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2006-05-24

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Embassy The Hague

CONFIDENTIAL

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 001184

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/23/2016

TAGS: PREL, PGOV, PINR, EU, NL

SUBJECT: DUTCH SOCIALIST PARTY (SP): NOT YOUR FATHER'S
MAOISTS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROLAND ARNALL FOR REASONS 1.5(B) AND (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Under the charismatic leadership of Jan Marijnissen, the Dutch Socialist Party (SP) is reconfiguring itself to become a credible left-wing alternative to the increasingly centrist Labor Party (PvdA) of Wouter Bos. In a rare meeting with Ambassador Arnall on May 16, Marijnissen and MP Harry van Bommel stressed that the party has evolved to become more moderate and less anti-American -- although it remains strongly opposed to many U.S. policies. Party leaders believe SP could win between 15 and 20 seats in the next Parliament -- up from 8 -- making it a serious political force and a potential partner with PvdA in a left-leaning coalition government -- although PvdA leaders are openly dismissive of forming a government with former Communists. END SUMMARY.

DUTCH SOCIALISTS: REVIVED...

2. (SBU) The Dutch Socialist Party (SP), has long been perceived as a more radical, leftist alternative to the increasingly mainstream Labor Party (PvdA). Formed in 1972 as a grass-roots protest party with an openly Maoist ideology, the SP first competed in parliamentary elections in 1977, but won its first two seats only in 1994. The party's roots as a provocative protest party is symbolized by its logo -- a ripe tomato suitable for throwing. Under the leadership, since 1986, of charismatic former welder and factory worker Jan Marijnissen, the party has steadily increased its credibility and appeal -- in 2003, it won nine seats in the Second Chamber and four in the First Chamber. The SP is now the fourth largest party in Parliament, and the third largest in the country in terms of membership (just under 40,000).

3. (C) During the 2004 Dutch referendum on the EU's Constitutional Treaty, the SP drew on its extensive grass-roots networks -- especially in urban areas -- and party discipline to mount an exceptionally effective no campaign. Support for SP grew dramatically as a result, especially among PvdA voters disappointed by their party leadership's support for the Constitution. Although SP support has declined from those peak levels, the party more

than doubled its representation in city councils following the March 2006 municipal elections. SP has subsequently formed local coalition governments with the PvdA and other parties in several municipalities, including Nijmegen and Groningen. According to recent polls, the SP could win 14 seats in parliament if elections were held today, but SP Foreign Policy Spokesman Harry van Bommel privately predicts it will win between 15 and 20 seats when elections are held in 2007. Even taking into account the fact that the SP tends to do better in opinion polls than in actual elections, the SP is likely to emerge from the next election as a significant force in Parliament.

...REFORMED...

4. (C) On May 16, Ambassador Arnall and POLCOUNS met with Marijnissen and van Bommel at the Second Chamber of Parliament. Marijnissen and van Bommel both stressed that their party has become more moderate, and less anti-American, in recent years. Marijnissen, for example, proudly noted that this was the first meeting he had ever had with an American Ambassador. Van Bommel similarly pointed out that when he speaks to party members these days, he stresses that the SP is now more of a Social Democrat party than a Socialist one. Based on his multiple trips to the U.S. -- where he worked briefly as a teacher and traveled extensively by motorcycle -- van Bommel said he appreciated shared U.S.-Dutch values and could not imagine a Dutch government abandoning the transatlantic relationship.

5. (C) Van Bommel and Marijnissen made clear that they strongly disagreed with many policies of the Bush and Balkenende governments. The SP, for example, firmly opposed Dutch military deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Asked about Dutch participation in the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), van Bommel said he thought the initial Dutch decision to become involved was a mistake at the time -- and it still is. That said, SP's interest in foreign policy would always take a back seat to bread-and-butter domestic issues such as workers' rights and compensations.

6. (C) Although the SP draws much of its support from urban areas with large immigrant populations, van Bommel

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acknowledged that the party has a problem attracting immigrant voters. This is partly due to the party's tradition of defending indigenous workers' rights against immigration, but van Bommel suggested that other factors also played a role. He noted that the sole SP member of parliament with an Islamic background, Ali Lazrak, had defected from the parliament because he objected to the SP's policy of having MP's turn over a significant portion of their salary directly to party coffers. Van Bommel stressed that the party was actively looking at ways to change its image to make it more attractive to culturally conservative immigrant groups, particularly with regard to religion, and was seeking to recruit more ethnically diverse candidates.

...AND READY TO RULE?

7. (C) Van Bommel and Marijnissen accented their willingness to serve in a left-wing coalition government with PvdA and GreenLeft -- a possibility they have also raised publicly.

If current trends continue, van Bommel pointed out, there could be a clear left-wing majority (more than 75 seats) in the Second Chamber of Parliament following the May 2007 elections for the first time since 1977. Even if PvdA leader Wouter Bos would prefer to rule from the center, according to van Bommel, it would be irresponsible for him not to at least consider governing from the left if that is what the voters want. He pointed out that the PvdA and SP formed governing coalitions in a number of municipalities -- including Groningen and Nijmegen -- following the March 2006 municipal elections, and could be seen as natural partners on many issues. Marijnissen joked that Bos had even copied his trademark look -- suit with no tie -- from Marijnissen, who has not worn a tie in decades.

8. (C) In a separate meeting with the Ambassador on May 17, PvdA member (and close Bos advisor) Frans Timmermans rejected outright any possibility of forming a coalition government with SP. Timmermans stressed that Bos recognizes that even to hint at such a possibility would alienate large numbers of centrist voters both within and to outside the PvdA. In his view, it would be foolish for the PvdA to trust anyone who used to be a communist.

COMMENT:

9. (C) Having rejected Maoism in the 1970's, abandoned Marxism-Leninism in 1991, and -- just last year -- dropped all references to public ownership of property from the party platform, the SP arguably no longer poses an ideological threat to the status quo. That said, it remains anathema to most voters because of its Communist links and history of aggressive anti-establishment protest activities. As frustration with the Dutch political establishment grows, however, voters on both the left and the right are looking for alternatives to the established parties, and the SP is well positioned to fill part of that niche. Dr. Gees Voerman, a specialist in Dutch political parties at the University of Groningen who is currently writing a book on the SP, told POLCOUNS recently that the SP may be the fastest growing party in The Netherlands. If, as expected, the PvdA refuses to enter into a coalition with SP following the 2007 elections, Voerman noted that the party would be well positioned to challenge Bos from the left in Parliament, potentially laying the groundwork for a more serious challenge to the PvdA's dominance of the left in the future.

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