

A PEOPLE'S PARTY REINVENTED?

THE DUTCH CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS

Olaf Wientzek

As the country's largest people's party, the Dutch Christian Democrats (Christen Democratisch Appèl, CDA) have played a decisive role in shaping the country's history since World War II. The 2010 and 2012 parliamentary elections probably constituted the most serious crisis in the party's history. It has since made efforts to reform in terms of its program, structure and personnel. During the local and European elections in May, the party succeeded in curbing the downward trend for the time being. However, it is facing huge obstacles in its endeavour to regain its former strength for good. Other Christian democratic parties in Europe are facing similar challenges and may do well to take some lessons from the CDA's development over the last few years.



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HISTORY

For a long time, Dutch society was characterised by the so-called pillarisation along ideological lines. In a system of that type, groups defined by their religion and social status are living quite strongly segregated lives, each in its own cosmos with its own social organisations (political parties, associations, schools, health insurance institutions, etc.). Everyday life mainly unfolds within each pillar. Christians, socialists and liberals formed the three pillars of the Dutch political system. The "Christian pillar" itself was divided into a Catholic and a Protestant pillar. Christian democratic parties represented a fundamental component of the Dutch party system. The present-day Christian democratic party of the Netherlands, the Christen-Democratisch Appèl (Christian-Democratic Appeal) is a relatively young party, which was formed from three denominational parties in 1980. The Katholieke Volkspartij (KVP, Catholic), the Anti-Revolutionaire Partij (ARP, Protestant) and the Christelijk-Historische

Unie (CHU, Protestant) were all established political forces. A merger of these three parties seemed unrealistic until the 1950s, as the sectarian divide was more pronounced than in Germany because of the pillarisation of society. However, in response to a stronger trend towards secularisation in Dutch society and the weakening of the pillarisation that this entailed, efforts to foster closer cooperation between these forces began in 1967. But it would take another 13 years until the joint Christian democratic party, the CDA, was inaugurated. The three parties entered parliamentary elections together in 1977 for the first time, and the party itself was formed officially in 1980.¹

The merger was encouraged by the fact that all three parties had already been collaborating as members of the European People's Party (EPP) since the 1970s. The rapid consolidation of the CDA after its foundation was furthered by the good early results achieved by the alliance under the Prime Ministers Dries van Agt (1977 to 1982) and Ruud Lubbers (1982 to 1994). In each of the four elections during the 1980s, the Christian Democrats attracted some 30 per cent of the votes (in 1989 even 35.3 per cent), thereby establishing themselves as a people's party.

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The CDA suffered its first crisis in 1994. After the party had been in power for 17 years, its support dropped to 22.2 per cent of the votes. Its waning popularity was a clear sign of a desire for change in the Netherlands; also, as the party in power, it had lost touch with its members and the country's citizens to some extent. At the same time, the Liberals and Social Democrats forged a center-right coalition against the CDA under Prime Minister Wim Kok (Partij van de Arbeid, PvdA), which kept the party out of government for the next eight years. Initially, the Christian Democrats did not manage their opposition party role well, and in the 1998 elections, they dropped below the twenty per cent mark for the first time. They did, however, make use of this time to revitalise the party in terms of its program and personnel.

1 | Hans-Martien ten Napel, "‘Een wet mag de zedelijke draagkracht van het volk niet te boven gaan’. De opstelling van het CDA-in-wording in het parlement", in: Gerrit Voerman (ed.), *De conjunctuur van de macht. Het Christen Democratisch Appèl 1980-2010*, Groningen, 2011.

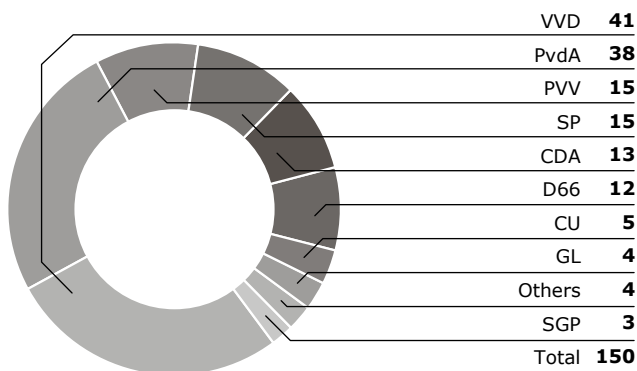
Table 1

**Election results at Netherlands parliamentary elections
2006 to 2012 (in per cent)**

Party	2006	2010	2012
Christen Democratisch Appèl (CDA)	26.51	13.61	8.51
Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)	21.19	19.63	24.84
Socialistische Partij (SP)	16.58	9.82	9.65
Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)	14.67	20.49	26.58
Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	5.89	15.45	10.08
GroenLinks (GL)	4.60	6.67	2.33
Democraten 66 (D66)	n.a.	6.95	8.03
Others	10.56	7.38	9.98

Sources: Data 2006: "Tweede-Kamerverkiezingen – 22 november 2006", <http://nlverkiezingen.com/TK2006.html> (accessed 3 Jul 2014). Data 2010 and 2012: Kiesraad, "Bijlage Nieuwsbericht 17 september 2012", Sep 2012, <http://kiesraad.nl/sites/default/files/BIJLAGE%20bij%20nieuwsbericht%20uitslag%20TK2012.pdf> (accessed 3 Jul 2014).

Fig. 1

Allocation of seats after the 2012 election


Source: Kiesraad, "Bijlage Nieuwsbericht 17 september 2012", Sep 2012, <http://kiesraad.nl/sites/default/files/BIJLAGE%20bij%20nieuwsbericht%20uitslag%20TK2012.pdf> (accessed 24 Jun 2014).

After eight years of left-liberal coalition, the CDA succeeded in staging a comeback in 2002 under its new party chairman Jan Peter Balkenende, who held the post of head of government until 2010 in four different coalitions. While the party did not entirely regain the level of voter support it enjoyed in the 1980s, it achieved respectable results in the three elections of 2002, 2003 and 2007, ranging between approximately 25 and 29 per cent. These were eventful years in government. In 2002, the CDA went into coalition with the right-wing populists of the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF), which had made it into Parliament from a standing start with 17 per cent. This government alliance represented a breach of taboo in Dutch politics. One good thing that came out of the LPF's participation in government, however, was that it was soon debunked. In the 2003 elections, called after the rapid fall of the government, the LPF had already shrunk into a minor party (5.6 per cent). The CDA, for its part, weathered further governmental crises and the ensuing elections unscathed. At the same time, it succeeded in attracting voters from outside its core following, which consisted of people with a Christian outlook. The Christian Democrats won over some Muslim voters, and two of its parliamentary representatives were, in fact, Muslims. During those years, some eleven to thirteen per cent of voters with no religious affiliation voted for the CDA.



Jan Peter Balkenende (center) at the EPP Summit in 2010: The former CDA party leader was Prime Minister in four different coalitions between 2002 and 2010. | Source: EPP, flickr ©.

Table 2

Election Results of the CDA since 1989 (in per cent)

	1989	1990	1991	1994	1995	1998	1999	2002	2003
Elections to the Tweede Kamer	35.3			22.2		18.3		27.9	28.6
European election	34.6			30.8			26.9		
Local council elections		29.0		21.6		20.4		20.3	
provincial elections			32.7		22.9		24.4		28.0

	2004	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2014
Elections to the Tweede Kamer		26.5			13.6		8.5	
European election	24.4			20.1				15.2
Local council elections		16.9			14.8			14.3
Provincial elections			25.0			14.1		

Source: Kiesraad, "Databank Verkiezingsuitslagen",
<http://verkiezingsuitslagen.nl> (accessed 7 Jul 2014).

Despite its short history, the party is well rooted in the population at a local level, partly because it was able to build on the structures put in place by its three predecessor parties. With close to 57,000 members, the CDA is still one of the strongest parties in the Netherlands in terms of membership. It is considered a people's party within the political establishment and has the image of a *bestuurderspartij*, a party with expertise in administration and government, ready to take on political responsibility at any time. It was also perceived as a party of the political center, which stood for solid economic management, was a consistently reliable coalition partner prepared to make compromises and therefore a perfect manifestation of the consensual political system of the Netherlands. One further key characteristic was its strong commitment to Europe; it was considered the Europe-party of the country for a long time. Dutch Christian Democrats have played a significant role in the European integration process since its inception. They have also represented an important force in the European People's Party. The CDA was a driving force in

the formation of the EPP and its parliamentary group in the European Parliament and had a hand in shaping its program. The CDA and its Scientific Institute under former Chairman Jos van Gennip were instrumental in expediting the drafting of the Basic Programme of Athens in the early 1990s.²

THE CRISIS OF THE CDA FROM 2010

The parliamentary elections to the Tweede Kamer (Second Chamber) of 2010 brought an unexpectedly harsh defeat for the party; it lost half its votes and seats, its proportion of votes dropping to 13.6 per cent (21 seats). This downturn was not entirely unexpected. The CDA had already lost a surprising number of votes in the local elections

in March of the same year.³ Prime Minister

In spite of the election defeat in 2010, the Christian Democrats built a government coalition with the right-wing liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy and the Party for Freedom of Geert Wilders.

and party chairman Balkenende resigned and handed the party leadership to former Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen, who favoured a conservative course. In spite of the election defeat, the Christian Democrats

once again entered into a government coalition with the right-wing liberal Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, VVD) and the surprisingly strong right-wing populist Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, PVV) of Geert Wilders. The intention was to raise the party's profile in a center-right government while debunking the right-wing populists through their involvement, as had happened in 2002. In contrast to the alliance with Pim Fortuyn List in 2002, the PVV did not actively participate in the government, but entered into a so-called toleration agreement, whereby it undertook to support the government in certain policy areas to ensure a majority. The CDA and VVD in turn undertook to support a tightening of the asylum and integration policy and to tone down planned economic reforms.

2 | More about the relationship between the CDA and the EVA can be found in Steven van Hecke, *Wanneer macht voor ideologie komt: Het CDA en de Europese Volkspartij*, Groningen, 2010.

3 | Cf. Peter R. Weilemann and Olaf Wientzek, "Warnsignale für die etablierten Parteien – Die Gemeinderatswahlen in den Niederlanden", KAS Country Report, 5 Mar 2010, <http://kas.de/bruessel/de/publications/18975> (accessed 10 Jun 2014).

The manner in which the CDA entered government was highly controversial within the party. Although two-thirds of the membership had supported the course of action at a special party conference in Arnheim, there were still heated disputes taking place during the following few months. Experienced members severely criticised the course taken by the party leadership, and the party conferences frequently displayed disunity and strong differences of opinion. A change of course then took place in April 2011 subsequent to the election of the future party chair of the CDA. With the Protestant minister Ruth Peetoom winning the vote, the helm was taken by a politician highly critical of the PVV. By voting for her, members made it clear that they wanted both a different style of politics and a different direction in policy. Consequently, there soon followed the first steps towards a reorientation in terms of both program and structure. Under the leadership of the former Deputy Secretary General of the OECD, Aart Jan de Geus, the Strategisch Beraad (Strategic Council) was convened for the purpose of drafting a new party program.



A protestant minister at the forefront: In April 2011, Ruth Peetoom, here together with the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy in The Hague in 2011, became the CDA's party chair, representing a group critical toward the Party for Freedom. | Source: Dirk Hol, Council of Europe, flickr ©111111.

In the spring of 2012, the government comprising VVD, CDA and PVV disintegrated. This came at a rather bad time for the CDA, as it was in the middle of its restructuring process. The Christian Democrats paid a high price for

their collaboration with the right-wing populists and only attracted 8.5 per cent of the votes (13 seats) in the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2012. Within just six years, they had lost two-thirds of their electorate. The party fared particularly badly in the major cities, where its following had shrunk to under ten per cent almost across the board and in some places even to under five per cent (as in Amsterdam).

CAUSES OF THE PARTY CRISIS

After the 2010 election defeat, the party charged the long-time MP Léon Frissen⁴ with analysing the causes, and after the 2012 parliamentary elections, the CDA mayor Ton Rombouts submitted a similar report.⁵ All in all, the causes of the election defeat can be summarized under five headings:

1. Secularisation of Society

Over the previous 40 years, the proportion of Catholics among the Dutch population had declined from 40 to 25 per cent. In the case of the two largest Protestant Churches, there was an even more pronounced downturn from 33 to 13 per cent. Regular church attendance dropped even more significantly. This shrunk the CDA's voter base. Due to the simultaneous depillarisation and increasing individualisation of society, religious affiliations are playing a less important role these days. Having said that, some 40 to 55 per cent of Christians voted for the CDA during the first decade of the 21st century, while it was only just over a quarter in 2010 and only one-fifth in 2012. This loss of support from Christian voters cannot be explained purely by the depillarisation of society. In fact, many voters no longer perceived the party as a credible force promoting Christian values – not least because of its collaboration with the PVV in government. At

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4 | Cf. CDA, "Verder na de klap: Evaluatie en perspectief, rapport commissie Frissen", Nov 2010.

5 | Cf. CDA, *Rapport Commissie Rombouts. Om eenheid en inhoud*, 27 Oct 2012, https://cda.nl/fileadmin/CDA/Documenten/2012/Rapport_Rombouts_Om_eenheid_en_inhoud__2_.pdf (accessed 16 Jun 2014).

the same time, the Christian Democrats were not able to compensate for their losses where their traditional clientele was concerned by attracting consistent support from Muslim and non-religious voters. In 2010 and 2012, the proportion of the latter was only two and three per cent respectively. The coalition with the Party for Freedom proved highly damaging to the campaign to attract Muslim voters, which had been quite successful in the early years of the new millennium.

2. Disenchantment with the Elite and a Changing Political Culture

The reputation of being a *bestuurderspartij* became a liability for the CDA. After having run the government for eight years with various crises, the party experienced the effects of a desire for change. The fact that the political culture was moving away from a consensual political system plus a mounting disenchantment with the elite within society had consequences for the CDA. The Christian Democrats were seen as part of the Hague elite, which the citizens considered to represent the consensual political style and which had failed in the area of immigration and integration policy. The gradual decline in the pro-European and multi-cultural consensus since the end of the 1990s consequently hit the party hard. The loyalty factor has generally decreased considerably for all parties. This is evident from the volatile voter disposition, which has also affected the liberal and social democratic parties in the last 15 years. This was demonstrated clearly by the dramatic loss in popularity of right-wing liberals and social democrats within weeks of taking government in 2012.⁶

3. Lack of Constructive Debate within the Party

The report by the former MP Frissen criticised the estrangement between the grassroots and the party leadership. The people in leadership had succumbed to the “arrogance of power” and were impervious to criticism; they were seen as being too unapproachable and introverted and had

6 | Surveys showed that both governing parties lost close to half their support within just a few weeks, see also: Olaf Wientzek, “Holpriger Start der neuen niederländischen Regierung”, KAS Country Report, 16 Nov 2012, <http://kas.de/bruesse/de/publications/32772> (accessed 10 Jun 2014).

shut themselves off from the outside. The report also complains that the party had not responded promptly enough to make the necessary structural changes to match the changes taking place in society.

4. Party Disunity

To many, the Christian Democrats demonstrated disunity and unreliability. For the CDA, this impression proved to be disastrous.

While there was initially some criticism about a lack of debate within the party, the public self-evisceration of sections of the party since 2010 following the coalition with the PVV was one of the main causes of the 2012 election defeat. To many, the Christian Democrats demonstrated disunity and unreliability. For the CDA, whose perceived strengths had previously included stability and reliability, this impression proved to be disastrous.

5. Lack of a Distinct Programmatic Profile

A fifth factor relates to the weakened ideological profile of the CDA in the run-up to the 2010 elections – not least due to the period in government with varying coalition partners. Many voters and party followers were unsure about which concrete policy contents the CDA would in fact promote. By following a hard line in its immigration and integration policy during the coalition with the VVD and the PVV and by its contributions to the debate about matters of European policy the party sowed confusion among its own followers.

WAYS OUT OF THE CRISIS AND STEPS TOWARD REORIENTATION

Overall, there are four dimensions to the party's reorientation:

1. Programmatic Reorientation

In January 2012, the Strategy Council presented the new party program "kiezen en verbinden – politieke visie vanuit het radicale midden",⁷ which the Christian Democrats

7 | In English: Decide and connect – a political vision from the radical center. Accessible (in Dutch) at: CDA, "Strategisch Beraad presenteert: Kiezen en Verbinden", 20 Jan 2012, <https://cda.nl/actueel/toon/strategisch-beraad-presenteert-kiezen-en-verbinden> (accessed 10 Jun 2014).

adopted in June 2012. The title suggests that the CDA wishes to position itself in the political center. It expresses its commitment to the model of the Social Market Economy, to a positive stance towards immigration (in conjunction with an activating integration policy) and to the need for a strong Europe. One of the explicit objectives is to establish the CDA as the most important Europarty of the Netherlands. In addition, political polarisation and populist positions are denounced. This sent a significant signal, as the CDA was still in the toleration coalition with the PVV at the time, yet in part contradicted the agreement made with the right-wing populists in its party program. On the whole, the program does not represent a total U-turn, but rather in many respects a return to the party's roots and ideological core. The CDA membership welcomed it as an important guide. The media and the public, on the other hand, were more reticent in their response. They criticised that the concrete policy objectives that the Christian Democrats would pursue in their political activities were unclear. During the following two years, the Christian Democrats tried to put some flesh on the bones of their party program. In June, party leader Sybrand van Haersma Buma presented seven guiding principles for the party's future orientation.⁸ According to these principles, the CDA sees itself as an inclusive party of living together in society, of the family, a promoter of small and medium enterprises, of solid economic management and of volunteering.

At the same time, there were extensive discussions about the party's fundamental values. In 2014, the party presented an anthology dealing with the meaning of Christian Democracy, the role of social organisations and the implementation of Christian democratic principles in current politics.⁹ The debate about the party's orientation included discussions about the role of the "C". There is some disagreement within the CDA as to how vigorously the party's image should portray the "C" and some MPs argue that

8 | The seven guiding principles are: "Community rather than state", "Everybody has a task", "An honest economy", "Against hangers-on", "Family is our foundation", "Self-assured Netherlands linked to Europe", "The future of our children".

9 | Cf. Christen democratische verkenningen, *CDA Ontleed. Over de betekenis van de C, D en A*, https://cda.nl/fileadmin/Organisaties/WI/CDA_ontleed_definitief.pdf (accessed 10 Jun 2014).

stressing it excessively would frighten off urban voters and those without religious affiliation. However, dropping the “C” from the party name was never considered, partly because the associated values had served as keystone and guide in the party program.



European Elections 2014: The party's Manifesto on Europe (as of June 2013) reflects the logic of the pro-European party program and calls for stronger economic policy coordination and a strengthening of foreign and security policy. | Source: harry_nl, flickr ©①③④.

The CDA defines itself as a party of values, of the community (*samenleving*), of subsidiarity and of an inclusive society. The purpose of this definition is to differentiate itself from other forces of the (wider) political center. On the one hand, it opposes the materialism of the right-wing liberal VVD and the social democratic PvdA and thereby an overly strong marketisation of society. On the other hand, it differentiates the party from the line taken by the liberal D66, which it views as being excessively focused on the individual. Instead, the CDA sees the individual as a responsible member of a community. In its efforts to implement these principles in political practice, the CDA focuses on the areas of the economy, finance, sustainability, family, health and care. Immigration and asylum policy, which had dominated the political discourse in the Netherlands for years, have become less prominent. In concrete statements, the party instead emphasises budgetary consolidation, rejection of further tax increases and income equalisation, relief for

small and medium-sized enterprises, and consideration of the concerns of families. Contrary to what the title of the party program suggests, the party is taking a center-right course in the area of economic policy under Sybrand van Haersma Buma's leadership partly due to the realisation that the CDA lost most voters, including particularly SME entrepreneurs, to the right-wing liberal VVD in 2010 and 2012. To date, the majority of the party's following has supported this course. Party strategists of the CDA have identified traditional and modern middle-class voters as their main target audience. Both groups represent slightly more than a third of voters.

Lively discussions are taking place about the stance on Europe. The party's Manifesto on Europe, which was presented in June 2013, reflects the logic of the pro-European party program and demands, amongst other things, stronger economic policy coordination, a strengthening of foreign and security policy, the EU taking a more active role in asylum and migration policy, and a strengthening of national parliaments while retaining the European Parliament's right of initiative. However, this manifesto was a step too far particularly for the CDA group in the Second Chamber. While the program for Europe, therefore, reflects most of the guidelines of the manifesto, it is altogether more cautious in tone. When the program was adopted at the European party conference in February 2014, some more critical sections were added on the initiative of some regional associations as well as the

youth organisation Christen-Democratische Jongeren Appèl (CDJA).¹⁰ Consequently, the final version of the program argues against a federal Europe and rejects any expansion of the EU during the coming legislative period. At the same time, the program calls for EU institutions to be slimmed down and scrapped the suggestion to grant the European Parliament the right of initiative. Party representatives have made repeated public demands for a discussion about the option to renationalise competencies of the Community level. This discourse also reflects the fundamentally more Eurosceptic mood in the country. However, these

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10 | Cf. Olaf Wientzek, "Startsignal für Kommunal- und Europawahl", KAS Country Report, 13 Feb 2014, <http://kas.de/bruessel/de/publications/36866> (accessed 10 Jun 2014).

topics were pushed into the background during the last few weeks of the European election campaign. Overall the CDA still calls for an active role of the Netherlands in the European Union. It is striking to see the frequency with which the CDA emphasises the partnership with its sister parties, namely the CDU in Germany and the Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V) in Belgium. The Dutch Christian Democrats have also looked at developments in Germany for inspiration with respect to several program issues.

2. Differentiation from the PVV

By the time it published its party program at the latest, the CDA had distanced itself clearly from the right-wing populists – both in the political discourse and in its program. In its party program, the party very explicitly takes a positive stance with respect to immigration and cultural diversity (and therefore also an open attitude towards the role of Islam in public space). The CDA is also making efforts once again to be welcoming to Muslim voters.¹¹ Party leader Sybrand van Haersma Buma has stressed repeatedly that the CDA would not join a government including Geert Wilders' PVV in the future. Occasionally, the CDA even launches frontal attacks against the right-wing populists, for instance after Wilders stated that he would see to it that there would be fewer Moroccans in the Netherlands. At the same time, the Christian Democrats want to avoid giving the impression that the CDA and the parties of the political center are ganging up on the PVV. Otherwise, the CDA would add further fuel to the PVV's victimisation and anti-elite discourse. Instead, the CDA is going its own way in terms of political communication while not shying away from addressing issues that the right-wing populists focus on.

3. From Government Party to Opposition Force

Strategically, the CDA has been in an ambivalent position since it went into opposition in 2012. While it can hope to win back some voters who are disappointed by the political

11 | Cf. Werkgroep CDA & Islam, *Gedeelde waarden – moslims in het CDA* (Shared values – Muslims in the CDA), Jan 2013, https://cda.nl/fileadmin/Organisaties/Visiegroepen/Publicaties/Gedeelde_waarden_Moslims_in_het_CDA.pdf (accessed 10 Jun 2014).

activities of the PvdA-VVD coalition, the grand coalition in The Hague frequently conducts pragmatic politics, giving the CDA as a former government party little scope to exercise its opposition role. Added to this is the fact that the left-wing liberal opposition party D66 is also vying for voters from the center ground. But unlike the D66, which last exercised governmental responsibility in 2006, the CDA has yet to become accustomed to its role in opposition. A sense of responsibility and pragmatism are deeply ingrained in the party's DNA, and the party considers itself a force of balance, of compromise and of respectable administration. It has since succeeded in adopting its new role and in raising its profile. Unlike the left-wing liberals, the Christian Democrats voted against the "autumn agreement" in October 2013, an important austerity program put forward by the government. This step came as a great surprise to many observers. The reason for the rejection: in the eyes of the CDA, the package would affect the middle class disproportionately, impose excessive tax increases and encourage the erosion of income differentials. This decision was a risky manoeuvre, but was welcomed by large swathes of the voting public.

A sense of responsibility and pragmatism are deeply ingrained in the party's DNA, and the CDA considers itself a force of balance, of compromise and of respectable administration.

This course was confirmed at the party conference in Leeuwarden in November 2013, when van Haersma Buma announced that there would be no compromises for compromise sake in the future. On the other hand, the CDA is still supporting government projects, as long as they are in line with its own guiding principles, such as the reduction in the period people can draw unemployment benefit or the reform of the protection against dismissal. Simultaneously, the party's communication strategy has also been adapted in some respects. Individual politicians have thus not shied away from overstating their positions. This is a common course of action for opposition parties, but many observers were surprised to see CDA representatives adopting it. However, the party has been making efforts to find the right balance since 2013: to lose the image of a low-profile party of government and compromise while avoiding the impression of engaging in opposition for the sake of it.

4. From Government Party to an Inclusive People's Party – Strengthening Internal Participation

One of the key criticisms of the Frissen Report was the estrangement of the CDA from the party grassroots and from the country's citizens. The party responded by encouraging greater participation by its followers as well as non-members and by bringing in many new faces.

- Introduction of direct elections for top positions: In April 2011, the party chairman was determined in a direct election for the first time. The following year, the leader of the parliamentary party Sybrand van Haersma Buma also became party leader (*partijleider*) by direct election for the first time. In November 2013, Esther de Lange came through as the preferred candidate for the European elections in an election conducted by telephone and online. The introduction of direct elections was a risky measure, but it helped to avoid potentially damaging competition.
- New blood: Numerous experienced politicians were replaced by younger people or by those with strong roots on the regional level. While the composition of the lists for the parliamentary and European elections drew some criticism, not least due to what some considered excessive changes in personnel, this did not produce a serious dispute within the party.
- Participation by the grassroots in programmatic activities: The regular consultation between the Strategic Council and regional and local party organisations is a case in point.
- Participation by social organisations: The party also included independent organisations in its discussions on the party program, such as the independent youth movement G500. While the CDA has retained its links with the traditional institutions of the pillar structure, it is no longer relying on these exclusively. In line with this strategy, van Haersma Buma called upon the large organisations and associations, which are also suffering from shrinking membership and a loss of trust, to make efforts to reform; rather a novel stance for the CDA. The party is therefore no longer restricting itself to its traditional

connections in its interaction with civil society, but is searching for new ways to connect with it.

- **Approaching non-members:** The CDA increasingly attempts to get in touch with non-members who are thought to be ideologically close to the party but who have not been in contact with political representatives of the CDA yet. Party activities will increasingly address (middle class-oriented) non-members in the future. Moreover, the party has increasingly used systematic microtargeting.

FIRST SIGNS OF PROGRESS – AN END TO THE CRISIS?

During the elections in the spring of 2014, it seemed the party's efforts and strategies were starting to pay off, as the Christian Democrats were able to halt the downward trend for the time being in the local and European elections. In the 2014 local elections, they achieved a respectable result with just over 14.3 per cent of the votes. While this represented a small drop compared to the previous local elections of 2010, the CDA once again became the strongest single party at the local level in terms of seats and votes.

The 2014 local election results were of psychological significance. A defeat would have damaged local support for the party and its reform agenda and potentially subjected it once more to the ordeal of internal strife.

This was also a psychologically significant result in view of the party's traditionally strong local roots. A heavy defeat would have damaged local support for the party as well as its reform agenda and potentially subjected it once more to the ordeal of internal strife. It appears that the efforts to strengthen the links with the local level and the party grassroots have borne fruit.

The European election results paint a similar picture. Although the party clearly suffered losses compared to 2009 (minus five per cent), it managed to retain the existing number of seats. With an overall result of 15.2 per cent of the votes, it did considerably better than the polls had predicted and achieved its best results since 2009 in the combined ballots. This suggests that the party's pragmatic pro-European stance has paid off to some extent. However, it is of symbolic significance that the CDA just lost out to the D66 in terms of votes, a party that had taken up a clearer pro-European position. One reason for the party's respectable results was the disproportionately high

mobilisation rate among its following in both elections. It therefore appears that the efforts to involve the party's own members paid off. Furthermore, the CDA was untroubled by any scandals that might have damaged its image, which also won it appreciation from the voters.

Based on the results of the local council and European elections, the CDA appears to have passed its nadir. While these results can probably not be directly transferred to the national level, as the party benefited from a low turnout at the European elections and from its solid local grassroots support in the local elections, improved figures in national polls indicate that the results from the two elections are more than just a blip. The 15 per cent, which are currently being forecast, represent a significant step out of the crisis, but cannot satisfy the aspirations of the former people's party. In spite of the modest recovery, both sets of results once again reflect the party's key issues. The CDA still remains generally below the ten per cent mark in the major cities and once again enjoyed its greatest support in the rural areas of Overijssel and Friesland.

CHALLENGES FOR THE PARTY'S FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Looking back, it is remarkable the Christian Democrats did not panic after their historic nadir in 2012 and continued on their course of renewal.

The CDA has not totally reinvented itself. While it has made efforts to go back to its roots, it has also forged new paths in some areas. The initiated reforms show that the

CDA is aware of changes taking place in society, in political culture and in the citizens' attitude to various issues. Looking back, it is remarkable the Christian Democrats did not panic after their historic low in 2012 and continued on their course of renewal. So far, it has succeeded in holding discussions within the party without engaging in a publicly conducted party dispute. This will remain essential if the party wishes to continue its consolidation. Its period in opposition is proving to be a valuable lesson in enhancing the party profile. To date, the party has succeeded in profiling itself as a constructive opposition party without degenerating too much into populist rhetoric. Whether the self-proclaimed image of a value-oriented party of the community will suffice for voters to perceive the CDA as a new, "reformed" people's party remains to be seen. It is striking that the party's popularity in the polls increased

precisely at a time when its guiding principles were being translated into concrete political content. One of the challenges over the coming years will be to retain the correct balance in the European discourse. While a dispassionate course on Europe may match the mood of many voters in the center and in the center-right spectrum, many Dutch people saw the D66 as “the Europe-party” in the recent elections because of its clear pro-European stance. The fact that Hans Wijfels, a long-serving CDA politician, announced shortly before people went to the polls that he would vote for the D66 sent a warning shot across the party’s bow.

Internally, the party is enjoying calmer times. Future discussions on party policies regarding the economy and Europe will no doubt entail some disagreements, partly due to the fact that the positions of CDA members and (potential) CDA voters do not always match entirely. Where party renewal in terms of personnel is concerned, the challenge is to find the right mixture of new blood and experience. The good results obtained by the experienced politician Annie Schreijer-Pierik in the European elections indicate that the party base does also wish to see experienced politicians representing it.

There are several factors suggesting that the CDA might yet find it difficult to rise permanently above the twenty per cent mark. In general, the atmosphere has become tougher for people’s parties, as the Social Democrats have also found out to their cost.¹² The core electorate of each of them has shrunk to not much above five per cent. Even though the CDA has not fully exploited its potential among Christian voters (the strictly Protestant parties of the CU and SGP have made great strides in attracting more voters lately), this voting pool has decreased in size. Due to the deeper gulf between secular and religious people in the Netherlands, the party will find it more difficult than other Christian democratic parties to attract and keep religiously non-affiliated voters for good because of the competition from the secular D66. Observers therefore consider it all

12 | In the local elections, the PvdA attracted only just under ten per cent of the votes; in the European elections, it dropped below the ten per cent mark for the first time ever, ending up behind the left-wing populist SP.

the more important for the CDA to win back the allegiance of the classic voting clientele of a Christian democratic people's party, the middle class. But apart from the CDA, the VVD and the D66 are also vying for this section of the population. There is similar competition for other voter groups. The CU and the SGP remain alternatives for Protestant voters; the VVD is the main competitor in the liberal conservative spectrum, the D66 in the political center as well as for pro-European, urban and younger voters.

The political environment remains difficult for people's parties. Trust in the traditional political elite, which CDA is considered a part of, has generally declined. And the honeymoon period granted to parties taking over the government is short. Consequently, the first time the CDA will participate in government after its spell in opposition will represent a test showing whether the efforts to place the party back on a more solid footing have paid off. The high level of voter volatility, the fact that 80 per cent of the elec-

The growing mediatisation and personalisation of politics entail opportunities because well-managed media appearances in the final stages of the election campaign might double the support for a party.

torate are split between five to six parties of similar size will continue to characterise the political system in the Netherlands. The growing mediatisation and personalisation of politics entail opportunities and risks. Good campaign tactics and well-managed media appearances in the final stages of the election campaign might double the support for a party, while conversely, solid preparatory work can be destroyed at a stroke. Recent history has also shown that a charismatic or popular leader alone is not sufficient. In spite of the presence of those such as Geert Wilders and Emile Roemer, the two largest populist parties, the PVV and the Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij, SP), achieved disappointing results, and the charismatic PvdA politician Diederik Samson lost his shine within months of the parliamentary elections.

In the arena of urban politics, the CDA is in a similar dilemma as other parties in the EPP family. Should they concentrate on the rural areas or conduct costly campaigns to increase the party's visibility among the urban population? In CDA's case, there is no easy answer. On the one hand, the party is confronted with a virtually fully secularised population in several large cities as well as distinct apathy in some places. In a country as urbanised as the

Netherlands, it is, on the other hand, virtually impossible to claim to be a people's party while turning one's back on the cities. At the same time, party representatives question the appropriateness of a one-size-fits-all approach towards bigger cities. In many cases urban voters do not seem to be that different from rural voters.

LESSONS FOR OTHER CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTIES

There are other Christian democratic parties facing similar challenges: a declining appeal in the large cities, an aging membership, lack of a clear programmatic profile, the reputation of a (perpetual) government and administration party. This creates problems at the latest when the party is forced into opposition. There are similar social changes (secularisation, declining importance of social organisations) taking place in many countries. Due to the idiosyncrasies of the political system and the party landscape, there is probably only limited scope for the developments and experiences of the Dutch Christian Democrats to be transferred to other contexts. Having said that, they may provide some pointers on how a people's party can deal with a serious crisis and what obstacles can occur in the process.

While discussions about the meaning of the value base and about programmatic guidelines may not have an immediate effect on voters, the example of the CDA shows that they can represent a tool for the party to boost its self-confidence in times of crisis. During the crisis and the process of self-discovery, the "C" proved to be an important keystone for the party's (re)orientation. However, it has become clear it can no longer be the main characteristic of a people's party. Other remarkable features include the strengthened internal participation and new levels of integration with other society actors. The reform process tried to change the political culture inside the party rather than completely re-invent its structure. While these cannot be expected to act as a universal remedy, they appear to have aided cohesion in the case of the CDA. The attempts to increasingly focus party activities on non-members deserve attention.

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No doubt, any people's party must possess flexibility and adaptability. But when fundamental core features that are deeply rooted in the party's values are called into question, its credibility will suffer – with potentially dramatic consequences for its election prospects. To some extent, the CDA's experiences provide lessons on how to deal with right-wing populist or Eurosceptic parties. The asymmetric collaboration with the PVV in a toleration coalition did not pay off for the CDA. Instead, it put off one part of its electorate for good and created strife among its membership. The strategy of distancing the party clearly from the right-wing populists, which has been pursued since 2012, has so far proved more successful. This should not prevent Christian democratic parties from tackling taboo subjects. But what happened to the CDA shows that a party's credibility suffers when the discourse within the party is influenced unduly by the course set by right-wing populists. At the same time, avoiding an ostentatious proclamation of solidarity between the parties in the center ground turned out to be a wise decision in that it prevented the right-wing populists from playing the victim card.