

Wanted: Bearers of Hope



Famous for their Dutch spirit of commerce and broad outlook, the Dutch merchants crossed the world in the Golden Age looking for new foreign connections. Almost four centuries later, globalization is a process tangible in every Dutch living room. But instead of giving the people of today the glance of discovering the whole world, the intangibility and the lack of certainty within the process make the Netherlands an inward-looking country. World wide economic cooperations are possible now, enrichment of people of all continents is attainable with only one click.

But the globalization also made old certainties disappear. What to think of the big changeability in the business world with splitting ups, outsourcing and reorganizations? New threats have arisen. The cross-border character of the activities makes them less tangible for the national governments. Government and business world seem to communicate hardly with each other. The political landscape has become fragmented and instable. The centre parties (VVD, PvdA, CDA, D66 and Groen Links) are not able to give clear answers anymore. The extreme parties at the left and the right (SP and PVV) drained off the electorate from the middle, although they do not offer realistic solutions. How can we interpret this political instability economically? And where can we find a way out?

Looking at society we see the middle class being afraid and insecure. It feels itself threat-

ened and not protected by the political and economical elite – whereas the lower classes still do have much security of the welfare state and the higher classes can protect themselves at their strong positions on the labour market. The tax increases do hit the middle class most. They do not accept that anymore. The political and economical elite fail to win the trust of this class. So that they start to mutiny, what we see in several western democracies.

A lack of trust and a surplus of fear within society are fatal for the social cohesion. People seem to be satisfied about their own lives but unsatisfied and even worried about the Dutch society and politics (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2009). Because the worries of the people are not on the political agenda, dissatisfaction and unrest emerge. Politicians do not seem to know what is going on in the street and lack good stories. The economic elite created the growth of profound distrust of them even more by themselves: by living in an abstract world that was dominated by money and information, an own cosmopolitan culture with the footloose adage: money without any link with and interest in the worries of the people around them.

The political elite gives too less direction to the largest worries of people: the challenge of the multicultural society, the sharp rise in the ageing population and the question if we can afford the actual welfare state, and the threatening climate problems. People react conservatively and reach for existing certainties. Disorder and uncertainty in society make people yearn for

structure and clarity. That can be found in stereotypes, pigeon-holing someone creates clarity.

The extreme political parties, both at the left and the right side, do have simple, clear solutions for social problems. The middle class turns to these extremes of the political landscape, although that is opposed to their self-interest.

What is needed to prevent these stereotypes? To speak with the sociologist Max Weber we need 'Hoffnungsträger', leaders who can give the citizen direction and hope. Hope can lead people to a common perspective bigger than themselves and can stimulate unselfish behaviour. Bearers of hope can interpret the current upheaval, dare to name problems honestly and put a meaning on the anxiety by offering meanings with perspective. When society asks for that kind of perspective, it is the responsibility of the elite to show social engagement and to voice the intuitions and the fear of the people with great perspectives. Universities have the chance to train these future bearers of hope well. And when they additionally increase their relevance for city and environment, they will boost the cohesion and certainty in society too.

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