

Summary

Between ideal and illusion deals with the history of the Dutch political party Democraten 66 (or Democrats 66), founded October 14, 1966. The new party resulted from the 'Initiative Committee D'66', that had gathered in the Krasnapolsky hotel in Amsterdam in April of that year, on the initiative of former city council member Hans Gruijters. The foundation of the party followed the overwhelming response the Initiative Committee received to their pamphlet 'Appeal to every Dutchman who is worried by the serious devaluation of our democracy'. The foundation of D66 was induced by what has become known as 'the roaring sixties' and the party can therefore be considered to be the political translation of the massive expression of dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and with the existing structures in Dutch society in the mid-sixties.

This book gives an overview of nearly 37 years D66, dealing with all highs and lows: the creation of the party, the participation in government in the sixties and seventies, the crisis and near-death experience in 1974, the electoral loss after holding office in the early eighties, the historical victory in 1994, the internal criticism on the inadequate party organisation, the call for clear position-taking and the many discussions over a declaration of principles. Attention is also paid to the political programs, election campaigns and election results. History shows that only few Dutch political parties that have emerged during the sixties and seventies, have survived. Therefore, this book is also a case study of ups and downs of new political parties that enter the political arena.

Since the foundation D66 has had three major goals: to attain radical democratization of politics as well as society, to establish a break through in the the party political set-up and the replacement of ideological politics by pragmatic politics. Three goals that result in just as much dilemmas. Through the nearly 37 years of the existence of D66, from the Appeal to the 'insane adventure', from the crisis to the resurrection, from the 'reasonable alternative' to the fiasco of holding office and from 'different politics' to the 'purple coalition', three subjects have dominated the debates in D66: the layout of the party organisation, the political strategy and the embedding of the party's principles. These three subjects, that are like threads in the

history of D66, show how the party during its existence has struggled with the goals mentioned.

First of all, D66 pleaded for radical democratization of politics and society: the new party wanted citizens to be more included in the political decision-making and to increase participation. The Democrats wanted to set the right example and applied this goal in their own party organisation. Decision-making had to take place by means of direct democracy in order to include as many people as possible. The ideal of internal party democracy is, however, at odds with the need for an effective party organisation and a decisive decision-making process. This study shows that the limited number of (cadre) members that participate in the decision-making process at conventions, the fully loaded agendas at these conventions, the formally equal but in practice larger influence of prominent party figures and the influence of the party executive do harm to the pursued ideal. The same goes for the procedure for the nomination of candidates: the commission that advises the members how to vote has much influence and relatively few people use their right to vote. Furthermore, the low level of organisation (the number of members in relation to the number of voters) leads to substantial organisational and financial risks and limitations. D66 is consequently faced with the expectations people have of a large party, while being a small one. Finally the internal relations are characterized by the primacy of the parliamentary party, a subsidiary role for the party executive and a dominant role for the party leader.

The party organisation has always been one of the major subjects of discontent within D66. Time and time again executive committees have been established to investigate the shortcomings of the party structure. Everytime proposals for improvement were made, but the party has never decided to radically change the party structure. Proposed changes pointing towards a stricter formal structure or professionalization were commonly considered to contravene the loose volunteer organisation that D66 is. The Democrats have really continued to be the political amateurs they were in 1966. Moreover, the party consists of different kinds of people, individualists, non-conformists, a little bit anarchistic and hard to align. In fact, they all would like to have their own little party. Decentralization of responsibilities is symbolic for the openness and approachability of D66. According to the Democrats these characteristics should not be restricted by formal structures, a view that ignores the fact that structures can improve the approachability and the effectiveness of the role of the individual member. One might conclude that as a pilot project of a national system of direct democracy D66 has proven that the pursued ideal, an equal vote for every individual, remains an ideal that is hard to achieve.

Secondly, D66 wanted to break through the party political set-up in The Netherlands. In order to do this, they decided to pose an electoral threat to the existing parties, hoping to be like a crowbar and compel other parties to adapt. But since D66 does not have an absolute majority, the party can not bring about changes like that

all by itself. Moreover, the choice to establish a political party meant that D66 became a player in the political arena the party opposed.

Since the foundation of the party, D66 has consequently pursued the break through of the political set-up. In the beginning this was tried by inciting a party reshuffle (in the words of party leader Van Mierlo: 'to blow up the existing order'). After it appeared that this did not work out, D66 tried to establish a parliamentary majority by seeking cooperation with other parties and directly confronting the voters with the question of who would exercise power after the elections. Meanwhile the party tried to reform government legislation, but these efforts were repeatedly blocked by a parliamentary majority. Van Mierlo's successor as party leader, Terlouw, laid less emphasis on the break through of political relations, but after the return of Van Mierlo this goal was again put on the forefront with the strive for a 'purple coalition'. The realization of this coalition in 1994 meant the definitive break through in the political relations in The Netherlands and the crowning glory of the break through efforts of the Democrats.

Through the years, D66 has developed from an initially radical-democratic movement for renewal, that tried to place its ideas on the political agenda, into an established political party for moderate, left wing liberal voters. Except for the views on democratization, that have remained radical, the ideas of D66 are a mixture of liberal notions like self-determination and freedom of choice and social or 'leftist' views on equality, solidarity and environmental protection. D66 has positioned itself amongst the other parties, that have increasingly become 'social-liberal' as well, while remaining opposite to the others parties considering its radical-democratic views.

To understand D66, one needs to see that for the larger part of its existence the party has had two wings. One wing considered D66 to be a temporary movement (Van Mierlo's 'Gideon's Gang'), that no matter what should not behave like a normal political party and that should be disbanded once the goals would be achieved. The other wing consisted of people who in the course of time gained political executive positions, in regional and city councils, and who regarded D66 as a normal political party that played a distinctive and remaining role in Dutch politics. The longer the party existed, the more influential the latter group became. More and more party members got to hold positions and the party became more and more institutionalized. Only recently, in 1997, with the emergence of the 'Opschudding' (literally: shake up) movement within the party, marking the rise of a new generation of Democrats, coinciding the leaving of Van Mierlo, who epitomized the wing that considered D66 a temporary movement, this discussion has come to an end.

Thirdly, D66 strived for politics to be based on pragmatism instead of, in the Democrats' view, outdated and rigid ideologies. Therefore the party for a long time refused to make a choice between the existing ideologies and initially decided not to write a declaration of principles. At the same time the Democrats had to make their

own identity clear and specify what basic values the party based its policy on. The pragmatic mentality of the Democrats and their aversion to ideologies are probably the most essential characteristics of D66. D66 has never made (or wanted to make) an exclusive choice between the three major ideologies that have dominated Dutch politics during the last century. At the same time it has become apparent that 'pragmatism' hardly appeals to the larger public. Pragmatism is just a way of dealing with political and social issues and democracy is nothing more than the preferred way of decision-making. The Democrats have always made things difficult for themselves by not wanting to be associated with ideological terms or labels. And although the Democrats refer to the fact that they do not have a rigid declaration of principles, they do use terms like 'basic assumptions', 'principles' or 'basic values'. It was only in 1997 that the Democrats 'capitulated to the system' and adopted the term 'social-liberal' as their ideological label. In 2002 this indication has even been embedded in the statutes of the party. By doing so the Democrats have laid down what has been practice for years and solved this dilemma (at least for the time being).

The history of D66 is a history with varying success. However, the much much predicted downfall of D66 is still awaited. Despite serious fluctuations in electoral popularity, D66 is the only new political party from the sixties and seventies that has been able to maintain itself. After the leaving of Van Mierlo D66 has undergone a transformation. The party is now called 'social-liberal', has embedded its principles in its statutes and the party organisation has been modernised. The main stimulus for this transformation has been the rise of a new generation of Democrats, marked by the manifestation of 'Opschudding'. The old generation has left the stage. The Democrats who were in their thirties in 1966, an elite from the old centre of Amsterdam, have made room for the Democrats who are in their thirties now and whose roots lie in the organisation of the Jonge Democraten (Young Democrats) and Opschudding.

After nearly thirty years D66 has become a grown-up party. Evolved from a radical-democratic movement for renewal that opposed ideological politics by rigid party bureaucracies into an established party organisation in the centre of Dutch politics that pursues the realization of its ideas through the responsibility of government. A party that was initially positioned opposite to the other parties but that gradually has found its place amongst them. At the same time D66 remains the unwanted child of Dutch politics. The party has always been confronted by people who cannot refrain from pointing out that D66 is redundant. No other party is so often asked when it will disband.

D66 was also confronted with the dilemma that all new political parties are confronted with, namely either to strictly hold on to its goals, with the risk of a short lifetime, or to let go of its goals in order to survive. The Democrats let go of their idea of a temporary movement, but refused to give up their three original goals. For a long time they tried to put these into practice, resulting, as has been mentioned, in

three dilemmas, that each for itself are not new, but in combination indeed unique for D66. By applying their political and social goals to their own party organisation, the Democrats experienced the problems of their own proposals and the dilemmas they bring along. These dilemmas form a thread through the history of D66, with the for the Democrats characteristic electoral wave-like motion as a marking line between ideal and illusion.

