

WHEEL OF FORTUYN

Sylvester Hoogmoed writes from Nijmegen on the legacy of the assassinated Dutch politician's challenge to consensus politics

Pim Fortuyn has been haunting Dutch politics ever since he was murdered, on May 6th last year. Just a week after the funeral, his party, the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) won 26 of the 150 parliamentary seats at the national elections. But Fortuyn's followers had only one thing in common: they were all mavericks, just like Pim himself. Five months later, the Fortuyn party imploded completely. Two squabbling LPF-ministers were forced to step down. Consequently the Balkenende government fell and called a new election on January 22nd; the LPF was sanctioned for its impotence, losing most of its seats.

But that is not really the end of the story. The spirit of Pim Fortuyn survives. His influence during the election campaigns was twofold. Firstly, less embarrassed attention was paid to the immigration issue than would have been possible in previous years. Secondly, Dutch politics has become more flamboyant, and decidedly less genteel.

In the international press, Pim Fortuyn was often described as an anti-immigration extremist. One who was perhaps not entirely comparable with Haider and Le Pen, but who was nevertheless mentioned in the same breath. Many Dutchmen accepted this comparison, especially after a controversial interview with *de Volkskrant*, in which Fortuyn said: "I don't want to welcome any more immigrants. We have a full country." However, Fortuyn was far from a vulgar xenophobe. His running mate on his party list was a Cape Verdean immigrant. While calling for closed borders, Fortuyn also stressed the need for integration, and the emancipation of immigrant women. Shortly before he was murdered, he even called for a general pardon for all the illegal immigrants living in the Netherlands. It has also been noted that the homosexual Fortuyn more than once half-mockingly said how much he appreciated the company of beautiful Moroccan boys...

Instead of condemning immigration per se, Fortuyn in particular sought to warn against the threat intolerant islamist groups of immigrants pose to the principles of European civil society. A homosexual himself, Fortuyn identified the general issue raised by homophobic fundamentalist islamists. "It's a backward culture," he stated in the *Volkskrant*-interview.

For a long time it was hardly considered decent to discuss such a threat in the Netherlands, where 'political correctness' ruled. Pim Fortuyn ignored the taboo on discussing this subject. However, he was not the first to do so. The present European commissioner Frits Bolkestein paved the way during the 1990s, when he was the leader of the rightwing liberal VVD.

Then, the growth of immigration to the Netherlands was explosive, whereas the numbers have been falling back dramatically during the past few years. Immigration policies in the Netherlands have become so restricted that today it is hardly possible to hold up the image of Holland as a hospitable country. However, Fortuyn was right to draw attention to the issue of the integration of immigrants already living in the Netherlands. Here governmental policies have not been successful.

Yet, Fortuyn's significance lies not primarily in his message, important as it may have been, in some respects. More important is the way in which he delivered it. Charming, arrogant and narcissist, Fortuyn in no time became a media-favourite, being so different from the grey and timid leaders of the other parties. Because of his flamboyant manner, and striking appearance - totally bald, a tip-top dresser, chauffeured in a Bentley, holding two lapdogs that became his mascots. But also because of his un-Dutch habit of ventilating outspoken opinions. Fortuyn's image enabled him to promote not only debate about immigration and Islam, also about many other matters, like the morbid growth of Dutch bureaucracy.

Fortuyn's style helped him to deliver an almost mortal blow to the much-acclaimed 'Dutch Model', which the Dutch themselves call the 'Polder Model'. Since the middle of the 1990s Holland's economy had been booming. Many attributed this success to the Dutch habit of resolving differences round the table. Consultation, cooperation and consensus were the keywords, especially between the employers and trade unions, but also within the government, since the Labour party formed a coalition with the rightwing liberals in 1994. This Dutch Model attracted international attention and had prominent admirers such as Chancellor Schröder and President Clinton.

However, these admirers may have failed to notice something important. In the extremely consensual Dutch Model open debate lost out completely. The range of opinion expressed by the political class became cosily restricted. In consequence the electorate gradually became responsive to outspoken populists. Pim Fortuyn rode that wave. If he wasn't an outright populist, he certainly gave the impression of being one, having no coherent political program, frequently changing opinions and preferring speeches full of one-liners to deeper discussion.

Some say Fortuyn's political success was mainly due to the media hype he created. While the other party leaders were busy visiting small groups of potential voters in all parts of the country, Fortuyn concentrated on giving interviews.

More than symbolically, he was shot at the Media Park in Hilversum, just after an interview on Radio 3, the national pop station. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelen, Fortuyn with his soundbites put a spell on his followers, it seems. His

astonishing success came like a bolt from the blue. According to a report of the prestigious research institute SCP, published in June 2002, the Dutch on average felt safe in their country, and there was no lack of social cohesion. In a survey of the Netherlands, published three days before the murder of Fortuyn, The Economist stated that the Dutch were consummate pragmatists, and that their country was a fine place to be. The Dutch, according to The Economist, had done well during the last decade, both economically and in tackling some of the more vexing social issues. Politically for a long time The Netherlands made the impression of being a very stable nation. Early 2002, just a few months before the elections, the election polls still indicated anything but a landslide. But then, suddenly Fortuyn appeared, and needed only a few weeks to change the political scenery completely (because of rather hysterical media hype, one is tempted to say).

Still, Fortuyn would never have succeeded, had it not been for the extreme dullness of his adversaries. The leaders of the big parties made the impression of having participation in a new administration of caretakers as their one and only ideal. After years of consensus politics many voters yearned for some discussion, and political spectacle.

Since the elections in May last year, nearly all the Dutch political leaders have stepped down and been replaced by more colourful and outspoken personalities. They have been discussing more openly the fundamental problems of Dutch society, like the immigration issue. In the spirit of Pim Fortuyn, one may say.

The significance of Fortuyn's brief political adventure goes beyond the Netherlands, however.



First because he signalled the paradox facing all people whose ideals are libertarianism, tolerance and open-mindedness. What are we to do when intolerant, fundamentalist sub-communities take advantage of the freedom open societies offer, and start to threaten freedom and open(-minded)ness? Answering this question will provide perhaps the major challenge for European libertarianism during the coming decade.

Secondly, Fortuyn's electoral success was another indication that consensual political systems can pave the way for populism. As in Austria, where Haider's rise was parasitic on decades of socialist-conservative coalition governments. Similarly, in France Le Pen got his biggest electoral success after years of left-right cohabitation. Trying to solve problems through consultation and cooperation while defusing public debate, makes a political class look self-serving. Apparently, there is an end to the amount of depolarisation a democracy can swallow.