

A fish rots from the head down, Mark Rutte et al

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A fish rots from the head down, and I'm not referring to the Scottish catch that cannot get into the EU these days, although I'm sure it applies as well. Rather, it's what the acting Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, has in common with fellow right-wing enablers such as Boris Johnson and his Brexiteers, most of the US Republican leadership and a slew of other conservative political opportunists.

The Dutch Prime Minister might seem like an odd duck in this rogue's gallery but he's not that far removed both in tactics and ideology from the rest. Last week, he took the ostensibly responsible step to resign his post, and by extension let his cabinet fall, ahead of a vote of no confidence in Parliament over a ruinous benefits scandal overseen by the tax authority in the Netherlands.

The Dutch and taxes. You might wonder whether this is the same tax regime that has allowed the Netherlands to find all kinds of creative ways to help large companies and wealthy individuals to evade taxes? Ah, no, not that kind of taxes, where the real interesting money is. No, we're talking about a damaging witch hunt against some of the poorest, most vulnerable members of society over what can be considered paltry change for most of Mr. Rutte's friends, over what turned out to be mostly either small technical oversights or wholly imaginary missteps. It didn't actually involve taxes at all, rather the tax authority acting as overseer of childcare payments. And, oh yes, it included racial profiling. Plus, there's reason to believe it extends into other benefits besides childcare.

Why am I connecting this seemingly local and somewhat esoteric sounding scandal to wider hard-conservative trends, such as the British hostile environment policy and Brexit, or let's say storming the US Capitol? Because it's a product of the same callous calculation

that many previously respectable conservative parties and movements have made over the past several decades.

Like many of his fellow conservative leaders, Mr Rutte and his VVD party have felt the chill winds of right-wing fanaticism and rather than taking a stand, like, say, Germany's Angela Merkel, he has chosen time and time again to bend rightward, accommodate the extremists and take electoral advantage of somehow being the only 'responsible' choice on the right. Take, for example, the run-up to the last elections in 2017, when he published a notorious open letter in which he told migrants who didn't abide by some vaguely defined Dutch norms, to leave: Behave or go away. In the final tally, his VVD successfully beat off a challenge by the anti-immigrant and anti-Islam PVV of Geert Wilders to remain the largest party.

It is a tactic seen time and time again, centre-right parties not just outflanking extremists on the right but actively picking up that ball and running with it. Nothing new there, indeed. But what the Dutch child care benefit witch hunt shows, along with UK affairs such as the hostile environment policy and in the US the storming of the Capitol, is that outspoken right-wing policies combined with harsh nationalistic, socially divisive rhetoric create an atmosphere in which people, be they Dutch tax authority employees, Home Office civil servants or the mob, feel they can behave with impunity towards targeted subgroups.

I've come across impunity before, from Israeli soldiers and settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories, among others. In purported democracies, it's always overwhelmingly institutional, allowed and abetted by a chain of command, justified by a large enough slice of society and ultimately sanctioned by a vision articulated at the highest political level.

The creation of a social and political environment in which enough people can feel it's alright to hound law abiding citizens in the name of fighting fraud, or for that matter threaten innocent people with expulsion in the name of a hostile environment immigration policy, or that they can violently overturn legitimate election results, is a common outflow of the behaviour and rhetoric of calculating conservative leaders. They have helped shape an atmosphere over decades, going back at least to the 1990's, in which the means justify

the end – the means being the adoption of extremist ideas and expressions, and the end being power for the right.

Not that this is new. Since WWII alone we've had divisive right-wing onslaughts such as McCarthyism and "Rivers of blood" immigration rhetoric, to say nothing of Voodoo economics and small government fallacies. What has made a comeback is the willingness to adopt and voice ideas that were once so far outside the mainstream consensus that they would have been considered fringe, while managing to remain inside that mainstream, effectively moving the whole of society to the right. We're all like a frog in a pot of slowly warming water stoked by an ever hotter right-wing fire.

Another thing Mr Rutte has in common with his fellow hard-conservative leaders is a 'who, me?' attitude to personal accountability. While the head of the left of centre Labour party resigned as leader over his role at the time – the affair played out partly while he was minister of Social Affairs, Mr Rutte in all likelihood will return at the head of another coalition after elections that were scheduled anyway for March.

He's staying on as caretaker Prime Minister until then, so effectively nothing changes. During the press conference in which he announced his government's fall, his justification for remaining as party leader and candidate to lead the next government, was that as Prime Minister, he had no direct involvement in the implementation of policy, 'only' overall responsibility as PM. That conveniently leaves out the more than a decade that he's been in power, and longer as party leader, shaping the atmosphere in which this could happen.

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