> [Accessed 12 January 2022].

²¹ "IFES Election Guide | Elections: Netherlands Parl May 15 2002", *Electionguide.Org*, 2002 <<https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/287/>> [Accessed 7 January 2022].

²² Sarah de Lange and David Art, 'Fortuyn Versus Wilders: An Agency-Based Approach to Radical Right Party Building', *West European Politics*, 34.6 (2011), pp 1230.

No matter what your opinions of Fortuyn and his party may be, and no matter how short-lived their success, it has been made clear ever since 2002 that they “undoubtedly changed the Dutch political landscape.”²³

In part thanks to Fortuyn and his political agenda, the right-wing in the Netherlands remains prevalent in the Dutch political arena, and it is unified on the basis of anti-Islamic, anti-immigration, and anti-EU sentiments.²⁴ Though the key players of the radical right are different from those of 2002, many of their characteristics remain the same: The *Partij voor Vrijheid* (hereafter known as PVV), led by Geert Wilders, is the leading force of the Dutch radical right, and arguably has been since its creation. Seemingly not as successful in elections compared to LPF (with only 15.5% of the vote in 2010), suggesting the support for radical right-wing politics in the Netherlands has not increased since the early 2000s, the party has been successful in consolidating itself into the Dutch political system, unlike Fortuyn’s party before it. Wilders himself has admitted that he was able to take many lessons from the failure of LPF and use them to his advantage when building the PVV. In doing this, he was able to develop a tightly organised party within four years.²⁵ Even now, the PVV is showing a slow but steady increase in support in electoral polls in the Netherlands.²⁶

There is further evidence to suggest that right-wing politics in the Netherlands have been growing since Pim Fortuyn laid the groundwork in 2002. The current Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, despite belonging to the *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (a generally liberal party), has adopted some of the sentiments of the radical right: pleading in an open letter against *hufteigheid* (which loosely translates to obnoxious behaviour, with ‘of immigrants’ implied) which he claims “screws up” the Netherlands. The letter was focused mainly on outsiders, and he goes so far as to say, “people who refuse to adapt, and criticise our values, should behave normally or go away.”²⁷ This is a clear echoing of the values of Fortuyn, Wilders, and their respective parties, and it seems to be an attempt by Rutte to win back some of the vote from the PVV, appealing to these ever increasingly popular sentiments.

Dutch right-wing politics is unlike the political right elsewhere, with radical right parties led by charismatic personalities who appeal to the Dutch people with their radical points of view. Pim Fortuyn led the movement towards the right, ushering the tolerant Dutch people closer and closer towards his anti-immigration politics, luring them in with the illusion that his sexuality, and the status that it afforded him as an outsider capable of empathising with minorities, allowed them all to elide the reality of their anti-immigrant,

²³ Dorussen, ‘Pim Fortuyn and the ‘New’ Far Right in the Netherlands’, pp 142.

²⁴ Buchowski, ‘A New Tide of Racism, Xenophobia, and Islamophobia in Europe: Polish Anthropologists Swim Against the Current’, pp 524.

²⁵ Sarah de Lange and David Art, ‘Fortuyn Versus Wilders: An Agency-Based Approach to Radical Right Party Building’, pp 1230-8

²⁶ A. de Koning and W. Modest, ‘Anxious Politics in Postcolonial Europe’, *American Anthropologist*, 119.3 (2017), pp 524.

²⁷ John Henley, *Netherlands PM Says Those Who Don’t Respect Customs Should Leave*. The Guardian, 2017. www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/23/netherlands-pm-mark-rutte-dutch-citizens-open-letter-pvv, [Accessed 29th November 2021].

Islamophobic policies. The ground was laid, and the status of the radical right as a legitimate political opponent was confirmed. Following the assassination of Fortuyn and the subsequent collapse of his short-lived party, Wilders took the opportunity to build off the back of its success, building the Partij voor Vrijheid in just a few years, gaining relative success in Dutch parliamentary elections. Right-wing sentiments remain pervasive in Dutch society and are no longer limited to just Wilders and his adherents but are seeping into the mainstream liberalist groups as well, with even Mark Rutte demonstrating such ideas. The prevalent ideas, those which are anti-immigration and largely xenophobic, continue to be obscured by a persistent assertion of tolerance, excusing their ideas as a defence of Dutch liberalism.

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