

The Dutch Labour Party (PvdA)

The Dutch social democratic Labour Party (PvdA) was founded in Amsterdam on 9 February 1946 through the merger of the socialist Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP) with the social liberal VDB¹, the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU) and several prominent members of Christian socialist groups. Shortly after WWII there was a lot of support for renewal of the political landscape. In this vein, the PvdA was conceptualized as a “breakthrough party” (*doorbraakpartij*) that should overcome the Dutch political system of “*verzuiling*” (compartmentalization) in which all aspects of social life were organized on the basis of religious and political orientation. The unification of various left groups of different background and ideological origins into one party meant that, from its onset, the PvdA as a party valued (common) policy preferences over (divergent) ideological analyses of society.²

As a political model, the establishment of this "breakthrough party" initially found little following: after the parliamentary elections in 1946, most pre-war parties re-entered politics (sometimes with a new name).³ "De-compartmentalization" effectively took root only from the 1960s-1970s with the onset of secularization. Despite this, the PvdA successfully established itself as the party of the socialist (social-democratic) "pillar", and as such played a big role in Dutch post-war politics. In 1946, the PvdA entered government as the junior party under the Catholic People's Party (KVP; which later merged into the CDA), and from 1948-1958, the PvdA was the leading party in four subsequent broad coalitions based on catholic-socialist cooperation under prime minister Willem Drees. This was the period of reconstruction and the build-up of the welfare state, earning the PvdA considerable popularity. Other main themes within the PvdA included financial redistribution and a focus on community life that should provide the conditions for emancipation and self-fulfillment.⁴

In the 1960s, the PvdA's ideological development was strongly influenced by social changes in Dutch society, including the start of the squatters' and "*provo*" movements in 1965. *Provos* advocated their own solutions for social problems on a wide range of issues including ecology and the environment, authorities, democratization and emancipation.⁵ The *provo* movement moreover aimed to "provoke" the authorities through a mix of playful and more serious protests. In 1966, *provos* protested with empty banners after their statements had been prohibited in demonstrations by the mayor of Amsterdam, widescale protests took place during the royal wedding of Beatrix and Claus, and cuts in workers' holiday vouchers led to protests and street fights with the police that became known as the construction workers' riot (*Bouwvakkersoproer*⁶). It was in this climate of protests and social change that within the PvdA a "New Left" movement was founded in 1965, which aimed for more internal party democracy, a more radical income policy and the establishment of closer ties with smaller progressive parties.⁷

¹ Vrijzinnig-Democratische Bond; VDB. Philip van Praag, "PvdA partijgeschiedenis", Politieke partijenindex (RUG; 15 September 2014). Accessed 8 March 2017: <http://dnpp.ub.rug.nl/dnpp/pp/pvda/geschied>.

² Van Praag, "PvdA partijgeschiedenis".

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ True to its anti-institutions position, the *provo* movement disbanded itself in 1967 before it could become an institution itself.

⁶ Also known as the "Telegraafrellen": workers moved against this newspapers' headquarters after it falsely reported the cause of death of one of the protesters, Jan Weggelaar, to be a stone thrown by one of his comrades.

⁷ Including the PPR and the PSP - two smaller socialist parties that would both merge into the green party *GroenLinks* in 1990.

Cooperation between PvdA, the progressive party PPR⁸ and D'66 in the 1972 elections led to the formation of a 5-party government⁹ under PvdA-prime minister Den Uyl (1973-77). The government's official ambition of "distributing knowledge, power and income" was translated into an ambitious program of social reform that combined plans to expand public services and provisions and increase social justice with ecological and feminist thinking. Yet the implementation of these policies was partially stalled due to internal divisions within the PvdA and the coalition at large, as well as international circumstances such as the oil crisis. Increasing budget deficits led the PvdA to conclude that the expansion of the welfare state might be unaffordable. The party's agreement to cut back on government expenses led to a period in which the PvdA had great trouble in reformulating its policies with regards to the welfare state.¹⁰

In the early 1990's, the PvdA was particularly inspired by the English labour party's "third way" program that attempted to integrate elements of neoliberalism into a social democratic program. This inspiration was visible when from 1994 to 2002 the social democrats again entered government as the biggest party in two "purple" cabinets of social democrats (PvdA), liberal democrats (D'66) and liberals (VVD) under PM and former trade union (FNV)-leader Wim Kok. These cabinets were characterized by "fairly harmonious relations" between the three coalition parties¹¹; the switch to neoliberal positions within the PvdA bred a common trust in market mechanisms to make public policies and provisions more efficient. In line with this conviction, the "purple" cabinets oversaw the privatization of several government companies and the devolution of government tasks to independent administrative bodies. In a 1995 speech on the ideological developments of the party, Kok claimed that this development had almost reached its climax. He concluded that "for a political party like ours, shaking off the ideological feathers is not only a problem, it is in certain respects also a liberating experience."¹² Since then, Kok's words have widely been interpreted as an indication that the PvdA had drifted away from left politics.¹³

The 2002 election campaign saw the rise of Pim Fortuyn, a right-wing populist politician who combined attacks on "old politics" with a rejection of Dutch immigration policies. Fortuyn virulently attacked especially the PvdA, then led by Ad Melkert who seemed inapt at countering Fortuyn's specific blend of populism and personality-driven politics. On 6 May 2002, Pim Fortuyn was murdered; 9 days later, his party (List Pim Fortuyn; LPF) achieved a resounding victory in the elections, entering parliament with 26 seats (out of a total of 150). The PvdA obtained 23 seats, losing nearly half of its previous faction of 45. The spectacular rise of the LPF marked the advent of right-wing populism in Dutch politics (succeeded in 2006 by the more radical "Freedom Party" [PVV] of Geert Wilders) and heralded a period of great electoral volatility that continues up until this day.

⁸ Politieke Partij Radikalen (PPR); a progressive party formed in 1968 by 'christian radicals' who split away from the KVP. The party focussed on such themes as international development, climate and disarmament. In 1991, PPR was one of the parties that merged into the green party GroenLinks.

⁹ Including also the Christian parties KVP and ARP.

¹⁰ Van Praag, "PvdA partijgeschiedenis".

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The complete text of Wim Kok's lecture can be found in: Stichting Dr. J.M. den Uyllezing, *In het spoor van Den Uyl. Den Uyllezingen 1988 – 2008* (Amsterdam 2009), pp. 187 – 213.

¹³ Particularly the Socialist Party, which evolved from a Maoist party in the 1970s to a party that now describes itself as "social democrats with a little extra", has often stressed this point - specifically also to claim that the SP is more of an heir to Den Uyl (as the last "left statesman") than the PvdA is.

Financial crisis

After 2002, the PvdA surprisingly recuperated under new party leader Wouter Bos, and following the November 2006 elections (33 seats), the PvdA entered government under the Christian Democrats (CDA) and with the Christian Union (CU) from 2007 to 2010. In 2008, this government decided to bailout two big Dutch banks, in order to avoid bigger social costs – the banks were deemed 'too big to fail'. At the same time government put limits on the bonus system in the financial sector (to prevent risky decisions and disasters that then needed to be covered by the treasury), and limited salaries in public and semi-public offices.¹⁴ These were very popular positions that were followed up by the subsequent governments (however in 2015 the previously nationalized ABN Amro bank went back to the stock market). Yet within the PvdA, unease over third way thinking had grown. In 2010, PvdA party leader Bos contended that the party had underestimated the dynamics of the market, and that public oversight to protect public interest was not strong enough. He called for a new relation between market and state, however without clarifying what that should look like.¹⁵

In the run-up to the 2012 national elections, polls suggested that not the PvdA but the SP could become the largest party in the Dutch parliament, with up to 37 seats.¹⁶ Yet in the last two weeks before the elections the SP entered into a free fall, largely due to Roemer's clumsy media performances: at prime time television he was unable to smoothly explain his party's election program, which raised doubts about his capacities to run a coalition.¹⁷ This led to a swing in votes from which especially the social democrats profited. The PvdA presented itself as the only credible and experienced governing party on the left, and was successful in winning over a substantial part of the left electorate whose priority was to keep the liberal-right party VVD that now stood to win the elections out of government.¹⁸ Eventually the SP 'only' managed to keep its 15 seats in parliament; in light of the projected support, this was a rather disappointing result.¹⁹ The PvdA obtained an unexpected 38 seats. Yet to the great dismay of many of its 'strategic supporters', the party then entered a coalition government under PM Rutte of the VVD (41 MPs).

The VVD-PvdA coalition accord ("Building bridges"²⁰) had largely been negotiated on the basis of exchange. Presented as "the best of both worlds"²¹, this allowed both parties to "score" on some of their main campaign issues, but it also meant that both parties accepted policies entirely based on the other's preferences. In practice, and in the midst of the financial crisis, the two parties agreed to cut 16 billion euros on the state budget, while at the same time promising that the purchasing power of people with incomes below the Dutch average

¹⁴ Daniel Keith, "Failing to capitalise on the crisis? The Dutch Socialist Party", in: Luke March and Daniel Keith (eds.), *Europe's Radical Left: From Marginality to Mainstream?* (Rowman and Littlefield: forthcoming), 8-9.

¹⁵ Van Praag, "PvdA partijgeschiedenis".

¹⁶ Marije Willems, "SP en VVD blijven grootste in peilingen", in: *NRC*, 5 August 2012.

<http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2012/08/05/sp-en-vvd-blijven-grootste-in-peilingen/> (accessed 8 October 2015).

¹⁷ The SP campaign of 2012 has been recorded in a documentary movie by Coen Verbraak: "Emile Roemer - tussen pieken en peilen"; http://www.npo.nl/emile-roemer-tussen-pieken-en-peilen/POMS_S_VARA_124085 (accessed 10 October 2015).

¹⁸ Until a month before the September 2012 elections, these were expected to end in a run-off between VVD and SP; from August, the PvdA took the SP's place in this struggle between the two largest parties. Polls likewise indicated that the difference between VVD on the one hand and the SP or PvdA on the other would be very little; in the end, the VVD became the largest party.

¹⁹ The election results also clearly showed the fragmentation of the Dutch electorate: SP (15 seats), PVV (15), CDA (13) and the liberal party D'66 (12) all obtained between 8 and 10 percent of the votes.

²⁰ VVD and PvdA, "Bruggen slaan – Regeerakkoord VVD en PvdA" (29 October 2012):

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/regering/documenten/rapporten/2012/10/29/regeerakkoord>.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

would still grow at 0,2% a year.²² Several measures that sobered health care and elderly care were defended with a call on citizens' individual responsibility (or "personal strength") and social responsibility to take care of each other. In the same vein, the responsibility for specialized aid such as psychiatric youth services was devolved to local authorities, which are now expected to negotiate annually with local and regional care providers about patient numbers and tariffs. Meanwhile, reforms of the system of individual budgets that allows people with special needs to arrange and contract their own care made the system so opaque that many people failed to obtain the funds they were entitled to.²³ Austerity measures moreover proved hardest for low-income groups with little financial cushion, despite the PvdA's promise that these groups would be protected.

The coalition's austerity measures thus contributed to a further reduction of the welfare state and continued the attrition of the PvdA's image. Many of the "strategic voters" that had supported the PvdA in the hope of a left-wing government were extremely disappointed with the party's decision to govern together with the VVD. This resulted in losses in local (2014: 10,25%), European (2014: 9,4%; 3 seats²⁴) and provincial (2015: 10,08%) elections, and eventually in a resounding loss in the March 2017 national elections, when the party's parliamentary faction was decimated from 38 to a mere 9 MPs (5,7 % of the votes).

Significantly, the PvdA's participation in governments that cut back welfare state provisions and contributed to labor market flexibilization also contributed to severing the party's historical ties with the largest Dutch federation of trade unions, the FNV. In recent years, the SP successfully managed to fill this void, including by organizing joint protests against cuts in healthcare services (2010) and against austerity measures (2013, 2014). Former FNV chair (2005-2012) Agnes Jongerius in 2014 became an MEP for the PvdA. Yet today it is the SP that is closest to the trade unions, with a party leader (Ron Meyer) who formerly worked as FNV official, and who in this position in 2014 coordinated the long and well-organized strike of cleaners.²⁵

Eurocrisis

In 2011, the PvdA (then in opposition) heavily criticized the government's agreement to a European support package for Greece. Although the social democrats did in the end vote in favor of the package, they were especially dissatisfied with the "low [financial] contribution of the private sector".²⁶ At the same time, the PvdA called for more stringent budgetary discipline of Euro-countries.²⁷

In January 2013, PvdA finance minister Jeroen Dijsselbloem was elected chair of the Eurogroup. In July 2015, he was re-elected for a second 2,5 year term. It is however likely that he will have to resign from this post once a new government is formed in the Netherlands

²² Ibid., p. 4.

²³ <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/02/19/kamer-wenst-opheldering-van-rijn-over-pgb-6773435-a1546682>

²⁴ It should be noted that the PvdA normally suffers from the low voter turnout [2014: 37,32%] in the European elections. In 2009, the party obtained 12,05% of the votes (3 seats).

<http://www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl/Na1918/Verkiezingsuitslagen.aspx?VerkiezingsTypeId=5>

²⁵ And also the SP's nr. 3 in the latest elections of March 2017, daughter of long-term party leader Jan Marijnissen, Lilian Marijnissen, previously worked for the FNV.

²⁶ Job Cohen, "Herstel vertrouwen en tref noodzakelijke maatregelen eurocrisis" (17 August 2011).

<https://www.pvda.nl/nieuws/inbreng-job-cohen-debat-grieks-steunpakket/> (accessed 6 March 2017).

²⁷ Ibid.

without the PvdA.²⁸ As chair of the Eurogroup, Dijsselbloem became one of the figureheads of the austerity measures that Greece and other Eurocountries had to implement in return for financial aid packages. In response to the recent IMF report that lamented the social costs of years of reforms and budget cuts in Greece, Dijsselbloem was again adamant that there would be no (partial) remission of debts. Instead, he stated that there should now be a “move away from austerity” and “towards deep reform”.²⁹

It should be stressed here that the PvdA’s position on austerity measures abroad was shared by a large majority of the Dutch population which feels little solidarity with the Greek position. This puts parties on the left in a difficult situation between their commitment to international solidarity and the defense of their Dutch constituency’s financial interest. Thus nearly all parties defended the Dutch contribution to support packages to their constituencies by pointing to the “stern” demands placed on the Greek state. Only the Socialist Party initially claimed it would be possible to cancel Greek debts without affecting Dutch taxpayers’ money, by placing the burden on foreign (predominantly German and French) banks as well as on international investors; but this approach was difficult to explain, and contributed to Roemer’s plight in the 2012 elections.

Refugees policy

In response to the large numbers of refugees that entered Europe from Turkey to Greece, the PvdA has been one of the key architects of the "EU-Turkey deal" that was brokered during the Dutch presidency of the EU (Jan-June 2016) and signed on 18 March 2016. Then-PvdA leader Samsom, who was personally involved in brokering the deal together with German chancellor Merkel, called the agreement "both tough and humane".³⁰

The most important provisions were a return of "irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands" to Turkey, combined with the agreement that "[f]or every Syrian being returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled to the EU".³¹ The idea was to discourage refugees from attempting to cross the Egean Sea, while at the same time offering them a "safe alternative" in Turkey. To make this arrangement palatable to the Turkish authorities, the agreement on refugees included EU financial compensation to Turkey (including 10 million for the improvement of Syrian refugee reception in the country) as well

²⁸ At the time of writing (31 May 2017), coalition negotiations in the Netherlands are still open. Due to the PvdA's significant electoral loss, it is however unlikely that the party will re-enter government just now. EU Treaties indicate that the chair of the Eurogroup should be a Minister of Finances. Dijsselbloem himself has indicated that he would like to continue as chair of the Eurogroup. Although there is support for this ambition in the Netherlands, it is unclear in how far Dijsselbloem has actually secured support for his plans by other Finance Ministers. Meanwhile Dijsselbloem's statements in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in which he seemed to suggest that the financial troubles of southern European countries were the result of these countries spending all their money on "Schnaps und Frauen", led to calls for his resignation as Eurogroup chair. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/01/25/dijsselbloem-wil-ook-na-verkiezingen-voorzitter-blijven-van-eurogroep-a1542915> (accessed 6 March 2017); Jeroen Dijsselbloem, "Response letter by President Dijsselbloem to the members of the European Parliament" (4 April 2017), online at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/nl/press/press-releases/2017/04/04-peg-jd-letter-ep/> (accessed 18 May 2017).

²⁹ Christoph Schmidt, "Geldschietters gunnen de Grieken wat lucht" (20 February 2017) <https://www.trouw.nl/home/geldschietters-gunnen-de-grieken-wat-lucht~aef2755f/>.

³⁰ Stéphane Alonso and Annemarie Kas, "Ik verzoen me met de schade, het resultaat is binnen". In: *NCR*, 29 March 2016.

³¹ European Commission, "Fact Sheet, EU-Turkey Statement: Questions and Answers". Accessed 6 March 2017: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-963_en.htm.

as promises on speeding up the roadmap to visa liberalization, upgrading the Customs Union, and "re-energizing" Turkey's accession process to the EU.³²

The agreement has generated protest from its inception. These included objections over the situation of refugees in Greek facilities; over the procedures of returning refugees to Turkey, and over the treatment of refugees in Turkey. From the start, social and humanitarian organizations as well as legal experts have protested the plan to send refugees back to Turkey. At the same time, right-wing parties in the Netherlands (as elsewhere) objected to the pledge of taking in Syrian refugees, even if selected for migration to Europe in Turkey. The "deal" has moreover suffered from increasing tensions with Turkey, where the failed coup attempt of July 2016 was followed by increased political repression. In response, in November 2016 the EP voted to freeze EU accession negotiations with Turkey.³³ Turkey has moreover been accused of using the deal with the EU, and specifically the threat of cancelling it, to reinforce Ankara's influence in international politics and over people with a Turkish background in Europe. Examples of soured relations and increased Turkish assertiveness include the Erdogan satire-scandal in Germany (Jan Böhmermann), the arrest of *Die Welt*-journalist Deniz Yücel in Turkey, as well as the controversies over Turkish politicians attempting to mobilize support among Turkish citizens residing in Germany and the Netherlands for the 16 April 2017 referendum that increased the power of the president in Turkey. On 25 April, the Council of Europe voted to restart procedures to monitor the situation of human rights and rule of law in Turkey – again indicative of European unease over the developments in the country. The deal moreover failed to take away one of the largest problems in dealing with the European refugee crisis: EU countries' unwillingness to take up refugees. By January 2017, only 2672 migrants came to the EU via the Turkey deal. Most refugees (more than 1000) were taken in by Germany; the Netherlands took in more than 400 people. A total of 801 refugees were sent back to Turkey. Meanwhile, the situation in Greek asylum centers deteriorated.³⁴ The Dutch government moreover has also stalled on taking in refugees from Greece, blaming this on registration problems in the Greek asylum facilities.³⁵ Thus less than a year after the "EU-Turkey deal", it was already clear that it has largely collapsed.

On 8 January 2017, PvdA MEP and EP rapporteur on Turkey Kati Piri stated that "a part of the agreement can be called successful. The uncontrolled stream of refugees has been put to a halt"; however, "we have to conclude that we have failed in creating a safe and legal passage for the most vulnerable group of refugees".³⁶ Piri likewise blamed the "extremely slow" asylum processing system in Greece as well as European countries' lack of willingness to accept refugees after "pressure receded" with the signing of the Turkey deal. Piri also warned that the EU does not keep its promises to Turkey, especially regarding those aspects of the deal intended to alleviate the burden of the refugee crisis for Turkish citizens. Piri contended that she "still hopes that more work will be done for living up to the agreement than we have seen in the past months".³⁷

Europe

³² Ibid.

³³ PvdA, "Grote meerderheid EP voor bevrozing onderhandelingen met Turkije" (24 November 2016).

Accessed 7 March 2017: <https://europa.pvda.nl/grote-meerderheid-ep-bevrozing-onderhandelingen-turkije/>

³⁴ http://www.npo.nl/nieuwsuur/08-01-2017/VPWON_1267543

³⁵ By November 2016, the Netherlands had only taken in 629 refugees from Greece, out of the promised 3.797 people the Dutch government promised to take up in a two-year period starting September 2015.

³⁶ http://www.npo.nl/nieuwsuur/08-01-2017/VPWON_1267543

³⁷ Ibid.

The PvdA is currently represented in the European Parliament by 3 MEPs, who are part of the S&D parliamentary group. The PvdA is also a part of the PES party and of the Socialist International. The PvdA has always placed much emphasis on international affairs, and sees cooperation in international organizations as an important part of its identity. Significantly, the two main politicians representing the Netherlands in the EU at the moment are both from the PvdA, namely vice-president of the European Commission Frans Timmermans and Eurogroup chair Jeroen Dijsselbloem. In relation to the financial crisis, the PvdA's electoral programme for the 2014 EP elections called for a more "social Europe", and specifically mentioned that "the so-called Troika ... in assessing countries that are supported with bailout funds, should pay more attention to the social effects of crisis measures."³⁸ Yet as the quote of Dijsselbloem above showed, this does not mean that the PvdA is in favor of remissions; instead, "next to paying off debts", countries should "be helped in re-building their economies".³⁹ The party wants a revision of the 3% annual budget deficit limit to allow for fiscal policies based on "financial, economic and social circumstances": Countries that are "seriously working on bringing their budgets back in order" should get extra time to do so.⁴⁰ The PvdA furthermore calls for the primacy of national public interests over EU market regulations in the arrangement of (semi) public provisions⁴¹. Other important issues for the PvdA include a European refugee policy,⁴² a reform of European political institutions with more power for the EP and a smaller European Commission of max. 10 persons,⁴³ a decrease and reform of the CAP to encourage (only) sustainable agriculture,⁴⁴ European and local initiatives for sustainable energy,⁴⁵ and European agreements on tax evasion.⁴⁶

Catering towards multiple constituencies: the issue of 'integration'

Since the early 2000s, the PvdA has been mainly under attack from the political right for its policies regarding immigration. Started by Pim Fortuyn and radicalized under Geert Wilders, the current anti-immigrant, and specific anti-Islam narrative in the Netherlands holds the political left, and specifically the PvdA, responsible for the perceived "failed integration" of labor migrants, specifically from Muslim countries, that came to the Netherlands from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. The PvdA has had a hard time formulating an answer to these attacks, also because it continues to attempt a tightrope walk between a part of the (potential) electorate that laments the problems with immigration and integration and at the same time the significant electorate of Surinamese, Turkish and Moroccan descent for whom the PvdA long functioned as a party of emancipation. Unable to form convincing answers to this issue and to the critique on the PvdA's support for austerity measures, the PvdA has seen part of its electorate walk away - both to parties that advocate a stronger social program (SP) combined with nationalist rhetoric (PVV) as well as to more libertarian-minded parties that combine a stronger opposition to Wilders with liberal-progressive political programs (GroenLinks, D'66). In November 2014, the PvdA excluded two parliamentarians of Turkish descent from its faction and annulled their party membership after they had criticized the integration

³⁸ PvdA, "Voor een Europa dat werkt. Verkiezingsprogramma" (15 February 2014), p. 7.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴¹ Ibid., 10.

⁴² Ibid., p. 17.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 28-29.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 21; The 2017 national election program calls for a European (sustainable) energy union; PvdA, "Een Verbonden Samenleving. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017", p. 62.

⁴⁶ PvdA, "Voor een Europa dat werkt", p. 8.

policies of PvdA minister Lodewijk Asscher – specifically for distancing himself from organizations with strong ties to the Turkish state, such as Milli Görüş. In February 2015, Kuzu and Öztürk subsequently launched their new party, "Denk" (Think), which advocates the rights of minority groups in the Netherlands. Despite the strong association with its Turkish founders⁴⁷, the party initially attracted sympathizers among people with diverse immigrant backgrounds. Denk won 3 seats in the parliamentary elections, after a campaign marred by controversy over its statements (including the suggestion that doctors are sooner to stop treatment of people with immigrant background⁴⁸ and the party's continuous complaints about being slandered by the mainstream press) as well as its methods (including the use of internet trolls to harass political opponents and to suggest a wider following⁴⁹). Another party called "Artikel 1" (after the first article of the Dutch constitution which includes the equality principle and prohibits discrimination) was set up in December 2016 by Silvana Simons, a Dutch tv and radio of Surinamese descent who initially joined Denk but left the party after critiquing its polarizing course and its appeals to anger. Artikel 1 managed to attract the support of several prominent anti-racist and feminist activists. The party failed to win a seat in the March 2017 parliamentary elections, but has indicated to now focus on the 2018 local elections in Amsterdam. The establishment of both Denk and Artikel 1 clearly shows that frustration over Dutch attitudes towards people of immigrant background resonates with larger groups that had previously primarily supported the PvdA, adding to the attrition of the social democrats' electorate.

The March 2017 elections

As explained above, the PvdA does not have a very strong electoral profile. It primarily sees itself as a party that supports 'reasonable', left-of-center policies. As such, it has come to present itself in the past as the natural governing party on the left (in opposition to the previously smaller socialists and greens). In the 2012 elections, then-leader Samsom managed to steer the party to unexpected support rates when the electorate indeed granted him with more credibility as a political leader than his main opponent on the left, the SP's Emil Roemer. The subsequent coalition government with VVD was however severely criticized by many of the PvdA voters. Consequently, the March 2017 election campaign largely amounted to an attempt at explaining this choice to the public. This was, from the start, primarily an exercise in damage control.

Internal leadership elections organized in the run-up to March 2017 were of little help in creating a new image for the PvdA, as these saw two candidates both highly associated with the current government compete with each other. In the end, PvdA Minister of Social Affairs and Employment Opportunities Lodewijk Asscher received more support than the sitting faction leader and architect of the coalition with the VVD, Diederik Samsom.

Responding to voters' dissatisfaction with the coalition's austerity policies, the PvdA especially tried to cushion the expected electoral losses by boosting its social image. The party's 2017 election program thus explicitly called for a reappraisal of public policy that

⁴⁷ Denk for instance refuses to recognize the Armenian genocide.

⁴⁸ "Turks-Nederlandse artsen laken opmerkingen Kuzu: 'Ongefundeerd en schadelijk'". In: De Volkskrant (25 februari 2017). Accessed 7 March 2017: <http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/turks-nederlandse-artsen-laken-opmerkingen-kuzu-ongefundeerd-en-schadelijk~a4467417/>

⁴⁹ Andreas Kouwenhoven and Hugo Logtenberg, "Hoe Denk met 'trollen' politieke tegenstanders monddood probeert te maken". In: NRC Handelsblad (10 February 2017). Accessed 7 March 2017: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/02/10/de-trollen-van-denk-6641045-a1545547>

“strengthens the public character of the public sector” in which “[n]ot the market but the people should be central”.⁵⁰ This included an increase in welfare state provisions, especially for those with below-average incomes, comprising, among other things, a plan for social rent according to capacity as well as plans to experiment with a guaranteed basic income.⁵¹ It also included the rejection of TTIP “in its current form” and especially of the proposed trade tribunals. Instead, trade agreements should be upheld “via normal rule of law”.⁵² Other important issues included an “energy transition” towards renewable energy sources, and making agriculture more sustainable. In terms of European policy, the PvdA re-emphasized the importance of the EU, as well as other international organizations, for the Netherlands. In terms of refugee policy, the party implicitly continued its support for the Turkey-deal and promised more aid to host countries in the region – to be paid from the development budget.⁵³

The eventual election results indicate that the PvdA failed to regain the trust of disappointed voters. In the end, the party obtained a mere 5,7 percent of the votes – a loss of more than 19% that decimated the PvdA faction from 38 to 9 MPs. Significantly, the decline of the PvdA created only limited opportunities for other parties on the left. GroenLinks was one of the winners of the parliamentary elections, and saw its parliamentary faction grow from 4 to 14 seats (or 9,1 percent of the votes). Yet the PvdA's main contender in 2012, the SP, could not capitalize on the PvdA's downfall - it even lost one seat (now 14). Together, these parties now hold 37 seats; less than the PvdA on its own before the March 2017 elections. This image of declining support for (center-)left politics is not altered by the success of the Partij van de Dieren (Animal Party), a party with a focus on animal welfare that largely supports a left agenda,⁵⁴ and which went from 2 to 5 seats. The main problem for the left as a whole thus remains the swing of voters to the right, a trend that in the Netherlands unfortunately does not seem to have ended yet.

⁵⁰ PvdA, “Een Verbonden Samenleving. Verkiezingsprogramma 2017”, p. 9.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵² Ibid., p. 26. The PvdA however voted in favor of the provisional ratification of CETA, citing the many improvements made to the initial proposal, including the annulment of the proposed trade courts in favor of public courts, as well as a more general need to strengthen ties with democratic partners in response to current international developments, as the principle reasons. See PvdA, "Standpunten: CETA". Accessed 8 March 2017: <https://www.pvda.nl/standpunten/internationaal-defensie/ceta/>.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁴ The Partij van de Dieren is represented in the European Parliament by 1 MEP (Anja Hazekamp), and is a member of the GUE/NGL.