



Monday November 20, 2006

THE MAIN PARTIES

There are 26 parties contesting the general election on Wednesday. Of those, the following are likely to win seats:

CDA: Christian Democrats
Led by Jan Peter Balkenende (prime minister). Party has dominated Dutch politics since WWII.

VVD: free market Liberals
Led by Mark Rutte. Junior party in current coalition, Liberal on drugs, euthanasia, gay rights. Free market on the economy.

PvdA: Labour Party
Led by Wouter Bos. Second biggest party in parliament. In opposition since 2002.

SP: Socialist Party
Led by Jan Marijnissen. Has never been in government. Fastest growing party.

GroenLinks: Left-wing greens
Led by Femke Halsema. Works for a 'more social, greener and tolerant Netherlands'.

D66: Liberal Democrats
Lead by Alexander Pechtold. Pro electoral reform. Coalition partner in three of last four governments.

ChristenUnie: Christian Union
Led by André Rouvoet. Left on centre on social and economic issues. Orthodox values, anti-abortion.

SGP: fundamentalist Christian
Led by Bas van der Vlies. Opposed to women's participation in politics and anti gay marriage.

PVV: An anti-immigration party
Led by MP Geert Wilders who quit the VVD. Wants five year ban on non-western immigration.

Fortuyn (LPF), EénNL, Lijst Narwijn: All claim to represent the heritage of anti-immigration campaigner Pim Fortuyn, murdered by an animal rights activist in 2002.

Dutch go to the polls as economy lifts spirits

The Dutch go to the polls on Wednesday to vote in the general election against a backdrop of economic growth and increasing optimism. After four difficult years, beginning with the murder of anti-immigration campaigner Pim Fortuyn, the Netherlands now has one of the lowest unemployment rates and strongest economic growths in Europe. No single major issue has dominated the campaign. The relationship with Holland's Muslim population (6%), which dominated in 2002 and 2003, has faded from the spotlight, with anti-immigration parties set to win a handful of seats at most. If any issue has been controversial, it has been the dominance of the opinion polls - which have reflected attention away from the manifestos and towards possible coalitions. The Christian Democrats, who have dominated Dutch politics for decades, are set to emerge once more as the biggest party. But which way the next coalition will lean seems to be up to the fringe parties. The current centre-right government is 11 seats short of a majority in the latest polls. A left-wing coalition would also fail to take more than half the 150 seats in parliament. With one day of campaigning to go, some 25% of voters are still undecided.

You can follow the election results on tv or radio from around 20.30 hours. The polls close at 21.00 hours and a highly accurate prognosis is expected at 22.00 hours. Follow developments online on www.dutchnews.nl



The rise and fall of Balkenende II

Following the collapse of the CDA/VVD/LPF coalition in October 2002, elections were held on January 22, 2003. The LPF vote disintegrated as the party, formed by Pim Fortuyn supporters, lost its sympathy votes. The CDA won

the most seats, just two more than Labour, and formed a coalition with the VVD and D66. The row over VVD MP Ayan Hirsi Ali's status - was she or was she not Dutch? - led D66 to withdraw its confidence in immigration minister Rita Verdonk in July this year. Elections were called and the CDA/VVD continued as a minority cabinet.

How the Dutch political system works

- The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy, with Queen Beatrix as head of state. Elections must be held every four years. Only Dutch nationals can vote in the general election.
- The lower house of parliament (Tweede Kamer) has 150 seats and is elected by proportional representation.
- Political parties draw up a list of candidates. Voters cast their ballot for one person on the party list. Popular candidates can move up the list by winning preference votes.
- The upper house (Senate) has 75 seats. Its members are chosen by the provincial councils.
- The provincial councils (Provinciale Staten), water boards (waterschappen), local councils (gemeenteraden) and borough councils (deelraden) are all elected by proportional representation.

The Big Issues

Aging population

The PvdA plans to make wealthy pensioners continue to pay state pension premiums. The other parties have no plans to raise the state retirement age or increase premiums.

Immigration

All parties call for 'better integration' of foreigners. The right-wing splinter parties all want some form of stop on non-western immigration. All parties back the introduction of pre-school language tests.

Education

All back free crèche places. CDA and PvdA want to make secondary school books free. All pledge more spending on schools

Tax and benefits

All the main parties plan to tinker with the tax system and cut basic rates. PvdA and GroenLinks want to limit mortgage tax relief slightly. CDA wants to cut redundancy payouts, GroenLinks wants to cut unemployment benefit.

Red tape

All parties plan to fund their new spending plans by cutting civil service jobs and slashing bureaucracy. All want fewer managers in schools and healthcare.

Europe

Has not been an issue.

What happens next?

On Thursday, after the votes have been counted, all the party leaders will visit Queen Beatrix who will appoint an *informateur*, a senior statesman charged with looking at potential coalitions. Once likely government partners have been found, he will appoint a *formateur* to begin work on a coalition agreement. This can take months.