

SOUL SEARCHING FOR A NEW DUTCH IDENTITY

In search of a new identity, Dutch society is facing many challenges. Two political murders within two years and growing tensions among ethnically Dutch and their Muslim compatriots require a critical self-evaluation. An active younger generation is voicing the need for change in the political landscape and a growing representation of immigrants has altered the political climate. Tolerance is no longer a trademark of the Netherlands. The future needs to determine whether integration will continue to be a goal, or whether a new form of a stratified society will shape the new Dutch identity.

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Global events have local impact. The Netherlands and its political climate of the past five years have proven just that. The Dutch situation has become of international interest, following two political murders and a NO vote in the referendum on the European Constitution. The vote and other tensions are seen in the context of Western European societies' challenge to deal with 'Radical Islam' and the public's fear of Turkish accession to the EU.

On 5 April 2006 the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations explicitly mentioned xenophobia and a hostile climate against Muslims in the Netherlands ¹. The Netherlands was described as a searching nation ². Ironically it was during that same time when French Senators visited the 'problem areas' of Rotterdam, and expressed admiration for the Dutch way such urban problems are tackled.³ Recent developments and popular Dutch sentiment are more in line with the American interpretation of Dutch reality; a nation struggling to redefine its core values.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and two political assassinations soon thereafter, Dutch society underwent fundamental changes. To understand the social change, a closer look should be given to the March 2006 municipal election turnout and recent initiatives of the younger generation. A review of these two cases of public mobilization will give insight into society's response to a polarized climate and reactionary politics.

Is this the beginning of a paradigm shift, or is it just the craze of the day? The question is whether we should continue to strive to accomplish integration or whether is it more realistic to work on an open but stratified model. The answers to these questions have global relevance as the challenges that the Dutch face on a micro level are applicable also to most EU countries.

The process of establishing a new Dutch identity is in full swing and not nearly completed. Identity by nature is fluid, yet a more defined sense of what binds all Dutch citizens, is needed. When this Dutch identity takes on a more inclusive and solid form, the Dutch will be better able to understand their position in the European Union. This will be instrumental in understanding the possibilities of EU Expansion.

¹ Senator George Allen said about European American relations: 'A Europe preoccupied with tensions within its own society, is a weak partner for the US, not in the least when facing the global challenge of radical islam'. Furthermore the lack of equal opportunity for immigrants is criticized by Robin Niblett of CSIS.

² Tom-Jan Meeuws, "Racisme + Europe = terreur", (Racism + Europe = terrorism), *NRC Next*, 7 April 2006, p. 7.

³ Mark Duursma, 'Hadden wij maar wijkpolitie', (If only we had neighborhood police), *NRC Next*, 7 April 2006, p.9.

Welcome to the Netherlands

A culture of unlimited freedoms for some, Sodom and Gomorra for others. The Dutch culture and economy for centuries developed as a result of global trade. The tolerant image of the Dutch is attributable to their historic desire to be open to other cultures in order not to shut off possible trade partners; an economic motive.

Dutch society was divided in three dominant groups with Calvinists, Catholics and socialists living separately in their own strata. This phenomenon of parallel societies became known as stratification and lasted until the 1960s. The motto was 'live and let live, but not in my backyard'. Catholics, Protestants and socialists had their own political parties, schools and communities. Tolerance existed only within these subcultures and not between them.

In the 1960's, the Netherlands needed cheap labor and recruited temporary workers from the poorer regions of the Mediterranean as 'guest-workers'; initially mostly Italian and Spanish men, but later more and more Turkish and Moroccan workers. No government initiatives existed to integrate immigrants which resulted in little interaction between the Dutch and the newcomers.

Immigrants from different backgrounds and with different religions continued to live in their own growing communities. No structural program to integrate these guest-workers into Dutch society was created. No 'Dutch dream' was formulated, let alone communicated to the newcomers. They effectively became new strata in society.

After World War II, public-opinion deemed it politically incorrect to differentiate people according to ethnicity. Doing so was perceived as an intrusion by the government. This caused additional reluctance in policy-making to initiate integration policies targeting minorities.

It was not until the 1980s that minimal integration policies were formulated. Prior to that, the simple assumption was that the guest-workers would eventually leave. Many, however, ended up staying. Family-reunification was unavoidable and meant citizenship was granted to immediate relatives of thousands of guestworkers.

Today, a realization reigns that a new Dutch identity and new policies are needed to effectively include all Dutch inhabitants. Had such policies been implemented earlier, they would have forced the Dutch themselves to think about what binds them together while trying to communicate their identity to others. To this day, many first generation immigrants from Turkey and Morocco do not speak Dutch, and ironically, those who came here to work are now scoring highest in unemployment figures.

The intake of immigrants has been sharply reduced over the past five years. In early 2006, a new government funded film portraying images of the 'liberal Dutch culture' was distributed to 138 Dutch embassies, to be seen by those who consider applying for a visa. The film is part of a larger program of acquiring citizenship, aiming to stimulate the integration process of newcomers once they are granted a visa. Part of the process of acquiring citizenship is the so called citizenship-test. Both film and test send a message of discouragement as even many ethnically Dutch citizens would not pass questions such as 'How did nutmeg come to the Netherlands?'⁴

Two Political Murders and the Death of 'Tolerance'

The 9/11 terrorist attacks sent a shockwave throughout the world. In the Netherlands, it helped introduce fear as a dominant factor in a traditionally peaceful, almost boring, political arena.

A year and a half after 9/11, popular newcomer to Dutch politics, Pim Fortuyn, was assassinated by an anonymous left-wing radical.⁵ Fortuyn's rhetoric on 'Muslim terrorism' and 'failed integration' of immigrants had won him the 2002 municipal elections in the second largest city in The Netherlands, Rotterdam. The city had been ruled by social democrats for more than a century and has a majority immigrant population.

Fortuyn served from 14 March 2002 until he was murdered on the 6th of May of that same year, days before his party's likely victory on the national stage. During his campaign, he declared himself the next Prime Minister of the country and made it well-known he feared for his life. His outspokenness caused him to be celebrated and hated at the same time. Although his party, Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF), failed to consolidate continuity after his murder, it secured 26 out of 150 seats in the national elections which meant Fortuyn could have indeed become Prime Minister.

The massive vote for Fortuyn and his party has been dubbed the 'white middle finger' and it is known that many who voted for his party did so out of protest of the assassination. Although his assassin turned out to be a left-wing animal rights activist, political rhetoric following the murder suggested radical Muslim immigrants were to blame.

Political murder in peace time had not occurred in the Netherlands since the 1584 assassination of Dutch founding father Willem de Zwijger. This helps explain the intense reactions to the second political murder in two years. Movie director and professional provocateur, Theo van Gogh was assassinated on 2 November 2004.

⁴ <http://www.teleac.nl/nationaleinburgeringstest/>

⁵ Volkert van der Graaf

He was shot while riding his bike and subsequently stabbed to death by a Dutch Islamic fundamentalist of Moroccan decent, Mohammed Bouyeri. The murderer left a message to society promising more bloodshed pinned to Van Gogh's chest with a dagger.

Ironically, at the time of the murder, Van Gogh was working on a movie about the murder of Fortuyn. His earlier movie criticizing the position of women in Islam, 'Submission', was explicitly mentioned by Bouyeri as a motive to kill him because it portrayed verses of the Kuran on the bodies of naked women. Van Gogh produced this movie together with controversial Member of Parliament, Ayaan Hirshi Ali, who has been living under heavy protection ever since.⁶

The response to the murders of Fortuyn and Van Gogh was one of disbelief; the Dutch struggled to accept that such acts could take place in the Netherlands. They characterized the murders as 'un-Dutch'. But weren't these 'un-Dutch' murders the product of a 'tolerant' Dutch society? Did Dutch tolerance stand for open-mindedness and inclusiveness, or had it become synonymous with indifference to others? An intense re-evaluation and search for a new Dutch identity that unveiled the ignorance of the political establishment towards societal reality began.

Reports of the Dutch intelligence service show that radical funding pouring into mosques, schools, and the existence of terrorist recruiters were not un-Dutch.⁷ The Dutch interpretation of tolerance had effectively casted a blind eye to dangerous developments on its own soil.

The Netherlands had bred extremists that fall outside the alleged category of uneducated immigrants. Van Gogh's assassin Mohammed Bouyeri was highly educated, spoke Dutch fluently, but turned radical. Some suggested he could have been more susceptible to professional recruiters as a member of a minority in search for his own identity. Bouyeri himself denied this and proclaimed that he acted only in the name of Allah. It became painfully clear that terrorism was no longer un-Dutch.

With the murders of Fortuyn and Van Gogh, tolerance as it was known to the Dutch was murdered too. The Netherlands, traditionally known for its tolerance, witnessed 'retaliation' attacks on mosques and even Islamic elementary schools. Perpetrators did not try to hide their motives leaving such messages as 'Rest in Peace Theo'.

⁶ Her direct way of opening up the debate on the oppression of Muslim women earned her the title of European of the Year by Reader's Digest, as well as many enemies. Time magazine saw her as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2005.

⁷ AIVD (Dutch Intelligence Service) Report, 'De geweldadige jihad in Nederland; actuele trends in de islamitisch-terroristische bedreiging' (The violent jihad in the Netherlands; current trends in the Islamic-terrorist threat), http://www.nctb.nl/pers_en_publicaties/rapporten/, March 2005.

The sense of fear resulted in a tendency to block changes. This helps explain why the recent referendum on the European Constitution resulted in an infamous 'NEE' from the Dutch and why the discussion of a Turkish accession to the EU became such a topic of heated public debate.

Political Participation of Immigrants

Historically immigrants were barely represented in political institutions on both the local and national level. Political representation can give immigrants more visibility in political life and could help bridge the divide in society.

The municipal elections of 7 March 2006 displayed a major shift in the votes of the immigrant community with a surprising tendency to vote for the Labor Party (PvdA). While Labor's strategy of moving towards the center right worked, coalition parties across the entire spectrum lost as a result of a variety of unpopular measures. The shift in voting behavior can be attributed to a reaction against the insensitive immigration policies of the current administration, led by Minister Rita Verdonk. 'Iron Rita' is notably the most controversial and certainly most threatened minister. At the same time her no-nonsense approach is highly valued by many. This tension exemplifies the polarization in the Netherlands.

Traditionally the low political participation level of immigrants was attributed to their lack of integration into Dutch society. This time however, voter turnout among immigrants was unexpectedly high. Responses to this shift formed a heated debate, specifically over the result of voting along ethnic lines. The turnout during the municipal elections has been dubbed the 'black' middle finger.

Referring to people having voted along ethnic lines, Minister Verdonk said, "Many immigrants in the voting booth choose the (false) safety of old politics." "However, the 'easiest choice' in this field is often not the best,"⁸ Wouter Bos, head of the Labor Party and likely new Prime Minister, pointed to this risk as well, contributing it partly to the inexperience of new politicians.⁹ Many inside his party felt uncomfortable with their leader's statement; the party had, after all, gained popularity thanks to the recent voting dynamics that he seemed to criticize.

New influences in society challenge Dutch secularism rendering a new and effective re-establishment of the principle vital. Commentators claim that the problem lies with finding the right representatives in the Muslim community. Vrijssen states: "All cabinets have attempted to make contact with the Muslim world according to the old model of talks with the Catholic, Protestant, and social democratic pillars. This used to lead to consensus. Now it leads to distance."

⁸ http://www.justitie.nl/organisatie/verdonk_nl/column/, 22 March 2006.

⁹ 'Bos op het matje' (Bos needs to explain himself), *Het Parool*, 25 March 2006
<http://www.parool.nl/nieuws/2006/MAA/25/ams1.html>.

Minister Donner remarked: “We can not talk to Muslims about terrorism, because we do not want to relate religion and terrorism,”¹⁰ underlining the need for a clear definition of secularism.

The media warned that the ‘black’ voters might form a block. Others speak of a democratic answer to the political developments in the Netherlands. Hacı Karacaer, director of Milli Görüş Northern Holland, attributed the tumult around the election to a perception of “an attack to the established political interest”. It proves, according to Karacaer, that the presence of immigrants in Dutch politics is of a permanent nature. He asserts that the discussion is not so much whether immigrants should vote for immigrant representatives, but whether those elected are qualified. “The realization that immigrants are a power factor is confronting. It seems to hit hard in parts of The Netherlands.”¹¹

The ethnic divide would have been certain, had all the votes gone to Islamic parties, but these have not yet been effectively established. Yet, many immigrants were candidates on the list of the Labor Party, and many proved to have large constituencies. Interestingly it is the Labor Party that is largely blamed for the lack of integrating immigrants during the many years that they were part in government. The massive shift of votes is probably mainly a reaction to the policies of the current administration, by Dutch *and* immigrant voters.

Professor Paul Scheffer interprets the outcome of the municipal elections not as a victory of integration, but points to the risk of ethnic islands taking shape. “The municipal elections were not a celebration of democracy. (...) After the white middle finger of 2002 now the black middle finger of 2006. Action and reaction, the outcomes belong together and indicate the polarization stemming from urban problems. The explanation for both outcomes is the same: fear for change and a call for protection.” According to Scheffer “the coexistence between ethnic and political lines is not good for the belief in democracy.”¹²

Rebels with a Cause; Initiatives by the Younger Generation

The Netherlands has a debating culture. On several platforms and podia, such as debating houses, there are daily discussions on every political, cultural and socio-economic topic imaginable. These debates have a highly intellectual character and risk lacking practical impact.

The accession of Turkey to the EU has been a recurring topic over the past three years.¹³ Other topics such as political leadership and innovation, and radicalization

¹⁰ Eric Vrijssen, “Andere moslims” (Different Muslims), *Elsevier*, 29 October 2005, p 27.

¹¹ Froukje Santing, “Nederland doet ‘benepen’ over allochtone stem” (The Netherlands is being petty over the immigrant votes). *NRC Handelsblad*, 21 March 2006, p 8.

¹² Paul Scheffer, ‘De sputterende emancipatie machine’ (The struggling emancipation machine), *NRC Handelsblad*, 18 March 2006, p 15.

¹³ The European Stability Initiative (ESI) has extensively mapped the Dutch debate on the discussion of Turkish accession to the European Union, www.esiweb.org.

have been extensively discussed in public discourse as well. Hope lies in attempting to involve as many people as possible, from different layers of society, and underlining the need for action to result from debating. By doing so, a more inclusive debate for the development of a new Dutch identity can take place. Initiatives taken by the younger generation are indicative of their determination to deal with societal problems, and as such promising.

Today's youth take a unique approach as they talk, debate and rap about political topics in a way that differs from older generations. There is a natural urge to break away from the political establishment into a progressive new era. Some examples from the wide variety of initiatives exemplify what is becoming a movement for change.

Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch students collaborated in creating a platform called 'Ben je bang voor mij?' [Are you afraid of me?]¹⁴. The group organizes events that confront people with the fear of 'the other' that has surfaced after the murder of Theo van Gogh. Another initiative called 'HappyChaos'¹⁵ is an organization that started hosting 'symposium parties' in 2001 on various topics ranging from freedom of expression to democracy as a product for export. Politicians, journalists and academics hold debates in nightclubs and dance afterwards. 'CoolPolitics'¹⁶ is a company that organizes debates on pop concert stages and has a program on MTV which discusses political issues in a context which youth can identify with.

A foundation called 'Wonder'¹⁷ is a loose network of young professionals and students that plays practical jokes to raise awareness. As a cross-over of Dutch and Muslim traditions, in December of 2005, volunteers filled shoes of children in mosques with a present from the Dutch Santa Claus. Furthermore they initiated the 'BurgerBuddy' [civilian buddy project], linking civilians to politicians to pragmatically close the gap between politics and the people. 'Towards A New Start' (TANS)¹⁸ is a group of highly educated Moroccan immigrants, attempting to create a more positive image of Dutch-Moroccan youth to counter their negative stereotype.

'LuxVoor'¹⁹ is a group of people in their 20s and 30s from different political backgrounds that generated large media discussion along with 300.000 hits on their website after the publication of their manifest for a new political landscape, which cuts through established parties, published in one of the major newspapers, De Volkskrant, on March 18th 2006.

¹⁴ www.benjebangvoormij.nl

¹⁵ www.happychaos.nl

¹⁶ www.coolpolitics.nl

¹⁷ www.wonder.nl

¹⁸ www.tans.nl

¹⁹ www.luxvoor.nl

Popular attention for such initiatives helps explain why politicians are eager to be hosted on the stages that these young people set; delighted to show they too are there to make a difference. Critical questions and heated discussions are the result, generating media coverage.

These initiatives show an urge among the young generation to ‘do something’ and to contribute in their own fashion. Noteworthy is that a relatively large representation of Moroccan immigrant students can be found in these initiatives. Immigrants of Turkish decent participate as well, but seem more reluctant to break away from the various close-knit subcultures they are part of. Their involvement in public debate is more focused on Turkey’s bid to the EU. As the debate on Turkish admission is closely related to a debate on Europe’s identity, it could help motivate more young Turkish-Dutch to enter the discussions on Dutch identity.

Projects and initiatives like these add to a sense that there is a search for a new Dutch identity. Related to this question, is the challenge of how the Netherlands fits within Europe, and what will change on a day to day basis if for example Turkey enters the Union. Discussions among young people hold key clues for defining a new Dutch identity such as: inclusiveness, an open debate, new ways to practice politics and how to manage challenges in society. A discussion on the effectiveness of the abovementioned initiatives broke out in the media over the past months. Some claim it is too much the product of popular culture, without a long lasting impact. Others encourage all initiatives, arguing every little bit helps. The risk of talking without reaching feasible results is present, but at least there is initiative and participation. These various initiatives by the often elitist younger generation are beginning to look like a movement. Despite the great variety of projects, similar objectives are: opening a dialogue, getting topics out of the taboo sphere, generating thought, making a difference, breaking through conventions, and at the same time having fun. Most of these projects are innovative and creative.

What’s Next?

It is clear that the aftermath of 9/11 and the political murders in The Netherlands have caused a chain of action and reaction in the public debate. The municipal election turnout and the initiatives of the younger generation stand out in this complex debate. They send a hopeful message of the possibility of change, coming from the bottom up. Besides these developments, a set of structural changes needs to take place. Recognizing and challenging fear for ‘the other’ is essential. The most important legacy of Pim Fortuyn is that he wanted to uncover the discussion from the veil of political correctness. When both immigrants and the majority culture open up to putting the real issues on the table, we can begin to move forward to a solution. Currently, people seem to withdraw back into their

communities at the risk of a new form of strict stratification being created. A new immigrant or Muslim strata would risk becoming a 'ghetto'. It is time to take responsibility for the past, but move on into a common future.

The proposed idea of the Dutch government to send criminals with dual citizenship back to their country of origin does not tell the right message. It suggests that immigrants do not belong to the Dutch society, and that it does not have responsibility for all its citizens. Citizenship under the rule of law should be one identity everyone shares, and trusts. Over the past years a trend of immigrants re-migrating to their countries of origin, as well as Dutch people migrating indicates unhappiness or disability to adapt to this culture.

For the immigrants who decide to stay, integration will be a key factor. Part of the theory of Francis Fukuyama perfectly describes the situation of the Netherlands. He pleads for an emphasis on citizenship and the development of a modern national identity; a society with the same rights for everyone.²⁰ After all, the challenges coming from within the current Western European societies in facing their minorities need to be overcome within these same societies. It is time for a critical look inwards. The core values of freedom and equality have to be clarified and emphasized.

Concretely, the stimulation of opportunities for increased education and employment, and participation in society; rather than making people dependent, will be a first step. Within opportunity-enhancing programs, accountability needs to be a central driving factor. The role of politicians and lawmakers is to create a framework in which all people living in the Netherlands will be included with equal treatment and opportunity.

The question is how to effectively integrate ethnic minorities in all parts of society. Will we continue to strive for full integration or will an openly stratified society be a more feasible and likely outcome?

We have to be realistic and pragmatic without losing hope. The newly elected politicians and representatives and the younger generation will certainly continue to contribute to the debate. Youth initiatives should be taken seriously, and are a welcome development in the creation of the new Dutch identity. When a new identity is shaped, it will be possible to look towards newcomers and start a reasonable debate about the accession of candidate countries, such as Turkey, to the EU.

²⁰ Francis Fukuyama, "The Future of Democracy. Culture and Immigration.", *Nexus Lecture 2005*, www.nexus-institute.nl