



Fortuyn, Pim (1948-2002)

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His supporters saw in him a savior, a messiah, a saint, and they compared him to Martin Luther King, Jr., President Kennedy, and Princess Diana. His adversaries compared him to Hitler and Mussolini, threw urine at him, and sent him death threats. The immaculately dressed, openly gay, hard-hitting Wilhelmus Petrus Simon Fortuyn--or Professor Pim, as he called himself--liked to stir up controversy.

Fortuyn was in the Dutch political spotlight for only a few months, yet he managed to change the modern Netherlands. In the wake of his assassination in 2002, the electorate ousted a liberal government, and all major parties shifted their positions rightward, especially in the area of immigration, shifts that some people have seen as making the nation less tolerant than it had been and that others contend are necessary to preserve Dutch liberalism.

The Netherlands remains committed to equal rights for gay men and lesbians, and has led in the area of same-sex marriage. Other liberal social policies are also secure. For example, the possession and sale of small amounts of marijuana remain decriminalized, as do certain forms of euthanasia. Similarly, prostitution is still legal and regulated. But immigrants and refugees, especially from Muslim countries, are less welcome than they had been, at least in part as a result of Fortuyn's forceful protest against the threat to Dutch values that he saw posed by Muslim religious radicals.

For glbtq culture specifically, Fortuyn matters in two respects. First, Fortuyn was not closeted. Since he lived in the Netherlands, his sexual orientation was, it is said, a non-issue, though it is worth noting that no other leading Dutch politician has declared his or her homosexuality. Second, although Fortuyn was frowned on by some gay activists as extremist because of his perceived right-wing positions, he was admired by many glbtq people who saw him as articulating their concerns over the intolerance of a growing Islamic minority.

It may also be the case that, although Fortuyn thought of himself as defending glbtq rights against the threat of religious radicals, since his death his party has supported political changes that have negatively affected some gay people, especially refugees from Iran and other countries that persecute sexual minorities.

Biography

Fortuyn was born on February 19, 1948 to a large Catholic middle-class family. He grew up in suburban surroundings, which he found suffocating and from which he longed to break away. He found refuge in Catholicism. Indeed, as an altar boy, he had visions of becoming Pope one day.

As a teenager, Fortuyn discovered his homosexuality. As he freely admitted, he quickly began a life of great



A monument to Pim Fortuyn in Rotterdam. Photograph by M. Minderhood. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License version 1.2 or later.

promiscuity.

In 1967, he matriculated at the University of Amsterdam, majoring in sociology. After a few months, he transferred to the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. He received the academic degree Doctorandus in 1971.

Fortuyn pursued an academic career as a lecturer at the Nyenrode Business Universiteit and, then, as an associate professor at the University of Groningen. In 1981, he received a Ph. D. in sociology from the University of Groningen.

From 1991 to 1995, he taught at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. When his contract was discontinued, Fortuyn embarked on a career as a public intellectual, writing books and newspaper columns, and becoming increasingly involved in politics. A dynamic speaker, he earned hefty fees for his lectures.

When he emerged on the political scene, Fortuyn was widely regarded as a breath of fresh air in a decidedly sober and low-key country, where, as a Dutch saying goes, "if you behave normally, you are already behaving madly enough." He declared himself successor to a charismatic but controversial Dutch politician, Joan van der Capellen tot den Pol, an eighteenth-century revolutionary.

Appearances mattered to Professor Pim. He wore designer suits, sported brightly colored ties, shaved his head, lived in an Italian-style villa adorned with precious artifacts, cherished his two lap dogs, enjoyed the services of a butler and a chauffeur who drove a black Daimler displaying a family crest (in a country where most people ride bicycles), smoked Cuban cigars, and clad himself in politically incorrect fur.

Although Fortuyn was entirely comfortable with his sexuality, his pronounced effeminacy and campy flamboyance alienated some of his acquaintances. He described himself as a "self-proclaimed homosexual, more feminine than every woman in the Cabinet, an aesthete and grass roots democrat, a desperado, a Dadaist with a skull of a gladiator."

Political Fall and Rise

Fortuyn identified with a wide political spectrum. He was a one-time communist and Marxist, became a member of the Dutch Labor Party, and eventually joined the *Leefbaar Nederland* (Livable Netherlands), a populist anti-establishment party that advocated greater democratic participation, less bureaucracy, and more civil liberties. For the federal election in May 2002, Fortuyn was chosen to be the party's leader.

Three months before the election, Fortuyn gave a controversial interview to the Dutch newspaper *Volkscrant*. In this interview, he was quoted as favoring the end of Muslim immigration. He also was said to want to discard the first article of the Dutch constitution, which outlaws discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and other characteristics.

Amid charges that he had come close to hate speech in this interview, Fortuyn was dismissed from the party ticket.

Fortuyn himself later clarified that he did not want to discard the first article of the Dutch constitution, but that he valued article 7, which guarantees free speech, more highly than he did the anti-discrimination clause. He also pointedly distanced himself from extremist politicians who attacked Muslims.

The day after being dismissed as leader of *Leefbaar Nederland*, Fortuyn formed his own party, the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF). His platform called for deporting immigrants unwilling to assimilate in Dutch society, dismantling parts of the welfare state, eliminating subsidies for immigrant community centers and other programs, improving health care, hiring more teachers, increasing efforts against crime, and implementing

mandatory service--either military or civilian--for all young people.

In local elections in Rotterdam (a Labor Party stronghold) in March 2002, Fortuyn's party won 36% of the vote. For the first time since World War II, the Labor Party was forced from power in Rotterdam. The success of the LPF there was particularly remarkable, for almost half the population of Rotterdam is foreign, suggesting that Fortuyn also drew considerable support from ethnic voters. For example, a black woman from Surinam was elected to the local government on Fortuyn's ticket.

A huge victory in the federal election in May seemed a foregone conclusion, and even a Fortuyn administration was discussed. During the pre-election debates, the smug and complacent old guard politicians could hardly hide their frustration with and contempt for Fortuyn, which only heightened his maverick appeal to many voters.

As the LPF rose in the polls, some politicians and journalists began to demonize Fortuyn and compared him to such right-wing European leaders as France's Jean-Marie Le Pen or Austria's Jörg Haider. Fortuyn's political orientation, however, was far more complicated than these attacks suggested and the comparisons were patently unfair.

Fortuyn never talked about "fatherland" or traditional family values. Nor was he a conservative ideologue. In fact, he blended his suspicion about foreign influence with a decidedly liberal attitude on a number of issues. This is why, for example, some openly gay teachers supported him because they were afraid of the hostility of Muslim students they faced in Dutch schools. Moreover, Fortuyn repeatedly rejected the "right-wing" label, insisting that his ideology was pragmatism.

Controversy

Fortuyn's views on Islam, which are expressed in his book *Against the Islamisation of Our Culture* (first published in 1997, with multiple new editions and reprints but not available in English translation), sparked the greatest controversy. In this book, Fortuyn dismisses Islam as a "backward" religion, speaks of waging a "war" against that faith, and proposes strict restrictions on immigration from Islamic countries.

Many people wondered why an openly gay person would be so critical of another minority. The answer is that Fortuyn saw several tenets of Islam as threatening the liberal secular society of the Netherlands, particularly the country's celebrated support of women's rights, glbtq issues, and the separation of church and state.

Many agreed with Fortuyn that Islamic fundamentalism posed a threat. Moreover, what else than "backward" should one call a society that executes gay people by public hanging or stoning? (Of course, Fortuyn was being selective here, focusing on the most extremist Muslim regimes, notably Iran and the Taliban, rather than on the more moderate Islamic societies.)

Still, the threat of Islamic fundamentalism came not only from abroad. In May 2001, for example, a radical Moroccan imam preached in Rotterdam that homosexuality was a contagious disease that threatened the Dutch population with extinction. Not surprisingly, soon afterwards there were a number of gay bashings by Muslim youths. Another imam, featured on the cover of Fortuyn's book, declared that gay people should be put to death if at least four people witnessed them engaging in sodomy.

In a famous televised debate in 2002, Fortuyn clashed with a Muslim cleric, who, offended by Fortuyn's libertinism, denounced him in virulent obscenities. At that point, Fortuyn turned to the camera and raised the specter of *sharia* (Islamic law) taking hold in a Western country, calmly allowing the cleric's homophobic outburst to illustrate the danger that an uncritical multiculturalism posed to Dutch society.

Assassination and Aftermath

On May 6, 2002, Fortuyn was fatally shot by Volkert van der Graaf in the head and chest as he was leaving the building of a radio station where he had just given an interview. Nine days before the election, a usually peaceful and calm country was rocked by one of its few political assassinations since the slaying of Willem van Oranje (William the Silent) in 1584 during the Dutch uprising against the rule of Spanish King Philip II.

Van der Graaf was pursued by Fortuyn's chauffeur and captured while still in possession of the gun he used to kill Fortuyn. There was some relief that van der Graaf was a deranged vegetarian and animal-rights activist (Fortuyn's policy he most objected to seems to have been a proposal to lift a ban on mink farming), rather than a jihadist.

Van der Graaf confessed to the crime. Some months later, he received an 18-year prison term. This light sentence is regarded as an injustice by many of Fortuyn's supporters, particularly because the court seems to have accepted in part the defense's argument that Fortuyn was a danger to society.

An immense outpouring of grief followed the assassination. Even people who had not supported him politically lamented the loss of a talented man struck down by an assassin's bullet in a country that prides itself on its calm and rational politics. His death was seen by many as proof that something had gone seriously wrong with the country.

The elaborate funeral featured the slave chorus from Verdi's *Aida* blaring from loudspeakers and Fortuyn's beloved dogs, Kenneth and Carla, as the chief mourners.

Fortuyn's remains were then transferred to Italy, where he owned property. After his coffin was loaded into a plane, two fire engines on the runway at Rotterdam airport spouted jets of water and formed a rainbow in the sunlight.

Soon, a number of shrines and memorials appeared at Fortuyn's home, at the scene of the crime, in front of Parliament in The Hague, and at the Homomonument in Amsterdam.

Peter Jan Margry has investigated the messages left at these sites, characterizing them as expressions of grief, condolence, and dismay; declarations of affection and love; attributions of metaphysical qualities to the person of Fortuyn; and angry threats of retaliation, specifically for the perceived "hate campaign" against Fortuyn in the media.

The most immediate result of Fortuyn's death was that all parties ceased campaigning, though the election was not postponed. Since the date of the election was so near, there was no time to reprint the ballots. Technically, people could still vote for Fortuyn, which is what 17% of the voters did. The LPF received 26 seats in the 150-seat chamber, making it the second largest party in Parliament.

Political Legacy

The election of 2002 resulted in devastating losses for two traditional parties that had formed a coalition since 1994: the free-market libertarian *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD) and the leftist *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA). The only other winner in addition to the LPF was the conservative *Christen Democratisch Appèl* (CDA).

A coalition was formed among the CDA, VVD, and LPF, which lasted less than three months (mostly due to infighting in the LPF, whose cabinet members proved inept at governing), but the new constellation triggered some momentous changes as all the major parties veered rightward on the question of

immigration.

In the wake of the assassination of Fortuyn, the Netherlands adopted the most restrictive immigration policies in the European Union. In addition, the country engaged new and unsettling questions about the value of multiculturalism and the essence of Dutchness.

Another legacy of Fortuyn's rise and fall may be an American-style polarization of civic discourse.

The most controversial member of the administration that took office in 2003 was immigration and integration minister Rita Verdonk, nicknamed "Iron Rita." Although not a member of LPF, she proposed policies that LPF members supported, including prohibiting Muslim women from wearing burqas outside their homes and banning languages other than Dutch in public spaces.

Most controversially, from a glbtq perspective, she proposed the deportation of gay Iranian asylum seekers--for Iran, she claimed, no longer prosecuted homosexuality. When a vote of no confidence was introduced by the Green Party, it failed because of the LPF's opposition, though the policy itself was reversed. In response to parliamentary criticism, Verdonk announced that all asylum cases involving homosexual Iranians would be assessed on an individual basis.

The LPF has withered since its success in the wake of Fortuyn's assassination. A one-man show deprived of its charismatic leader, it was unable to sustain its parliamentary strength. At an early election held in 2003, the party dropped down to eight seats. (It was reduced to zero in 2006, after it aired a tasteless campaign commercial featuring a party leader descending with a parachute from heaven and offering himself as Fortuyn's reincarnation.)

Old wounds were reopened in November 2004, when the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was killed in Amsterdam. Gogh, a Fortuyn admirer who had just made a movie about his assassination based on conspiracy theories, was shot on a busy street. His throat was slit ritualistically, and an indictment of Western society and call for holy war was attached to his corpse. The murderer was a Dutch citizen of Moroccan descent and an Islamic religious radical. The slaying vividly confirmed Fortuyn's warnings about the danger posed by Islamic fundamentalism.

Fortuyn's legacy may also--somewhat unfairly--be said to include the new prominence of a populist politician, Geert Wilders. Wilders, who has likened the Koran to Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and has therefore been banned from other European Union countries for endangering public safety, leads a party that won nine seats in the 2006 election on an anti-Islam and anti-immigration platform.

Popular Legacy

A monument to Fortuyn has been erected in Rotterdam. Built of cracked marble, it is a twisted obelisk positioned on a pedestal, symbolizing Fortuyn's transcendence of established structures and his political twists and turns. The obelisk also bears Fortuyn's bronze bust engaging in debate, a strong allusion to his untiring proclamation of free speech, which the Latin inscription underlines: *Loquendi Libertatem Custodiamus* ("We shall defend freedom of expression").

In addition, statues of Fortuyn have been placed in a number of cities. A commemorative flag was introduced that features the national Dutch banner with a portrait of Fortuyn added in the center. A tulip has been named in his honor. In the Amsterdam version of Madame Tussaud's wax museum, Fortuyn sits surrounded by his two beloved spaniels. Fortuyn's residence, Palazzo di Pietro, restored in its full splendour, is now a museum.

Yet, despite his veneration in the Netherlands, Fortuyn is not well known in the United States. Even his assassination received relatively little notice in the American gay press, despite his being the highest-ranking openly gay politician to be slain since Harvey Milk.

There may be truth in Andrew Sullivan's observation, "If a pro-choice, drug-legalizing, sex-positive gay man speaks out against the Christian fundamentalist right, he is hailed as a hero. But if he speaks out against the Muslim fundamentalist right, he is a pariah." However, it is important to point out that Fortuyn was not assassinated because he was gay, nor was his assassin a fundamentalist Muslim.

Conclusion

Fortuyn may have been a demagogue, as his critics charged, but many people regarded him less as a demagogue than as someone who was speaking truth to power and who was defending the liberal values of the Netherlands against a threat from religious radicals. He powerfully exposed the failures of multiculturalism in the Netherlands and drew upon its attendant anxieties.

Fortuyn's concern seems not to have been with Muslim immigrants per se ("I do not hate Muslims, I even sleep with them," he wittily exclaimed), but with Muslim fundamentalists who despised the liberal traditions of the country and who refused to assimilate to Dutch culture.

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