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Peter Noordhoek: Building on solid foundations - a Dutch perspective

Peter Noordhoek is a member of the Dutch Christian-democratic party (CDA). He is a member of the board of the scientific institute of the party and has several other functions within the party to keep the information flowing. At the moment he is preparing for the next campaign. Here he reflects on a recent visit to Britain and recommends that Conservatives embrace a serious programme of decentralisation.



Recently I had the privilege of leading a small delegation of the Dutch Christian Democratic Party (CDA) to Britain. Our purpose was to visit a number of Conservative MPs and compare notes on policy. Now I know these sort of visits take place all the time, but perhaps some feedback would be worthwhile.

As a party we had a journey through the desert of opposition from 1994 to 2001, made a spectacular comeback, and are now in the painful process of discovering that not everyone is welcoming the change agenda that got us elected. After a number of great results, we just lost our local elections and will have to work hard to win the next general election. I have seen you struggle during all those years and it is wonderful to see that you finally have got it right. In the conversations we had with your MPs and some other Conservatives, I sort of heard a constant 'click', 'click' sound. It all came together. Well, almost. Very different personalities told us the same kind of things. There were also the little tell-tale signs of people speaking with confidence in the future. Of course there will be all kind of difficulties to overcome. Still, I trust that you will enjoy the success that is coming your way.

To get there, it may help to learn from the things we did right and avoid the mistakes we have been making. I believe you still have some homework to do and better be aware of certain pitfalls and blind spots.

As far as homework is concerned, it seems to me that you have got one half of the equation about right: the way you are re-inventing yourself. You are getting back to your roots and discovering new things about your own message. For us, getting back to our roots was the first step back to recovery. There is no way that an outside think-tank, let alone an advertising agency, can do this for you. Your homework is obvious: turning the rebranding into something more than a new image. It has to be a true story that is appealing to an audience of one and many. I recommend (re)reading Peter Franklin's comment on the 'and-theory'. You must find in your message that which appeals both to the young single City-analyst and the Northern family man. The one thing I think you cannot afford is the feeling that this is just some small band of Londoners talking, while the rest of the party is going its usual way. Therefore I compliment you on the way your policy groups are set up, and the fact that they do not necessarily include only party members. We have been doing that too, and are still doing that (up to the point that the committee that writes the first draft of our electoral platform includes someone

from abroad). As much as I like the way David Cameron is operating; he should not be the only one sending out a message of change.

In our conversations with you, we discovered you still have something of a blind spot when it comes to transferring responsibilities outside central government. Everyone we met thought that Britain is an over-centralised country. The effect is that changes formulated at the top do not reach the bottom, or if they do, they are made obsolete by the next changes formulated at the top. It simply takes too long to implement the changes you want. The MPs we spoke with realise this is a problem, but have not progressed much beyond that point. A case in point is the opening hours of shops on Sunday. In our time opposition we could not stop the government from introducing a law to augment the numbers of opening hours. We did manage to give local government authority to set some limits. The result is that opening hours remain constricted in many areas. Sunday rest still exists. Still this is just one point. What are you really going to do when you start a movement towards decentralisation?

“Everyone we met thought that Britain is an over-centralised country. The effect is that changes formulated at the top do not reach the bottom, or if they do, they are made obsolete by the next changes formulated at the top. It simply takes too long to implement the changes you want.”

We had the same problem of centralisation in the Netherlands. At the start of our period in Cabinet more than 1 million people out of a workforce of 7 million were receiving a permanent disability benefit. Thousands and thousands of other people were receiving some form of benefit. Though not as much as in your country, the costs of healthcare were spiralling out of control. All kind of proposed changes led to nothing.

What to do? One of the things we did was to make people more responsible for their own fate, while strengthening the role of the state as a ‘trampoline’. For this we are making a distinction in time. Since the first months are often crucial in getting back in a job after getting sick or being made redundant, that is where we laid the incentive for all directly involved. At the same time we looked at the buying power of people, especially for those with low incomes. So now people have to build up their own insurance policy for healthcare and other issues. They can choose their own insurance-company and their own level of risk. Each and every one of the permanent disabled people get a medical re-examination, aimed at checking what they still can do, not at what they are unable to do. Employers are made responsible for a year for the return and re-integration of people that are sick. The unions have to play their part. And local government is made more responsible for the actual delivery of re-integration services and benefits. They are forbidden by law to formulate general compensation measures; they have to judge each individual case. In return the local government can keep the money that is saved by a successful re-integration for other purposes. The taxman no longer only takes money from you; if your combination of premiums and expenses gets your income below a certain level you get paid by the tax office to compensate for that.

The results are more than promising. From a million permanently disabled people we are back down to about 300,000. Employers are taking on their responsibilities. Local government manages to save millions and millions because of the new policy. The tax office spends less than predicted. As a result the social consequences of the economic downturn are objectively speaking far less than the last time.

But what does the term ‘objectively’ mean in politics? Not much. To paraphrase O’Neil: all politics is subjective. The changes could not be done without making people insecure and sometimes less well off. When changes like these also come at a time of an economic and social crisis, as evident from dreadful events like those concerning Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirshi Ali, the image is not positive at all. So our party lost the local elections last March.

We are working very hard to get back in the game. It is not going to be easy. But in two respects we should do alright. First of all, the results of our changes are becoming more evident with each passing month. We are proud of our agenda and our success. Secondly, there is no need to discuss the fundamentals. The execution

and communication of our policies is the problem, not the policies themselves. So – in contrast to the past – our house is in order, the heart of our message is sound. How is yours? How is yours compared to Labour?

When I try to compare the situation of the Labour Party and your party in Great Britain, I am reminded a bit of some houses in my neighbourhood. Please bear with me while I make this analogy... I live in the town of Gouda (yes, the cheese), close to one of the lowest part of Holland, more than six yards below sea level. The ground can be really wet. Part of it is sinking more than an inch each year. Our houses are built on long wooden poles. Two things can happen with a house that is built on less than solid ground. One of the problems can be that the house starts to list because not enough poles have been used or because they are not evenly distributed. If you find out soon enough, this can be helped with a new technique that hammers in new poles sideways. The other scenario is more dire. The condition of the wooden poles depends on the condition of the ground. Paradoxically, the poles need to stay wet in order to stay in shape. However, that creates a risk, because usually the ground sinks faster than the house itself, exposing the top of the poles and drying them. The house still looks alright, but underneath the rot sets in and then the house starts to list in earnest. Because no one knows how far the rot has set in, the best thing to do may be to bring the house down, replace the poles and rebuild the house.

Dutchmen are supposed to be blunt. So let me tell it like I see it. It seems to me the poles are rotting under the house of Labour. It also seems to me that the conservatives do not have enough poles and those that are there, are too much to one side. I guess you could say that Mr. Cameron is using the technique of bringing in new poles sideways. But I wonder whether that is enough. Sooner rather than later the house of Labour will be dismantled by the owners. They will do it themselves. So you, as Conservatives, can wait for that moment and try to let the voters come into your house. Well, they may just do that. But will they stay there?

I think you should rethink the distribution of responsibilities in your country. Not just by giving more opportunity to business and not just by giving more room for the voluntary sector. Neither is enough. Please trust those who are there the moment it counts. So employers, local councils, decentralised offices of agencies, even unions when they are working for their members, should get the freedom and the incentives to do their utmost before central government comes in. That is, if you want to build to last.

July 10, 2006 at 09:31 in [Peter Noordhoek](#) | [Permalink](#)

Comments



JT zei...

A very good prescription for Britain. Thank you for taking the time to write.

It's pathetic that after all the books on the manifest and manifold failures of the welfare state, from Frank Field to James Bartholomew, many Conservative MPs still appear pretty unsure what the answer is, or how to make the case for radical change in a way that will carry the electorate with them.

Cameron's commitment to keeping the NHS as a nationalised, solely taxpayer funded organisation is not helpful in tackling one area of considerable concern.

That was very short-sighted policy statement in the same way that his abandonment of the Fisheries policy took the Conservatives backwards not forwards.

[Antwoorden July 10, 2006 at 10:05](#)



CCHQ Spy zei...

I agree with JT. A very good, thoughtful piece. Thank you, Mr Noordhoek, and best of luck in your endeavours. I invite the Editor to invite more European voices to ConservativeHome. We have much to learn from them.

Antwoorden July 10, 2006 at 12:14



Justin Hinchcliffe zei...

And we're going to leave sensible parties like the CDA for the loony parties like Poland's Law and Justice Party?

Antwoorden July 10, 2006 at 12:46



Dave B zei...

In our conversations with you, we discovered you still have something of a blind spot when it comes to transferring responsibilities outside central government. Everyone we met thought that Britain is an over-centralised country. .. The MPs we spoke with realise this is a problem, but have not progressed much beyond that point.

Very sorry to hear this. I had hoped that dramatically increasing local gov't autonomy would be a major part of the Tory agenda.

Antwoorden July 10, 2006 at 12:59



william zei...

There is a genuine sense of possibility expressed here by Peter Noordhoek. He speaks the same language - in the sense of policy - as Compassionate Conservatism, Direct Democracy and the Built To Last campaign are doing. But the phrases and the names used to badge these new ideas is still 'early days' both here and in Holland.

Built To Last talks of 'trusting people' 'sharing responsibility' 'supporting institutions and culture', which are phrases taken from the text of Compassionate Conservatism (CC).

In the text of CC they make perfect sense and are well explained but they don't work well as slogans, which is possibly why Maude's Built To Last road show is being seen as 'not very slick' in Cameron's PPS' emails.

Ideas are often first expressed as negatives - e.g. in the 1970's 'we don't want more nationalisation' was the feeling.

It was only when the positive expression of the concept, in this case the word 'privatisation' became common currency that the Thatcher programme began to flow into action.

I don't think 'denationalisation' would somehow have had the same impact as 'privatisation' as a political battle cry.

Nationalisation and privatisation were the two sides of the coin of ownership.

Centralisation and decentralisation are today's issues - a debate not so much about ownership, but about competence or suitability to manage.

Action-inducing words for the decentralising stock of ideas -viz. trusting people, sharing responsibility, supporting institutions - are possibly 'empowerment' and 'enterprise'.

If Conservatism 'looks beyond centralisation towards empowering individual and local enterprise', it is

beginning to sound like a campaign of action, and not a whinge about the errors of the past.

As one phrase maybe - 'empowering local enterprise'.

Antwoorden July 10, 2006 at 14:19



Peter Noordhoek zei...

May I suggest this (non-English, sorry) word to William: 'indepensation'. It means moving people, associations and institutions towards less dependence on the state, while at the same time making them more part of society. The days of full scale privatisation are behind us. Public aims cannot always be provided by privat means. The word can be used when you want to empower all those who are ready for new initiatives and still want to stay within the public ethos.

Antwoorden July 10, 2006 at 16:21



Andrew Woodman zei...

Very interesting article. I'm an advocate of localism, but would be interested in how the CDA's agenda fits in with the federalist EPP. Perhaps they might like to join our new grouping outside the EPP.

Antwoorden July 10, 2006 at 17:03



Peter Noordhoek zei...

It fits in quite well, thank you. The CDA works on the principle of subsidiarity, which in essence means that you always should work at the lowest level possible. Actually, I am a bit bored by this discussion of yours about the EPP. I resolved not to speak about Europe when coming over to London, but I do not mind doing so now. I know my friends in the Dutch delegation of the EPP do not want me to say this: but if you want to leave, please do. And no, we will not follow.

You should have been able to do so much good in Europe, but you have been too much a force for the bad. I say so from personal experience and not from any political position, but I do say this from having followed you for a long, long time.

I have been in contact with the Cabinet Office in both Margaret Thatchers and John Majors periode of office. I have felt that you had much to offer that could have helped to reform Europe's bureaucracies. But instead of using your knowledge and position, you were not able to say any other word than 'no'. You could have had such a strategic advantage! I am astonished that after all these years you still have no true vision of what you want with your neighbours next door - except to discuss the way to say 'no'. But never mind. I do not consider the discussion about the EPP vital to either you or us. I belong to a small core of people within the CDA that think the repositioning of the conservative party is great news. Both you and the CDA are on a similar path, both in content and in process. We should be able to learn from each other. That, for now, is the important bit. When it comes to Europe, neither you nor us should force issues. It does seem to me that your journey through the desert will be prolonged when you leave the EPP. But if that is what it takes, please go.

Antwoorden July 10, 2006 at 17:56



Alfred of Wessex zei...

Sir

You state "you still have no true vision of what you want with your neighbours next door", and "It does seem to me that your journey through the desert will be prolonged when you leave the EPP."

The English people may indeed have no true vision of what we do want. As the Bible states, "Without vision, the people perish". Some of us are, however, perfectly clear as to what we do not want, only my generation have not been asked.

I do not want to be ruled by a collective Nebuchadnezzar in Brussels that exists for the benefit of the political elites of Continental Europe, and in which my country's parliament is a rubber-stamp, and my country's Prime Minister a mere Satrap.

I do not want my ancient liberties and the rights won by generations of my forebears to be given away for a place at the European table. Born in 1962, I had greater freedoms and better guarantees thereof as a subject of Her Majesty than anything European 'citizenship' can confer (which, being in the gift of the EU, can be taken away at their pleasure).

I do not want my country's common-law tradition to be inexorably crushed under the heel of the Code Napoleon, and our heritage of jury trial replaced by the inquisitorial system.

I do not want my country's Christian foundations utterly destroyed and replaced by a humanist utopian dream.

I am happy to have you as my neighbour, but I will not have you or any foreigner dictate to me how I should be governed.

If I might take your desert analogy a little further, the Children of Israel did indeed wander in the desert for 40 years. God had already taken them out of slavery in Egypt, but it took 40 years to get the slave-mentality out of them before they were fit to enter the Promised Land.

I pray it will not take another 40 years for us to escape the slavery into which I was sold by the traitor Heath in 1973, and which my parents' generation were deceived into accepting in 1975.

[Antwoorden July 18, 2006 at 17:39](#)

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