

[guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk)

## The far-right cherishes this crisis

Financial turmoil helps populists such as Geert Wilders; to beat them we must come clean about how we got in this mess

---

**Saskia van Genugten** and **Erik Jones**

[guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), Monday 13 April 2009 15.00 BST

---

**A** [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

---

Believe it or not, the current global financial crisis seems to have winners as well as losers, and far-right politicians are at the top of the list. Economic misery is a blessing for them. It validates their electoral campaigns even as it terrifies voters into supporting them. Having already played on widespread political and social discontent, far-right politicians can now add financial insecurity to their appeal.

The Netherlands is a perfect example. The Dutch public has long sought to vent its frustration with its traditional political culture. In the early post-second world war period, compromise, consensus and conflict-avoidance were the bedrocks of politics. A generation down the road, frustration started building up. It was first expressed by polite reformers, such as [D66](#), which burst on the political scene in 1967 winning seven seats in parliament – a seismic change by Dutch standards of the days. A generation later, the stakes were higher. In late 2001, Pim Fortuyn shed any pretence to politeness, highjacking the political stage by playing the race card. Although Fortuyn was [assassinated](#), his party obtained 26 seats in the May 2002 parliamentary elections.

Now, we see the heirs of Fortuyn – like populist [Geert Wilders](#) – moving the Dutch political debate and its anti-immigrant rhetoric from bad to worse. For sure, Wilders' political platform is founded on the existence of real social discontent. But it is also the fruit of his search for new and as yet politically unexploited faultlines. He thrives on the fact that immigrants have become more visible and he exploits the inevitable frictions that arise as a large, culturally diverse community starts on the long road toward integration. His party ([PVV](#)) goes up in the polls when equating the Qur'an to Mein Kampf; or when he releases a simplistic movie equating Islam with terrorism.

With the economy going badly, and with little prospect of improvement in the near future, Wilders' brand of xenophobic populism plays well. According to recent polls, his latest move, [walking out of a debate](#) on government measures to manage the crisis, brought his party to within reach of 32 seats in the second chamber, which would make it the largest if the Dutch actually went to the polls.

Against a backdrop of crisis, Wilders' preference for symbolism over sensibility seems to pay off in terms of public attention. By orchestrating a drama, he draws a much larger audience to the remarks he would have made had he not been "overtaken by emotions" and "excluded from the debate". The written statement provided by Wilders offers little insight into the policies put forward by the government and fails to explain where they fall short. Instead it offers a potent mix of political, social and economic frustration directed against mainstream political leaders and Dutch society's "other". It is a mix that

appeals primarily to the dark side of human identity, the side that pits nations against nations and tribes against tribes.

Such identity politics threatens to open a Pandora's box, not just in the Netherlands but also in Europe. The old emphasis on consensus was an attempt to bridge social divisions within the country; the European project was meant to bridge them abroad. Now that too is turned on its head. Wilders criticises the "old establishment" for selling out the Netherlands to the European Union, and especially for spending money on the suffering economies in the east. By stopping the flow of money to Europe, Wilders claims he could better use it at home. What he forgets is that the Dutch economy is too small to keep itself afloat; trade is the lifeblood of the country's commerce, with export industries generating almost 70% of Dutch GDP; and even the significant net contributions that the Netherlands has made to EU coffers have come back tenfold in terms of increased trade and investment flows with the outside world.

Sure, the polls are just the polls and the voters might choose otherwise once really faced with the choice. Nevertheless, the politics of discontent is clearly on the rise and the constituency motivated more by fear than by hope is expanding. This is true elsewhere as well – from Hans Chistian Stracher's Austria to Jean-Marie DeDecker's Belgium and further across the European landscape. These politicians are the true winners of the current economic crisis. The losers are everyone else.

The challenge is to find an effective response. Wilders' appeal is strongest when he can ensure his arguments are simply taken for granted. He is weakest when the flawed logic of his arguments is exposed. This places a heavy burden on European politicians to lead with information and understanding, rather than falling back on "charisma" or "symbolism" where populists like Wilders clearly rule the day. A good start would be to come clean with the voters about the complexity of the current crisis and about how history has brought us where we are today. This will not be an easy message to communicate. But it cannot be avoided either. Wilders has at least one thing right there.

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2009