

Surprise in Dutch elections

Back to the centre Anti-European parties fare badly

by Roel Janssen

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The Netherlands has firmly re-established itself at the centre of European and euro politics with a political shift towards the middle-ground in yesterday's parliamentary elections. Coupled with a less complicated-than-expected Yes to the European Stability Mechanism in yesterday's German constitutional court ruling, this reasserts positive momentum behind various euro rescue packages.

Against expectations, the Dutch elections resulted in victory for the conservative VVD party of incumbent prime minister Mark Rutte, which registered its best-ever result, as well as the spectacular return of the social democratic Labour Party. Anti-European parties on the radical left and right did less well than expected or suffered losses.

Overall, the Netherlands seems to have turned the corner after 10 years of political drift since the murder of populist maverick Pim Fortuyn in 2002. Despite the economic crisis the elections have not resulted in strengthening of anti-European sentiment but have seen a shift towards political stability, adding to efforts to solve the euro crisis.

With 41 seats, the VVD will be the largest political grouping in the 150-seat House of Representatives, closely followed by the Labour party with 39 seats.

Only a month ago the Socialist party of Emile Roemer seemed likely to become the largest party in parliament, opening the perspective that a eurosceptic socialist who blames the banks for the crisis might lead one of the few remaining triple-A countries in the euro area. However, Roemer disappointed in the election campaign and the Socialists failed to rise to expectations.

Geert Wilders, maverick leader of the right-wing nationalistic Freedom Party, who campaigned fiercely against the euro, lost badly. Earlier this year Wilders repealed his support for the minority government of conservatives and Christian Democrats. His attacks on Dutch support for the euro rescue packages and calls for the Netherlands to leave the European Union, however, were dismissed by the electorate.

With Wilders' populist appeal on the wane, Rutte moved towards traditional Dutch views on Europe during the election campaign. He defended his track record in Brussels and stressed that the Netherlands worked closely with Finland and Germany to ensure fiscal discipline.

Though rejecting a third rescue package for Greece, he emphasised the Netherlands' interest in keeping the euro together. Like Chancellor Angela Merkel, he supports the European Central Bank's plan to make bond purchases to support beleaguered countries, provided they meet economic conditions.

The biggest surprise came from Diederik Samsom, newly-appointed Labour leader, a nuclear physicist by training and former Greenpeace activist. He turned a widely-predicted disastrous showing into a near-victory. With a moderate, pro-European campaign he secured a closely-contested second place. Though Rutte and Samsom fought a fierce campaign and they differ on issues like the speed of fiscal consolidation, their parties seem likely to form a coalition. Together, they have a small majority. It may well be that a smaller third party will join the next government, like in the 1990s when prime minister Wim Kok led two coalition governments of conservatives, liberals and social democrats.