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Peter Noordhoek: A message of fragmentation from the Dutch voters to Britain

Peter Noordhoek is runs a consultancy and training firm and is a member of the Christian Democratic Party in the Netherlands. This article had to be republished.

In advance of a visit I will pay to your country this month, it seems like a good idea to sum up a few developments in my country, the Netherlands. The correspondent of the Financial Times recently said that when it comes to politics, the developments in our country foreshadow that in Britain. In a literal sense this is not true, as it would be foolish to underestimate the differences between our two countries, and because your electoral system ultimately disguises many of the changes we see in ours. Still, it does seem to be worthwhile to compare the developments in both countries. I do so as someone who is active for the CDA, the Christian Democratic Party, and who has been paying visits to your country and the Conservative Party for many a year. The history of the CDA and the Christian Democratic Party is alike in the sense that we went into the political wilderness around the same time, after having been in power for a long time. Though it looks like we used our time in the wilderness better, having returned to power in 2001, there is one thing we should both be very much aware of: you cannot take anything for granted.

After my last visit to you in April 2006, I wrote in conservativehome.com about the way we used our years in the electoral wilderness to develop a consistent policy framework. Here I would like to say something more on our electoral strategies. Just a year ago, I must admit I had to be properly modest about our perspectives as a party. In March 2006 we suffered an enormous loss in the local elections. It was by far the biggest defeat since coming back to power. The reason for that was clear: the government, led by our party, had initiated a number of strong reforms in for instance the health care and tax system and we did so during a recession. Most of the people felt they were worse off than before or thought that the government should have done a better job in protecting people against the changes. Labour, led by a bright and charismatic young leader, Wouter Bos – a new kind of Blair - seemed destined to win the national elections. When I was with you the polls promised 60 seats out of 150 for Labour and less than 30 for the CDA. It promised to be a rout.

Even at that moment in 2006 I foretold that we would improve come the national elections, or was that just me talking courage? Coming home from London the mood was grim. Things were not going well in the political arena. A bizarre incident set the tone. In it Ms. Rita Verdonk, a Thatcher like minister for integration for the rightwing VVD-party, refused asylum to Ms. Ayaan Hirshi Ali, an MP for the same party, on the grounds that she had lied to immigration officers. Tensions ran high. But behind the scenes things started to come together for us. As at times before, we managed to keep our internal differences out of the papers, and started building our electoral strategy, led by a maverick man called Jack de Vries. Around that time I got asked by a great politician to head the campaign effort in the province of South-Holland, our largest province. In June I was planning for a provincial election in March 2007 and a national election in May of that year. It was not to be. The day after I had finished my plan of action, the Cabinet fell – again because of the way Ms.

Verdonk had handled Ms. Hirshi Ali. I tossed the plan over my shoulder, straight into the rubbish bin, and started again. The national elections would be in November and the provincial elections would be at the end, in March 2007. By the way, the outcome of the provincial elections would also determine the composition of our House of Lords. Sooner than I thought, everything was at stake.

The plan I made, which fitted like a glove in hand with that of Jack, was based on a few simple ideas. And though we used every modern technique available (and perhaps invented some), in essence this was not a campaign about techniques. The message and the person bringing that message would be all important.

All parties faced an electorate on the move. There were more 'drifting' voters than ever. Research showed that two seemingly opposite things were both true: on average people were better off than before, but the same people were more discontent than ever. And they seemed to be saying: I am doing fine, but society does not. What to make of that?

In case of conflicting messages: make a choice. We went for an upbeat message consisting of three Dutch words which translate like: 'being well off, being secure and feeling respected.' We transformed our message of change into one of investing in society. One of the reasons to do so rose from the economy. Just like the economic downturn was sharper in Holland than elsewhere, so was the upturn that started in 2006 better than elsewhere and we could rightfully claim this as a pay-off for the changes we had implemented.

The other thing we did was to help the media into turning the election into a horse race between Labour (far ahead in the polls) and us. With a representative system like ours, this is not as logical as it is with you in Britain. We figured that in such a fragile political climate, the one thing that determines the outcome is the public perception of the leader. If a media consultant were to design a political leader – please, save us - he would never come up with Jan Peter Balkenende. But he is our man and he had the vision, the guts and stamina to see us through the difficult years. Like Ms. Thatcher, he is not one for turning. And as likable our opponent from Labour seemed, he was perceived to be unreliable. So we put our man in front and put just a little pressure on Mr. Bos. Nothing like Mr. Rove did to Kerry in 2004, but it was enough. Wouter Bos got the image of a turncoat and he could never get himself rid of this. And here our system helped: the other parties also forced Mr. Bos to make the kind of choices he did not want to make. Do I go for a centre or for a left wing government, do I go for a critical or for an upbeat message? After some time, he could not do anything anymore without being considered fickle. Poor man.

Would it be enough? In the polls we were slowly but surely getting even with Labour, but the polls gave such conflicting signals that we did not trust our judgement. So we had to wait for election night. On the board were in fact two questions: would we, as a party, win and would the government, consisting of the right wing VVD and us, get a mandate for another period?

The answer to the first question was: yes, yes, we were to remain the largest party. We got 41 seats. This is 3 less than the 44 we used to have, but when considering we were below 30 at the beginning of 2006 this could rightfully be claimed as a great victory.

Our great competitor, Labour, got a terrible result. Of the 60 seats in the polls earlier that year, only 33 would remain. Worse, another party had come up, the Socialist Party (SP), led by the able Jan Marijnissen, and the SP managed to claim 25 seats. In other words: Labour had lost almost half of their votes to a left wing rival.

The carnage on the right was even worse. The VVD, just six years before destined by all political pundits to become the largest party, got destroyed and was left with only 22 seats. They had torn themselves apart in a battle over the identity of the party. Partly because of a bruising internal struggle between the new leader Mark Rutte, a moderate, and Rita Verdonk, the Thatcherite, they lost credibility with the voters. They lost votes to us and they were also hurt by the performance of Geert Wilders. This man had split off from the VVD on the grounds that the VVD was too soft on issues like the EC-membership of Turkey or the influence of the Islam. With his own party he managed to get a fair number of seats.

What had happened? *The voters went for the flanks and the flanks fragmented.* The political centre emptied out, leaving us as it's owner, but with less votes than before. But, because of the fragmentation on the flanks, the others could not profit. Research also showed that there was hardly any traffic of votes between left and right. Most of the changes occurred within the flanks. When it comes to voting, we are a divided nation indeed.

How relevant is this to you? At the beginning I quoted the Financial Times as saying that what happens in the Netherlands often foreshadows what will happen in Britain. I think it is already happening. Veiled by your electoral system, I see a fragmentation taking place. If you look at the struggle between the followers of Blair, Gordon and Milliband, you do not see a battle for some political centre taking place, you see a battle for the heart and soul of the left itself taking place. Just follow the discussions on ConservativeHome on issues like taxation and immigration and you see the possible fragmentations on the right. Meanwhile Scotland is shouting goodbye.

And the centre? The Libdems do not seem to be doing well in spite of it's moderate message. Or do they?

Just going for the political centre could therefore lead you to a lonely place. The winner of the next election is not necessarily the winner of the centre, it is the one who has the credibility not to be sucked into the fragmentation that is taking place. For that is the paradox. As much as the voter is fleeing for the clarity of the flanks, that same voter is longing for a message of unity, of inclusion. The one who understands this best will be the winner of the next elections.

My Dutch story continues just a little longer. Because of the disastrous results of the VVD, another government of CDA and VVD was out of the question. The coalition had received no mandate for another period. And because of that, the voter got what it according to polls taken just before the election, least wanted: a coalition of the CDA and Labour (plus the small Christian Union, a left wing evangelical party, well led by André Rouvoet, and the one bit of fragmentation we too have to endure).

In the shadow of the formation of that coalition we had to fight our provincial election, knowing that the voter was tired of politics and probably hated the government to be. Leading the campaign in South-Holland, we decided to stick to the national message of our party, while at the same time using our strong local contacts. We turned it into a long local-for-local election, with dozens and dozens of local meetings and using the internet as a way of distributing the outcomes of those local meetings. In other words: a classic campaign based on stamina, aided by modern means. We chose to do so because outside the SP, which is not a threat to us but to Labour, we are the one party that still has a local base and understands the ombudsfunction of politics.

It proved to be the right course. In South-Holland we traditionally always came into second or third place. For the first time since the 1970s we became the clear winner, winning exactly the number of seats I had hoped for. So together with my absolutely incredible team, we turned the campaign into champagne. A great feeling, you should try it.

The overall trend continuous. If it would have been national elections, the CDA would remain the largest party, but again mostly because of the discord on the left and right. For the first time, the SP would be equal to Labour on the left. On the right the party of Geert Wilders would almost have doubled its seats, worsening the plight of the hapless VVD.

Historically speaking this seems to be a unique situation. It is certainly one that could change overnight. The number of floating voters is bigger than ever and after a time of upheaval the voters might well say: enough is enough and return to 'normal'. But I do not see that happen in the coming two or three years.

In Britain, just as in our country, you should take nothing for granted. David Cameron should take nothing for granted. But I do think he is his own best message, and he could well be the one to 'straddle the centre'.

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