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# CLAREMONT

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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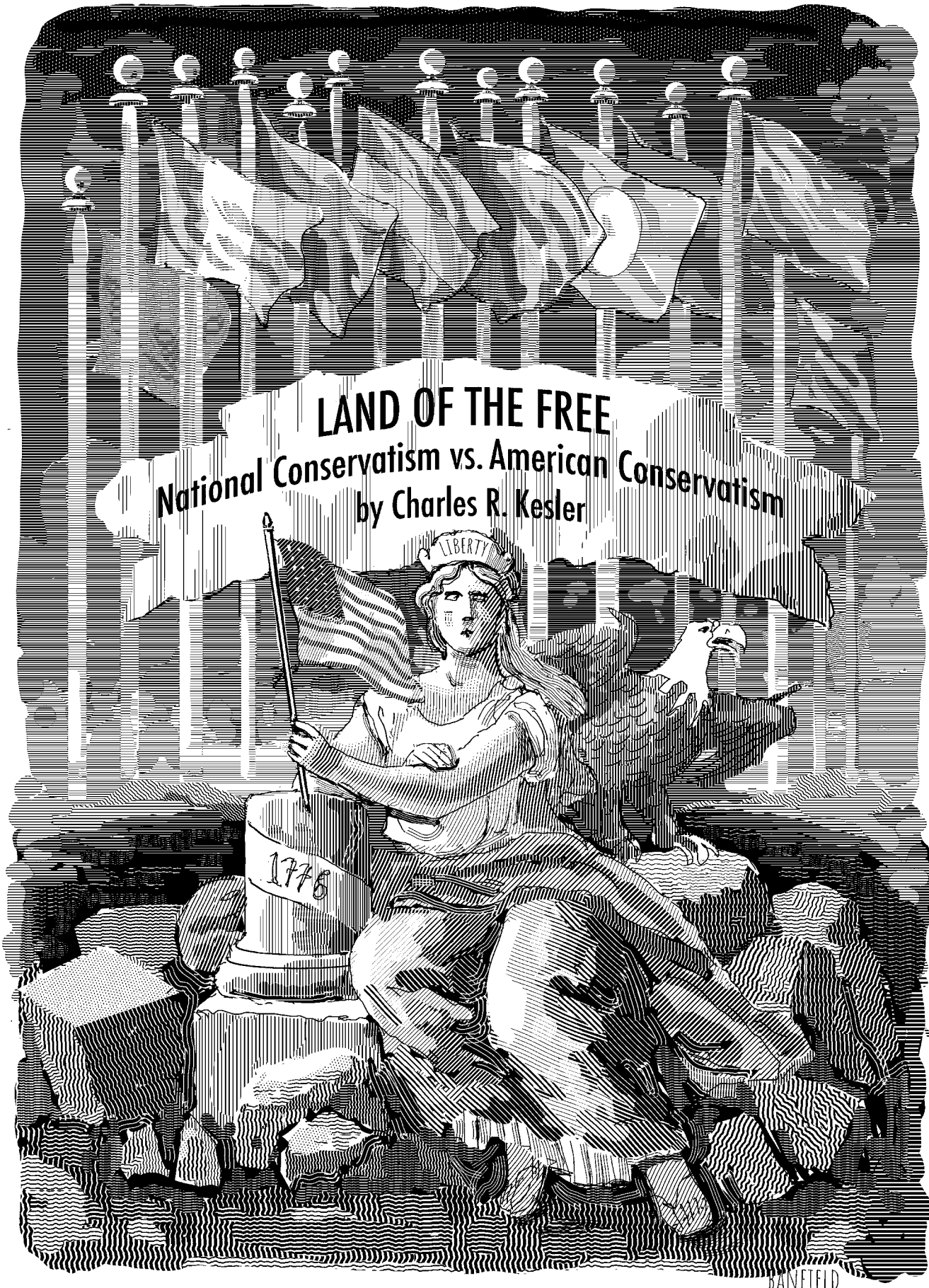
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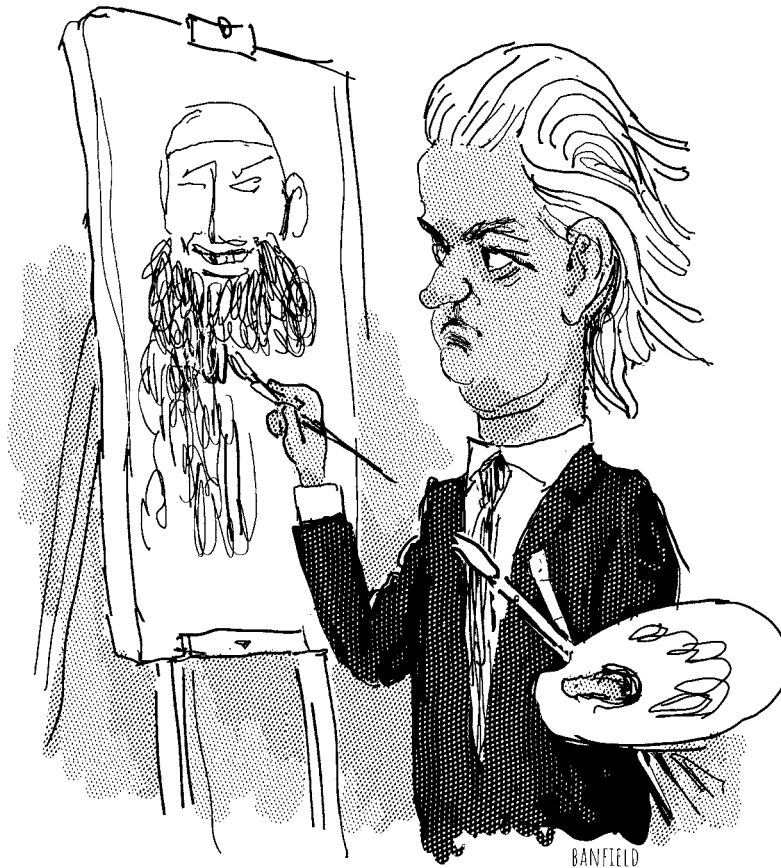


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Essay by Christopher Caldwell

# FLOODED WITH MIGRANTS

*Holland rediscovers Geert Wilders.*



*Geert Wilders*

**A**LMOST NO ONE EXPECTED THE ANTI-immigration firebrand Geert Wilders to win November's national election in the Netherlands, still less to dominate it with 23.5% of the vote. That may not sound like much of a tally, but in the Dutch system of over-elaborated proportional representation, most parties rest on a base about as broad as a fingernail clipping. Taking a quarter of the vote counts as a landslide. Had any other candidate achieved a similar result, he would have been ensconced in the prime minister's 14th-century office in the Hague for months already. Representatives of parties traditionally considered to be on the "right" hold 95 of the 150 seats in the Dutch parliament. Wilders's Party for Freedom (PVV) won 37 of those seats by topping the polls in 250 of the country's 342 municipalities. Across most of the country, the electoral maps resembled American ones in the age of Trump: a sea of Wilders blue, except for a few islands of support for the Labor-Green alliance in big cities and university towns, and a New England-like

resistance in the country's rural east. Strikingly, polls have shown Wilders's popularity continuing to rise steeply in the months since the election. If fresh elections had to be held, Wilders could take a *third* of the vote, giving him the largest representation in the Dutch lower house since the Cold War. And fresh elections may indeed need to be held. In early February the leader of the New Social Contract, a big and popular new Christian Democratic party, walked out of coalition talks over a dispute about budget data. Wilders is, at this writing, unlikely to be the next prime minister of the Netherlands. It is not impossible the next government could come from the center or even center-left.

## Testosterone Bombs

**H**IS PROBLEM IS NOT HARD TO FIGURE OUT: those who do not consider Wilders a national savior consider him a national embarrassment and even a threat to democracy. Wilders rose to

prominence at the turn of this century in the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), which at the time may have been the closest thing Europe had to a Reaganite force. For decades it had been a businessmen's party, a pillar of Cold War anti-Communism. But it changed in the 1990s under the leadership of Frits Bolkestein, a conservative former oil executive who is also a powerful essayist and political thinker. The VVD began to denounce the erosion of Dutch culture, and particularly the high levels of immigration from Morocco, Turkey, and other Muslim countries, which had brought crime and political radicalism in their wake.

After the September 11 attacks in the United States, there was a lot to be preoccupied with. Pim Fortuyn, a professor, businessman, and *bon viveur* in Rotterdam, began to complain about Muslims in his magazine column and on television shows. Big, bald, catty, dressed to the nines, and flamboyantly gay, Fortuyn warned that Muslim moralism threatened the live-and-let-live ethos on which his own dig-



nity depended. The Dutch—already terrified of expressing any misgivings about minorities for fear of being called bigots—were impressed, seduced, thrilled. In the politically correct logic of our time, hearing someone whom no true bigot could ever tolerate expressing the same opinions as you is the closest thing to being proved right.

A few months before the 2002 elections Fortuyn launched a political party, the Pim Fortuyn List, that was libertarian on most things but took a hard line on immigration policy. It became a sensation. It looked as if Fortuyn might become prime minister. Nine days before the vote, though, an animal-rights activist walked up to Fortuyn as he was crossing a parking lot after a radio interview in Hilversum and shot him dead. It was the first political assassination in the Netherlands since 1672. Another would follow in short order. In 2004, while bicycling through Amsterdam, filmmaker Theo van Gogh was shot and disemboweled by a Muslim radical angry at a film about women's rights that van Gogh had made with the Somali immigrant Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a VVD legislator. Then police discovered active assassination plans by the same Islamist network against two politicians. One was Hirsi Ali. The other was Wilders. Both went into hiding. Wilders has lived under police protection ever since.

Wilders had already left the VVD to start his own Islam-focused party, the PVV. A heterosexual from Venlo in furthest Catholic Limburg, he could not have been more different from Fortuyn. But he had an equally outré hairstyle, a massive slicked-back helmet of thick hair dyed peroxide blond, and shared Fortuyn's exceptional crudity. As he saw it, Islam was not a religion but a political ideology, so he would close the mosques. The Koran was not a holy book but a terrorist manual, so he would ban it. In 2014, at an election-night victory rally, he asked his followers if they wanted more or fewer Moroccans in the country: "Few-er! Few-er! Few-er!" the intoxicated crowd chanted. In 2016, as the last migrants were arriving on foot into Europe from Syria's war zone, he warned that the young men on their way were "testosterone bombs" aimed at the heart of Europe.

And that, it has often seemed to readers of the Dutch newspapers, is all there is to Wilders. He is certainly a powerful and charming debater. He has a sure instinct for what motivates Dutch people in their day-to-day lives (no mean feat for one who has lived in semi-seclusion for two decades). But he does not represent a multifaceted political movement. His Party for Freedom has only two paying members. One is Geert Wilders

himself. The other is a foundation called Friends of the PVV, the board of which consists of one person: Geert Wilders. He only follows one account on social media: the one he set up for his cats. His longtime aide Martin Bosma—witty, American-educated, and radical in his own right—was recently elected speaker of the lower chamber. But beyond that, there is a dearth of rising talent in the PVV. Like Donald Trump in 2016, Wilders might fall short of capable supporters to fill the cabinet posts he has available.

And yet, again like Trump, Wilders has been pronounced dead so many times that one must consider seriously the possibility that what appear to be liabilities are in fact assets. No one doubts that immigration and Islam are still major political issues. It's just that Wilders began talking about them at the turn of the century, before the Iraq war, before the iPhone and YouTube were invented, before we learned that men could have babies. From time to time, Dutch populists have looked for a more up-to-date standard-bearer. In 2021 the Forum for Democracy, led by the brassy and telegenic young author Thierry Baudet, was accused of COVID denial at election season and seemed to profit from it, taking eight seats. Just last year, the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB), a party founded to protest environmental overregulation and led by a half-Irish ex-journalist named Caroline van der Plas, became the largest party in the Dutch upper house. But both have since fallen back. Wilders, no matter how odd the peroxide bouffant may look on a man now in his sixties, has become the top vote-getter in the whole country.

For all the ridicule it has brought Wilders, that hairdo may be an asset. So much money and opportunity circulates in the global economy that many passionate defenders of national sovereignty have, over time, been lured into the establishment fold—the leftist Alexis Tsipras in Greece, for instance, or the rightist Giorgia Meloni in Italy. In this context, Wilders's bizarreness, like Trump's, is a signal that he won't sell you out to the elites. He *can't*: the elites wouldn't have him.

### Champions of Globalization

**D**HL, THE PACKAGE-DELIVERY SERVICE, publishes a Global Connectedness Index every other year. It ranks the world's countries by how "globalized" they are, in the sense of doing a lot of trade, having a lot of people online, getting a lot of tourists, and receiving a lot of immigrants. The Netherlands consistently ranks number one, edging out Singapore. (The United States ranks number

28.) You could say the Dutch live in the most "successful" country in the global economy. You could also say they live in the most "destabilized" country in the global economy. It depends on whom you talk to.

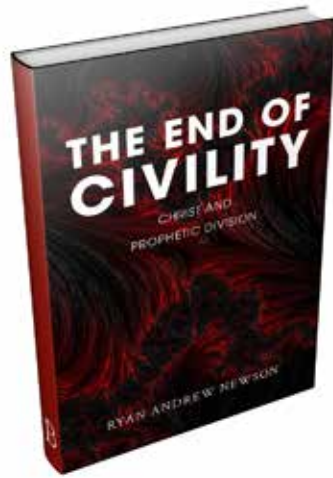
Globalization in the Netherlands works much as it does elsewhere. In the heart of the large cities along the North Sea you find a lot of highly educated people who teach at universities, who work at non-profit foundations, and who help run global corporations, from Booking.com to Heineken. As in other countries, they have tended in recent years to gravitate to various progressive parties, some of which were founded long ago to defend the interests of the working class. In the Netherlands this process has advanced further than elsewhere. The Labor Party (PvdA), an electoral juggernaut in the 20th century, has steadily lost working-class voters. Last year it had to merge with a second party, GroenLinks (Green-Left), to scabble 16% of the vote. What does this consolidated party stand for? Gentrification, mostly—it wins neighborhoods convenient to city centers where public housing has been privatized and the old tenants pushed out, like those just east of the center of Utrecht. It also wins among the glamorous. The new Green-Labor hybrid made its biggest gains in Bloemendaal, the richest community in the country. Almost two-thirds of this consolidated party (62%) has a university degree—as opposed to 24% of the VVD.

Aside from their being poorly educated, Wilders's voters are hard to describe with precision, though Dutch political scientists are trying. At the turn of this century, Wilders's electoral base seemed to be in heavily Catholic Limburg, his home province—a matter of cultural, not religious, affinity, for Wilders left the Church in his youth. In more recent years, it has been common to say that he is simply the candidate of the losers of globalization: he wins neighborhoods that used to vote Labor and even Communist, like Pekela, near Groningen.

Others say there is considerably more to it than that. "You don't get to 48 seats with deplorables," said a veteran Dutch political journalist in December, citing Wilders's strength in post-election surveys. Turnout in the Netherlands is heavily skewed to the university-educated; 87% of those with advanced degrees go to the polls. If you ended "voter suppression" there, the populists would clean up. (Although that is true in many Western countries, including parts of the United States.) Wilders is winning people who didn't used to vote. He is winning those who say they "don't trust politics." At a time when parents are growing impatient

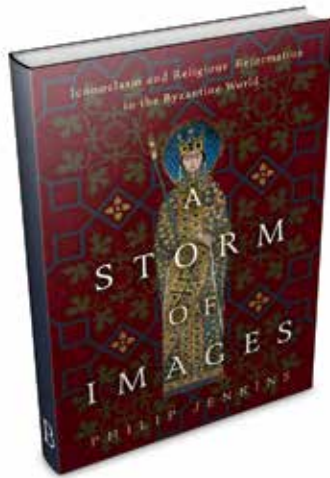


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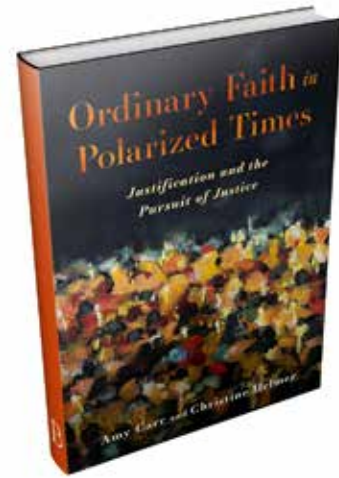
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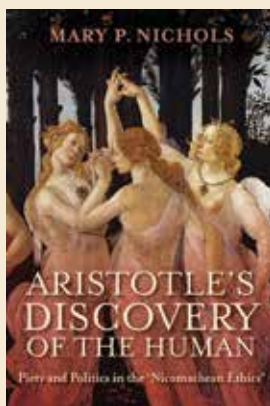
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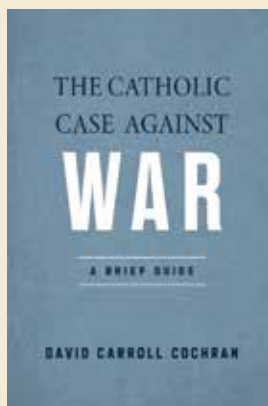
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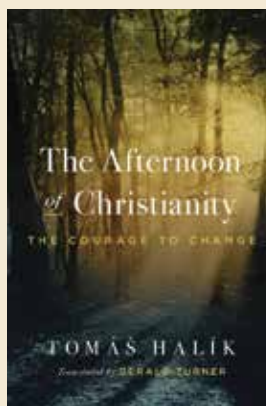
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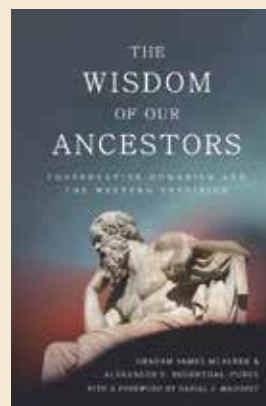
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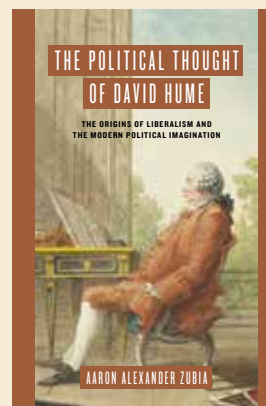
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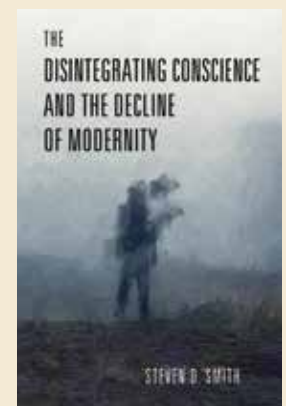
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with “purple Friday”—the second Friday in December, when elementary-school children are encouraged by local Gender-Sexuality Alliances to “affirm gender diversity”—he is even winning some Muslims.

The polarization between haves and have-nots is a matter not just of who gets the fruits of prosperity but of who makes the economic and cultural rules. In the wake of Brexit in 2016, Dutch leaders had the idea of turning the national university system into an English-speaking institution, as a way of raking in some of the revenue that foreign students would bring. It worked. Upwards of a hundred thousand came. It was a boon to those Dutch people who plan to make their living speaking English in the global economy. But it sparked fury among Wilders’s voters, for whom the requirement to do academic work in a foreign language placed one more obstacle along an ever more difficult path of social advancement. Ninety percent of Dutch people tell pollsters the country is too crowded already—they want zero population growth. Now foreigners began arriving *en masse* to take advantage of these new university classes in English—a reform that would help the local rich and hurt the local poor. Dutch people keep telling pollsters they want university education in their own language; Dutch elites keep telling the people they’re wrong.

The newcomers exacerbated an already dramatic housing shortage. The country has a waiting list 300,000 families long. It is out of building space, constrained in what it can build by environmental regulations, and required by both treaties and bureaucratic protocols to move political asylum-seekers to the front of the housing line.

### The Crisis of Elite Rule

**T**HE ODD THING IS NOT THAT DUTCH political life has suddenly blown up but that this conflict between progressive elites and reactionary voters remained dormant for so long. For twelve years Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the leader of the VVD, has ignored the rumbling of the volcano. If Frits Bolkestein was the party’s Ronald Reagan, facing the challenge of mediating between stability-seeking businessmen and change-seeking conservatives, Rutte has been the party’s George W. Bush. It was under him that conservatives discovered the party was no longer particularly interested in fighting for them.

Rutte had started out balancing both wings of his party. He refused to work formally with Wilders in his first government but required Wilders’s support to stay in power, and the two worked out a deal. In 2012 Rutte tried to tighten immigration

laws, even proposing to make it a crime to be in the country illegally. But the European Union stood in his way. Like many other conservative heads of government in Europe, Rutte very quickly understood that the E.U., if crossed, could harm his electoral prospects in a way that voters could not. He became Angela Merkel’s assistant principal, crossing the continent to scold those national leaders who violated the expectations of Brussels: the Greeks in 2011 for wasting Dutch taxpayers’ money, the Poles in 2021 for reforming their justice system in a conservative direction, the Hungarians all the time for everything. After 2022 Rutte became, aside from British premier Boris Johnson, the most oratorically extravagant defender of the Ukrainian war effort. He pledged an extraordinary quantity of his country’s weapons stocks, including, last year, over a dozen F-16s. The Dutch public does not share this maximalist stance: in 2016, two years after a Malaysian commercial flight from Amsterdam was downed by stray anti-aircraft fire over the Russo-Ukrainian war zone, they voted overwhelm-

**Wilders’s bizarreness is a signal that he won’t sell you out to the elites. He can’t: the elites wouldn’t have him.**

ingly to reject inviting Ukraine into an E.U. trade arrangement. Rutte kept reaching ever leftward for coalition partners. As he did, he and his party moved leftward, too.

In the summer of 2022, Rutte launched a plan climate activists had long dreamed of—a dramatic reduction of nitrogen emissions that within a decade would have required the closure of half the farms in the Netherlands. It was a blow to the country’s self-image. Despite its size and its population, the Netherlands is the second-largest exporter of food products in the world, right behind the United States. This was the beginning of the farmers’ protests that have spread across Europe, all the way to the border of Ukraine. They also brought the triumph of a farmer’s party in last year’s upper-house elections.

By last summer, anxiety over asylum-seekers was rising again, but Rutte’s coalition government—his fourth—was progressive enough to deny him any meaningful limitations. Rutte, familiar enough with public-opinion polling to know that assenting would mean the end of his political career, blew up the coalition. He

may have thought he could win a fifth term as a born-again conservative. He almost certainly did not expect a lurch into populism and an end to the party system that has organized Dutch politics for the past generation.

It’s easy to see what people thought would happen after Rutte. You just have to look at the *toeslagenaffaire*, a scandal that has slowly emerged from a misdesigned childcare benefit over the past decade. It infuriates Dutch people of all parties. When you bring up the *toeslagenaffaire*, even in a restaurant, they turn red and raise their voices.

In 2004 the government passed a childcare entitlement. It was convoluted in an Obamacare kind of way—a socialist benefit that users had to purchase for themselves on the open market. The government would pre-empt users on a sliding scale based on their projected income for the following year, then chase beneficiaries down if they wound up earning more than expected. At some point a band of Bulgarian migrants pulled off a scam, pocketing millions of dollars in benefits and leaving the country before they could be tracked down. The government became convinced it was being defrauded on a certain percentage of claims, and started using a predictive system that effectively created quotas for fraud charges. By the time the public figured out what was going on, Dutch tax authorities had wrongly prosecuted 26,000 modestly situated citizens for fraud. There were a host of suicides, divorces, and children removed from parents’ custody. For years, each individual defendant lived his Kafka-esque ordeal alone, but by 2019 it was clear something had gone systematically wrong. Rutte’s centrist coalition stonewalled. The *toeslagenaffaire* is the main thing Dutch people talked about during COVID (besides COVID), and in 2021 it brought Rutte’s third government down. After swearing he’d learned his lesson, Rutte re-formed exactly the same coalition once he had the votes. That was the government that fell last year.

The man who broke the scandal open became a national hero. He was Christian Democrat Pieter Omtzigt, a constitutional idealist and a legislative prodigy. Colleagues and journalists talk about Omtzigt with both awe and impatience. One longtime correspondent in the Hague described him as “the single greatest politician I have ever seen”—at least as far as policy expertise and attention to legal detail was concerned—but warned that that might not be enough. “Politics in the Netherlands is wheeling and dealing. It’s hard to live by high standards. Voters like it but it doesn’t work.” It hasn’t always worked for Omtzigt. He withdrew from politics in 2021, citing



exhaustion. His colleagues, resentful at his breaking of partisan omertà, cast him as obsessive and a bit weird. Almost every top journalist in the Hague has a story of being interrupted at home on a weekend with his family by a call from Omtzigt, eager to discuss some subtle mechanism in a legislative amendment. But it was Omtzigt most Dutch people thought would be their next prime minister in the months after Rutte's resignation. He wrote a book urging what he called a New Social Contract and started a new party of that name (NSC). What is more, he began to talk about making migration his focus in coming months. He called on the E.U. to enforce its borders. He suggested that, if consequential action were not forthcoming, the Netherlands might have to suspend its participation in the E.U.'s Schengen agreements, which guarantee free movement across the continent. Instead it could join a couple of its like-minded E.U. neighbors in a "mini-Schengen."

In a way, this was Wilders's message in a different register. As elections approached, it offered the gratifying prospect that Dutch voters could have bad-boy immigration restrictions while punctiliously complying with international law. But Omtzigt was ploddingly slow in developing his electoral program and diffident about whether he actually wanted to be prime minister. He faltered in the elections, finishing fourth. Dutch voters seemed

convinced that to get Wilders's policies they would have to tolerate Wilders's person.

### The Folly of Moderation

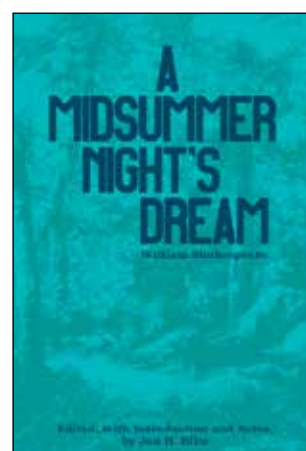
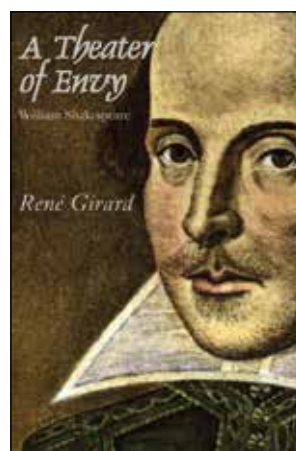
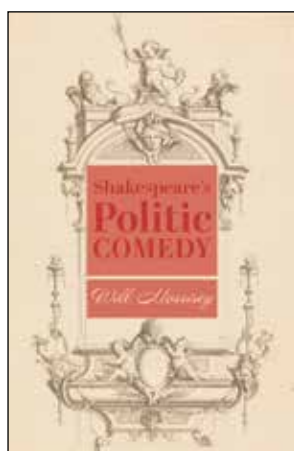
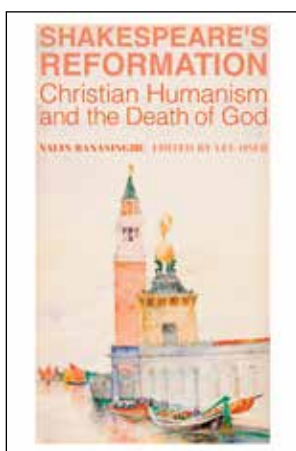
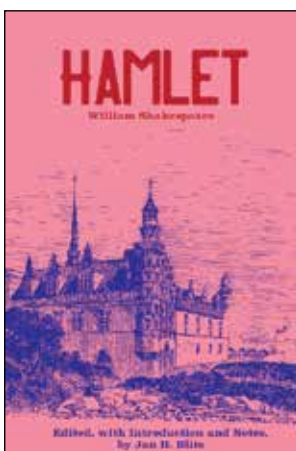
**T**HAT CONVICTION MAY HAVE DEEPENED over recent weeks. In early February Omtzigt blew up coalition discussions in their final week over a technical budgetary question, making the likelihood of a Wilders government more remote for the time being. And yet at the same time, events have been making it harder to envision a government without Wilders.

One is the war in Gaza. The war started before the elections, but the Netherlands keeps having the same uncomfortable experience as other European countries: the irruption into its national political life of the first-ever generation to be ill-disposed toward the state of Israel, and inclined to express it through strident marches. A younger generation either has not been taught that three-quarters of Dutch Jews perished in the Holocaust, or has not drawn the same lessons from history that its elders did. Large parts of the Dutch population are intensely uncomfortable seeing their own children marching through the streets of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, chanting anti-Israel slogans with the children of Muslim immigrants. Wilders, who lived in Israel for two years as a young man and has

returned several dozen times since, is the only Dutch politician who has taken Israel's side without hemming and hawing. This has been one of the dizzying European developments of the last six months: except in Germany, the defense of Israel has become a right-wing cause.

The first talks aimed at pulling together a conservative coalition included Wilders, Omtzigt, van der Plas's farmers, and the post-Rutte VVD. The possibility that the last of these could back Wilders seemed to diminish when the Dutch Senate—relying on VVD votes—passed a requirement that communities and villages in the countryside take a share of the thousands of asylum-seekers now lodged in the far east of the country. The so-called "Dispersion Law" was widely unpopular, based as it was on a cosmopolitan optical illusion. Most migrants flock to Holland's relatively wealthy globalized cities. They receive top priority for social housing because providing it is, in the view of global city elites, not just a treaty obligation but also the right thing to do. But migrant groups in major cities, while poorer than their affluent neighbors, are better off than those Dutch who live far from the job market. So, while rich city-dwellers look on the migrants as fit objects of charity, rural Dutch look on the migrants and see the darlings of the country's elite. Remember, all Dutch cities and towns face a

## “WORDS, WORDS, WORDS.”



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dire housing crisis. Municipal offices are full of desperate families. But migrants get preference. “As soon as a refugee arrives, we *must* arrange housing,” a municipal employee in North Holland said in January. “We are obligated to do this. Our citizens ask us, ‘Why don’t you care for *our* future?’” She added, “If other groups had to be given housing with the same urgency, you’d see how broken the Netherlands really is.”

In the early days of coalition negotiations, Wilders signaled he would moderate certain of his positions for the sake of comity, offering to put a few of his more controversial proposals “in the icebox.” That included his Koran ban and his suggestion that dual citizens be barred from serving as government officials. He told the country’s largest newspaper, *De Telegraaf*, that Islam was no longer the main issue.

And he may be right. The Dutch have acquired a new way of being afraid in the past two decades. At the turn of the century, in the time of Fortuyn, the worry was that a minority element would abuse the tolerance of Dutch culture, leveraging its youth or its social cohesion or its readiness for violence in order to demand special privileges. Today, in the age of Rutte, it looks as though Dutch culture is withering away. The Dutch are less worried that they may be bothered by minorities than that they’ll *become* a minority.

In mid-January, a government commission issued a long-awaited report on the country’s

likely demographics in 2050. Great news: the country is going to get “older, more crowded, and more diverse.” On current trends, the Netherlands, which had grown from 16 million in Fortuyn’s time (a population density that already felt stifling) to 18 million, could well grow to 23 million by 2050. Should this so-called “high-migration scenario” come to pass, 45% of the country would be of migrant background. The link between the size of the population and the foreignness of the population arises because, according to the report, all population growth in the Netherlands is now due to immigration. That’s fine, the report said. But perhaps, the report’s authors added, in the interest of stemming the discontent over housing and other things, the country could aim for “moderate population growth,” limited to a net of 40,000 or 60,000 a year. It is still quite a clip—growth as fast as in the Baby Boom years of the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s. That would give a population of 19 or 20 million at mid-century. But getting to even “moderate” growth is going to require a Herculean effort. The net migration in 2021 was 107,000. In 2022, with the addition of refugees from the Russia-Ukraine war, it was 223,000.

And this led to an extraordinary ideological confusion. The *NRC Handelsblad*, newspaper of the country’s elites, has always taken VVD legislator Martin Bosma to task for his allusion to *omvolking*, or population

replacement. The *NRC*, like many American newspapers, calls this a “conspiracy theory.” But now, in the wake of what it praised as a “nuanced” report from the commission, the *NRC* announced: “Since the second world war, the Netherlands has grown into a dynamic migrant society, in which migration is the most important source of population growth.” That’s precisely what Bosma says. True, the *NRC* adds the adjective “dynamic” to show that its heart is in the right place. But on the question of whether population replacement is going on, the country’s highbrow newspaper is of one mind with Wilders’s party.

What almost no one has been able to see is that the cost and benefits of migration can rise or fall over time. Migration can become more politically dangerous. It can bring a heightened risk of being *conquered*. A wise investor should avoid getting dependent on such a labor supply chain. If the Netherlands really is so dependent on the outside world for its prosperity, then the very last thing it should be doing is closing down its farms. The public now rallying behind Wilders may be thinking along these lines: if every single estimate of growth in the past generation has been an underestimate, then it is folly to aim for moderation.

*Christopher Caldwell is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books.*



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