

Beware the Dutch normal

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Like almost every other hot-button issue, Europe has been made secondary by corona in the Dutch election campaign that is now drawing to a close. In these first major European post-full-Brexit elections, the only clear message on Nexit is that it's become even more associated with the loony fringe. Convinced that George Soros and Bill Gates are injecting 5G chips through a vaccine against a disease that's made up to bring about world domination? Then you're likely also against the EU.

This is not fanciful conjecture: one opinion poll found that more than half of potential voters for one of the two far-right parties that advocate Nexit believe in corona conspiracies. The link between opposition to the EU, opposing corona measures and agitating for so-called freedom is frequently made by leading figures of parts of the extreme right, particularly the Forum for Democracy party, FvD, and its leader, the increasingly Trumpian Thierry Baudet. And he's set to significantly increase his still limited representation in parliament.

Because of corona, elections have been spread out over three days and the Dutch are starting to vote as this blog goes up so it's a bit dicey to make predictions. But it would be a major surprise if the current right-of-centre, run-of-the-mill, three-term Prime Minister Mark Rutte will not once again be asked to lead a coalition. Amid all the uncertainty of the corona-crisis, Mr Rutte appears to offer at least a modicum of stability, continuity and, as he likes to point out frequently, 'normalcy'.

Many a Dutch commentator nowadays reflexively jumps into a defensive crouch when foreign media mention how normal Mr Rutte has remained by pointing out he rides his bike to work. And Mr Rutte may have over-used his appeal to normalcy, and his catchphrase 'act normal, man' whether employed against right-wing anti-migrant, and anti-EU, Geert Wilders of the Party for Freedom, PVV, or indeed

against migrants, whom he challenged in 2017 'to act normal or leave'. Clearly, the Rutte normal is a very specific one, of which he's the final arbiter in the name of the supposedly normal majority. Yet, much Dutch behaviour in recent years, and particularly during the corona crisis, has been decidedly abnormal.

The level of violence in the Netherlands against corona measures and facilities, even against medical personnel and law enforcement, has been higher than anywhere else in Europe. The start of a curfew in January led to three nights of riots. Test centres have been attacked and fire-bombed, with the most recent incident just at the beginning of March. Bus drivers have been beaten up for asking passengers to mask up and just days ago a police officer was stabbed in the face when trying to enforce a curfew. Similar incidents happen in isolation in other countries but taken together, it's quite staggering. This is even without the regular and ongoing demonstrations against the corona measures, where distancing guidelines are ignored, and mass gatherings on sunny days that lead to parks having to be closed.

It's not the Dutch government's certainly confused and badly communicated corona response that is to blame. If that were the case, the UK would have been burning since before Boris Johnson caught the bug last year. The Dutch are not turning in a stellar performance but deaths have been relatively low and the economy has taken less of a hit than in most other EU countries.

Maybe more could have been expected from one of the EU's wealthiest countries and the anger that simmers in large parts of the population, even among those who don't riot, may in part be caused by a sharp blow to the national self-image. If the country were really as well-organised, efficient and fair as the average Dutch person appears to believe it is, how come it didn't do better in this crisis? How come it was affected at all? Weren't the Dutch supposed to be immune from the world's upheavals and be a light unto the nations?

Whether it is a national stereotype or a bit of bluster, the Dutch often do like to lord it over their European partners when it comes to being the most reasonable, responsible and well-adjusted country in the world. This self-image has been hard to shake, even now, after several political murders in the early 2000's, flaring identitarian tensions and more than a decade of austerity. Persistent niggles,

such as being a tax-haven and lagging on many environmental issues, don't register with a large part of the electorate.

This ultimate belief in the justness of Dutch society has, according to an increasing number of critics, led to a lag in coming to terms with a colonial past as violent and brutal as any in Europe. That in turn has contributed to an inability to level the playing field for immigrants, because surely, the Dutch don't discriminate. Even after Mr Rutte and his government resigned earlier this year over a scandal in which the tax authority hounded parents for non-existent benefits fraud, with strong indications of racial profiling playing a role in many of these cases, there has been very little reckoning with discrimination in broader Dutch society.

This is not to say that the Dutch are that different from other north-western European societies. In some ways the self-image might be accurate, with the Netherlands being in the vanguard once again, albeit of societal atomisation and political fragmentation. As the corona violence may have indicated, the major Dutch pre-occupation appears to be individual, with more emphasis on personal freedoms, which indeed are a great good, than on also much needed societal solidarity.

The fact that riots broke out over corona measures says a lot about the current state of Dutch society. While in other European countries demonstrations and strikes against economic and social inequality turned violent in the recent past, think the French Gilets Jaunes, in the Netherlands people lost it over not being able to sit in a bar and step outside after 9pm for a while in order to curtail a threat to everybody's health. This self-absorption is now one of the few remaining connecting issues in a fracturing society. The infighting among the identitarian far-right as well as the atomised identity politics of the splintered left have this in common. If the Netherlands could have 17 million Prime Ministers, it would. Maybe that's why a cipher like Mark Rutte has such political longevity; enough voters can project their own aspirations on this empty outline of normalcy.

Among all the blinkered self-absorption, it should come as no surprise that the Dutch are following the UK in its quest for having its European cake and also eating it. Nexit has not figured in these elections and apart from the far-right it's not in anyone's programme but most of the

major parties have not shown Europe much love. This is not surprising, a poll from last summer shows that more than half of the Dutch think they and the country have profited from the EU. But an even larger proportion, over 60 percent, is against spreading those profits around to the hard-hit southern EU-states through the European Covid recovery fund. In the Netherlands, this is normal.