

Towards a post-corona world: Brexit and the Dutch

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In the new normal corona trumps all else, except Brexit that is. This week the resumption of talks between the EU and the UK on the future relationship were announced as if the world is not in the midst of a gigantic health emergency-cum-economic meltdown.

Who was it that said “we’ll fight the virus as if there’s no EU and fight the EU as if there’s no virus”? I’m sure someone did.

Some poor, deluded souls speculated that surely, given the grave economic consequences of the corona-crisis, the final phase of Brexit would at least have to be postponed. Such wishful thinking is not an isolated case, no pun intended. Inexplicably there is no shortage of people who think that the world is pulling together in this crisis, or at least communities, well, OK, at least families are pulling together, and that all this goodwill cannot be lost, we’ll have learned our lesson from the virus, right? We’ll surely build a better world? Sure.

We should take our cue from the most recent sudden crises, rather than the simmering one of climate change, that the world had to confront. What they have in common is that our responses, around the globe almost without exception, were dictated by fear. In some cases, that fear was then used to intimidate whole slews of society into economic submission.

This is what happened after the 2008 financial crisis and we call it austerity. 9/11 was another crisis whose aftermath affected large parts of the world, and again fear was used to intimidate us into the loss of freedoms, military overreach and very poor political choices, skewing the world towards the populist right.

Corona looks set to affect our world negatively in the long term in many more ways than either 9/11 or the 2008 financial crisis. Personal safety fears over an invisible enemy combine here with economic anxiety that is exacerbated by the recent bout of austerity.

We can already see the way in which things are going: more police powers to stop and question people during lockdown, invasive tracking apps that end privacy, rescue packages for large corporations while in many countries the self-employed and sectors such as small businesses and culture are left largely to their own devices.

The threat of an economic crisis worse than the Great Depression may well be the opportunity some ideologues have been waiting for to end the welfare state once and for all. International cooperation whether in the EU or globally, is by the looks of it set to be one of the victims too. Just look at Trump and the WHO, or the Dutch lack of solidarity in the EU.

Actually, let's take a closer look at the Netherlands, my own country. Here's another economically right-wing government that is facing elections next year. It's defending its right flank against a gaggle of Eurosceptics and has no meaningful challenge from the left. The Dutch are expected to be one of the big economic losers both from Brexit and from the corona-crisis.

That may also explain the government's determination, despite being woefully underprepared and experiencing an appalling death toll, not to go for a full lockdown. Most shops have been allowed to stay open in the Netherlands throughout.

Here is a clear divergence within the EU and even with the UK. The Dutch are not shy about giving more weight to economic considerations than some other countries. It helps that the data on corona is so fuzzy, who's to say what's right?

Other ways in which the Dutch point the way, is the near-total disregard for the self-employed who are not covered for loss of work, either through lack of it or illness. Where in the UK an outcry at the outset saw the government offer parity with salaried workers, in the Netherlands the multitudes of self-employed are lucky if they are

allowed to receive a minimal dole payment. And healthcare, by the way, is not free either in the Netherlands. The cheapest policies cost over €100/month and even then we pay for the first €385 of tests and treatments each year.

The Dutch have been one of the most consistent austerity-minded countries in the EU over the past decade, using Eurozone budget rules as an excuse to squeeze ever more money out of the welfare state, even though money has been cheap for years.

They helped large corporations dodge taxes in other countries by providing a base for tax evasion. Their miserly attitude and lack of solidarity both domestically and towards their EU partners, shows what can be expected in a post-corona world.

Corona might have a special resonance in the Netherlands. The Dutch have a predilection for using diseases when cursing. One of the most colourful ones is wishing someone cancer-typhus-tbc-pox-and-pest (krijg de kanker-tyfus-tering-pokken-pest), a simpler yet effective one is calling someone a cholera-sufferer (klereleier).