

## **EU Referendum Tests the Dutch Political Establishment**

Ben Crum, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (4 May 2005)

The Netherlands is traditionally counted among the EU member states most dedicated to the integration project. It was one of the founding members of the European Union. It presided over the groundbreaking European negotiations that led to the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam. Together with its Benelux partners, it has traditionally been associated with pleas for a more encompassing integration process, strong supranational institutions (European Parliament and European Commission) and the scrapping of national vetoes in European decision-making. The most recent Eurobarometer survey puts support for EU membership in the Netherlands at 75%, a level that is surpassed only in Luxembourg and in Ireland.

Still, the Dutch referendum on the EU Constitution scheduled for 1 June appears anything but a done deal. Opinion polls give different indications: while the survey commissioned by the government puts the 'Ja' camp in a solid, but declining, lead of 10-20 percentage points, others suggest a very close call between the 'Ja' and 'Nee' camps with the latter even slightly ahead.<sup>1</sup> All confirm, however, that many Dutch citizens feel poorly informed about the EU Constitution and that at least one-third of them are still undecided. This large group becomes of particular importance given that few observers expect the turnout level to exceed the 39.9% that was recorded in last June's EP elections.

While a substantial part of the Dutch electorate thus remains positively inclined towards Europe, there also appears considerable ground for rather eurosceptic positions. The emergence of the latter sentiment has to be seen within a wider context. A first rallying point of anti-EU sentiment in the Netherlands was the net contributor debate in the run up to the multi-annual financial agreement of Berlin in 2000, which in fact was to a considerable extent provoked by the position of the government and its Finance Minister Gerrit Zalm (who is still in office, albeit in a rather different government). Subsequently, the European decisions to adopt the euro and to carry through with the 2004 enlargement have had a rather mixed reception in the Netherlands. It was not so much straightforward opposition to these decisions, but rather the feeling that there was no way that popular reservations could effectively be brought to bear upon them that fuelled popular resentment. Thus, the general perception created was that these decisions were imposed by Brussels upon the Netherlands, rather than that they were arrived at with the active and constructive participation of Dutch representatives. The uneasy handling of the Iraq crisis and the recent wrangling over the Stability and Growth Pact further confirmed the impression that, from its position as original insider, the Netherlands has come to be of marginal influence in the new, enlarged European Union.

Another background factor that has provided fertile ground for the articulation of eurosceptic sentiments in the Netherlands is a widespread disenchantment with the political establishment. Most notably, this disenchantment came to the fore in the 2002 national elections when the List Pim Fortuyn secured a share of 17% of the total vote. Fortuyn very much positioned himself in opposition against the established political parties and played upon xenophobic tendencies, including also a rather critical stance towards European cooperation. After Fortuyn's assassination, a plethora of initiatives are competing for the political ground that he has left behind. At the same time, on the left side of the political spectrum, a similar anti-establishment and anti-EU ticket has since 1994 allowed the Socialist Party to steadily expand its presence to 6% of the Parliament. Since all main political parties in the

present referendum campaign – from the Greens on the left to the Liberal-Conservatives (VVD) on the right – are campaigning in favour of the EU Constitution, the referendum is liable to be turned into an occasion to register a protest vote by the politically disenchanted.

Thus, the Dutch referendum on the EU Constitution appears as a major test of the ability of Dutch politicians to convince the electorate that Dutch interests can effectively be represented within a deeper and enlarged Union. It is striking, however, that most of them seem rather reluctant to take up this challenge in the face of so little public enthusiasm. So far the government's main message has been that the real campaign has yet to start. It has called upon social groups to actively promote their support for the Constitution, but the statements by Prime Minister Balkenende and his Secretary of State for European Affairs, Atzo Nicolai, convey more of a sense of duty than genuine enthusiasm. Opposition leader Wouter Bos used his May 1<sup>st</sup> speech to call for a 'Ja' but pollsters were quick to register that this cost him more supporters than he gained.

The debate on the EU Constitution has thus been slow in getting off the ground. Media are clearly struggling to get a grip on the document and to frame the debate. Notably, a considerable number of interventions so far have not addressed the Constitution itself, but rather question the appropriateness of a referendum as an instrument in the Dutch polder-democracy: would not it have been better to leave this complex issue to political professionals? In this context it is important to note that the Dutch referendum was not initiated by the government but by the Parliament and was actually opposed by the government's senior party, the Christian-Democrats (CDA). Moreover, the referendum only has a consultative status, although most parties, including the CDA, have already indicated that they will respect the outcome of the referendum if at least a minimum turnout of 30% is secured.

Despite its late start, the public debate gradually seems to be converging on the key question whether Brussels will come to rule The Hague or whether there remain sufficient controls by which Dutch interests can effectively be protected within the Union? Opponents of the EU Constitution claim that the Constitution is likely to establish the EU as a superstate and zoom in on the concept of a 'Constitution', on the codification of the principle of the primacy of EU law and on the limited power of national parliaments to prevent breaches of subsidiarity. Behind these arguments looms the fear that guarantees are lacking to prevent Brussels from intruding upon distinctive Dutch interests: enlargement has led to a reduction of the share of the Netherlands in the Council and the European Parliament, and the new controls that are adduced by the Constitution (most notably, the so-called 'early warning system') lack teeth. Eventually these arguments about the marginalisation of Dutch influence can of course be linked to the envisaged EU accession of Turkey. And while some politicians, like the former Liberal-Conservative Geert Wilders, may be keen to claim that a vote against the Constitution is a vote against Turkish EU membership, so far the two issues tend to remain rather separated in the public debate.

Clearly then the fight to get the voter to the polling booth and to get her vote one way or the other will only be decided in the final weeks, if not the final days, leading up to the referendum. In the end the deeply ingrained loyalty to Europe may well prevail among the majority of the Dutch electorate. Still, the 'Ja' side is liable to remain too passive and defensive, thus allowing the 'Nee' side(s) to turn the referendum into a vehicle for mobilising popular dissatisfaction with The Hague and Brussels. The other threat to the Dutch permissive consensus is beyond the politicians' control, as it comes from France. The impact of the outcome of the French referendum on the Constitution that is scheduled only three days before the Dutch referendum is hard to predict, but a 'Oui' result will

definitely give a boost to the 'Ja' campaign. On the other hand, however, a French 'Non' might well deal a fatal blow to the traditional loyalty of the Dutch to Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> The main sources relied upon here are the survey results of MarketResponse, commissioned by the Dutch government, of Interview/NSS, commissioned by the current affairs television program NOVA, and of [www.peil.nl](http://www.peil.nl), an online polling panel directed by Maurice de Hond, the Netherlands' best-known polling entrepreneur.