

# Democracy and Leadership



Prof. dr. Annemieke J.M. Roobeek



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**Prof. dr. Annemieke J.M. Roobeek**

Professor of Strategy and Transformation Management

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Nyenrode Business University

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## DEMOCRACY AND LEADERSHIP

# Democracy and Leadership

At this present juncture when new leadership is emerging in politics in the Netherlands, it is an excellent time to reflect on Democracy and Leadership. How has democracy come under pressure and what are remedies to get the basis of democracy, the citizens, actively engaged in the strategic choices to be made.



## What is a democracy?

A democracy is a form of government that grants influence over the government to all the people. In parliamentary democracy, the government is accountable to a parliament of representatives elected by the people. In a democracy, a government of the majority governs with consideration for the needs and

wishes of the minority, along with a free press and an independent rule of law.

Democracy is more than the political centre of power in The Hague, Brussels, or any capital city in a democratic country. It is the system of institutions, executive organizations that implement policies, and the independent judiciary that makes democracy work in a way that citizens can trust the system. In a democracy, freedom and the common good are central concepts. Within the framework of rights and duties of the common good, citizens enjoy freedom, the right to privacy and protection.



### **Image building and perception**

A democracy is about dialogue with each other to come to ideas, argumentation, substantiation, and consensus that works for different parties. The dialogue is instrumental to arrive at supported decisions based on



facts and arguments. Opposite the handwork of dialogue is the image-building or image formation of leading politicians. Image building of political leaders leaves little room for nuance. Image building evokes resistance or admiration. It is these filters that distort the substantive message and argumentation. What is left is perception. Recipients want confirmation of their perceptions and media eagerly play on this. The late Pim Fortuyn (1948-2002) considered himself a man with a mission and thought the image of the Dutch Messiah applied well to him as he became more and more a populist politician starring in the media. With this conscious image building he appealed at the time to the angry white man and woman who had lost faith in politics and government. Initially with pertinent analyses about a failing government and the need for a different administrative culture, but later more and more specifically with populist issues surrounding Islam, migrants, closing borders and the removal of the anti-discrimination article 1 from the Constitution.

### **Framing**

Although imaging with increasingly populist statements almost brought Fortuyn to the highest position in power, his utterances did not end abruptly after his death in 2002. It was the first political murder in the Netherlands. On the contrary, Fortuyn planted seeds for a political culture that has been adopted by emerging parties on the conservative and radical-right side of the

political spectrum. Framing social issues and selective colouring also became part of mainstream parties.



Media perceptions increased in talk shows, and in social media. Soaps, sensations, and scandals garnered more viewers and readers than substantive truth substantiated by facts and well-researched arguments. Electorally, it worked for parties to opportunistically conjure up enemy images, impose fear for imaginary disaster, and magnify perceived contradictions. The low point was the fall of the outgoing Rutte IV cabinet in July 2023 over migration as an unbridgeable issue, narrowed down to asylum seekers. It was ultimately about short-term interest, to satisfy conservative party supporters, but in fact it was about the backs of children left behind in war zones by denying reunification with refugee parents (status holders) in the Netherlands. How deep can you fall morally. Where is democratic leadership at a time when so much more and so much is going on at the

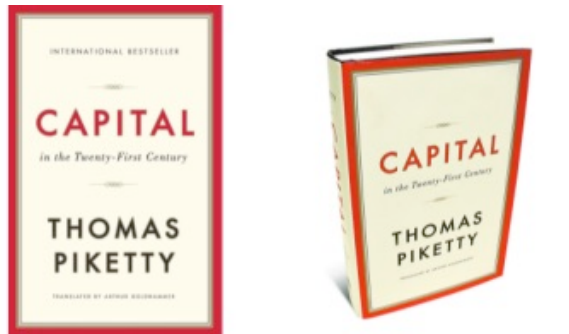
same time? Where is the narrative, the vision, the ambition that binds us together to work on a solid and dynamic democracy rather than drives us apart?

### **Times of transformations and challenges**

Opportunistic self-interest for electoral gain is not the leadership that advances a democracy in times of transformation. It pits people against each other instead of working to build broad support for a changing society. Not only has society become more diverse in recent decades, but economically and technologically we are amid a transformation to a different system. The challenges include the impact of changing climate due to global warming, declining biodiversity and nature restoration, excessive production of nitrogen, sustainability, housing shortage, opportunity inequality and the widening gap between the wealthy and less fortunate. Here one can also connect with Thomas Piketty in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. "If we are to regain control of capitalism, we must bet everything on democracy - and in Europe, democracy on a European scale." (p. 573) In his analysis on increased social inequality since the 1980s, he indicates that underlying this social inequality were political choices, particularly in taxation and finance (shareholder capitalism, finance capital). According to Piketty, the main task of achieving greater equality lies in the diffusion of knowledge and skills, and thus broad access

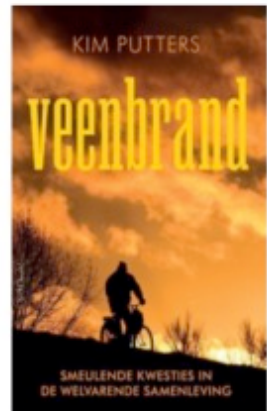
to education, professional and personal development. Pillars of social capitalism in a democracy.

The knock-on effect of the neo-liberal politics of recent decades in the Netherlands is unmistakable. Big corporations over citizens. Wealthy over the bottom of society. Recent figures from the CPB (Central Planning Office) and SCP (Social-Cultural Planning Office) show that nearly 1 million people in the Netherlands live below the poverty line and that this number has increased rapidly. (Volkskrant, Aug. 18, 2023). Among these are 230,000 children, or 7% of children in the Netherlands. There are 172 food banks in the Netherlands and the number of users is growing. The minimum wage is simply not enough to have a decent living. The gap between rich and (working) poor(er) is widening and this is accompanied by social discontent and distrust in democratic institutions.



## Future perspective

As Kim Putters, the Chairman of the Social Economic Council (SER) in the Netherlands, writes in 'Het Einde van de BV Nederland' (The End of the Netherlands Ltd, 2022), a narrative is needed, a future perspective, so that people feel they belong again to the democracy and that there is equality. The increasing poverty trap cannot be managed away with even more fragmented measures spread across ministries and municipalities. Integral, structural answers will be needed to achieve broad-based prosperity that is good for all citizens.



Measures could range from increased wealth taxation of the super-rich to something along the lines of a basic income or liveable wage income for those who fall into the poverty trap. The current minimum wage and the

social benefits for those who are not able to work, is no longer sufficient. The system of benefits is extremely complicated and often full of arbitrariness which leads to inequality. A sort of basic income, even if temporary, reduces stress in families and lets people regain room to move forward in life without getting caught in a forest of rules and legal inequality. If hot dinner is a luxury for some, the basic needs must first be in order: food, housing, clothing, leisure and work or community service. In a democracy, you don't look away. You take care of each other for the greater good of the collective.

### **Democracy founded on the rule of law**

Democracy is founded on the rule of law and the institutions that provide the checks and balances. It is thus more than government and parliament. More than politics alone. The freedom that democracy offers to citizens is accompanied by responsibilities for the greater good. Democracy is a form of state in which the collective interest, the common good, is paramount, not individual self-interest. This is true for governments, politicians and for citizens. In serving the collective, the individual finds the protection and the freedom to act within the frameworks of democracy.

The perception of democracy is made outside. Outside the centres of power. How people think, feel responsible, stand aside, or distrust the system takes place in their social environment, family, or work. Democracy and administrative renewal is not just about

the plush and the puppets in a government or parliament. It is about how we treat each other and how we respect each other. How we relate to each other. It is about social cohesion and the great challenges of our time. It is about the "learning society" to learn together and improve each time, so that we can all experience freedom and protection. After all the coarsening of recent years, a respectful relationship with each other is desperately needed.



What we look for at this new juncture in time are leadership styles that radiate commitment and connection and encourage people, companies, society, to engage and take a new leap forward together on the basis of a coherent story, a narrative, a shared vision with clear goals. Not an easy task. The perspective that binds together must be based on facts, clear argumentation, truths that are understood, so that

policies are explainable, reliable and implementable. At a time when new political leaders are taking office, this is the challenge to strengthen democracy, collaborate, find common ground, and not squander or fragment it.

## **Vision and responsibility for the bigger picture**

In part, the complex challenges can be answered with other distributive financial mechanisms, new technology, and contemporary forms of education and development that allow people to grow along with them. But most importantly, we must shape those transformations in a democracy under the rule of law. That requires responsibility for the bigger picture and not for opportunistic single issues, it requires long-term vision, support, stamina and not short fuses and deliberate creation of contradictions. Structural reforms require more than ever democratic leadership based on cooperation, horizontal networking leadership across democratic institutions, organizations and citizens. It requires the serious and active involvement of the population and stakeholders to also take responsibility on their part to participate democratically in discussions, take part in community activities, join the civil society, and take accountability. At this point, it is interesting to cite "Het Tij Tegen" (The Tide Against) by Herman Tjeenk Willink, who can be regarded as the conscience of the Netherlands politics and governance. He argues that government, in its policies and functioning, must



meet the requirements of democracy and law, because they provide legal equality and security for citizens. He does not find it so strange that in recent years citizens have increasingly rebelled against the erosion of democracy. His contention is that the erosion is the result of the dominance of money as a benchmark, as if government were a business. Government has been economized and democracy, he says, has been sold off. Monetary gain prevails. Can a measure be off? What is the financial cost-benefit analysis? But for whom are the costs and for whom are the benefits?



Tjeenk Willink argues that a healthy democracy cannot exist without active citizenship. Balance and counterbalance are needed. The new political leadership must again seek the counterbalance in society and engage in dialogue with it. Connection with citizens is needed to gain an understanding of the real problems so that structural solutions can be found in the common

interest. So, in case of the protesting farmers and the problem of high emissions of intensive livestock farming the government should not buy off the nitrogen problem individually with companies and farmers, but building a vision of greening industry, making agriculture more sustainable and financing biodiversity for a healthy environment for all.

### **Engagement through democratic dialogue**

Democracy requires popular involvement via engagement; it involves more than voting once every few years. In a democracy, dynamism and movement can come in a positive way when space is created for democratic dialogue on issues of collective concern. The larger issues, complex matters certainly have popular interest. At an early stage, people want to be involved so that active participation can take place. Giving information after the fact as a fait accompli is a death sentence because it causes people to drop out or become opponents and develop even more mistrust. With leading politicians acting more as technocrats and managing the government and its institutions as if it were a corporation with divisions with separate managers, this leadership style has created even less cohesion. Large, complex issues require fence-free cooperation between institutions, networks in which officials, policymakers, citizens can work together freely around complex issues. The leadership that goes with this is horizontal networking leadership.

The absence of a vision, a goal, an ambition to which you are drawn is a harbinger of failing leadership and a lack of responsibility for the whole. Band-aids won't get you there. It is not surprising that people drop out, lose confidence, and become cynical. Dead in the pot of a democracy.

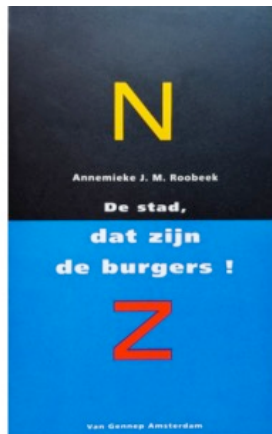


## **Democratizing is a verb: Forum Amsterdam**

It can also be done differently. At my time as Wibaut Chair at the University of Amsterdam, I set up Forum Amsterdam. That was in the mid-1990s. A large-scale action research process on democratic renewal and involvement of hundreds of citizens. The motto was: ‘The city is the citizens!’ The core was democratic renewal, urban planning and making the future together with citizens. Actively involving citizens in major issues, making them experience that complexity can be understood and that independent citizens can work

constructively with policy makers and officials if you come up with your own initiatives.

In Forum Amsterdam it was a) about sustainable accessibility of the city with a new North-South metro line and b) an accessible government and public administration that is open to questions, comments and initiatives from society. With 12 cross sections in networking teams of very diverse citizens and based on themes from economy to culture, we engaged in a democratic dialogue on the future of the city of Amsterdam. We learned what is going on, how to deal with opposing interests and what you can tackle constructively together. It was also important to see how topics are interrelated and that you can work together on a common future image of the city.



The North-South metro line was the metaphor for developing a track of innovations proposed by citizens. At the same time, it is the metaphor for making new connections between citizens, public administration, and civil servants to increase support for complex changes. When normal people understand what the issues are, one can talk to each other about these issues, work on them and take responsibility for proposals together. You can look beyond the nitty gritty and see the bigger picture. I led Forum Amsterdam from 1994-1997. From Forum Amsterdam, 20 projects emerged, supported by citizens, and partly financed by the city. With Forum Amsterdam the city had been given a future by its citizens.

### **Activating without polarization: Noord Lonkt!**

Another example is how at the turn of the century, with the Noord Lonkt project, we matured time, government, housing corporations, and the business community with a process in which citizens, artists, and stakeholders worked interactively on the future of the NDSM terrain. At that time it was a former industrial area for the shipping industry, which turned into a waste land. However, the positioning of the NDSM was very attractive: at the other side of the river IJ, close to the city center, at the sunny side of Amsterdam-North. The area had an enormous potential for development. However, there was regulation to keep it an industrial

site and it was highly polluted. What to do to explore the potential and to keep the arty character of this waste land? The aim was to explore with stakeholders and citizens this potential, but to do this in a process without polarization, using democratic dialogue as a tool. How do you preserve the free, public character and some roughness, while the area around it will be densely built with housing and offices in the years to come?

If you walk around the NDSM terrain now in 2023, you see that it has succeeded reasonably well. The waterfront on the IJ has remained free space for everyone. There is plenty of room for culture, entertainment, beach and activity, and dense building has taken place. Together, it has come together as a special urban ensemble.



Activating citizens, however, does not happen by itself. Democratizing, democratic dialogue, it takes organizational power and initiative. It is not something that comes naturally. The examples in the public arena show that democratic renewal and activation of citizens must be actively driven by people who know how to organize this. The participation of highly diverse citizens and stakeholders in open processes with a democratic dialogue is an important addition to the democratic decision-making process.

### **Citizens' Assembly**

It is hopeful that in recent years citizens' assemblies as we did with Forum Amsterdam and Noord Lonkt! have regained interest and that in cities and provinces, for example around energy transition, more thought is being given to how to actively involve the citizenry through networking. Many of the principles in citizens' assemblies, such as working with cross sections of citizens and employing democratic dialogue, can be directly derived from what we in Forum Amsterdam and with Noord Lonkt! were already putting into practice on a large scale. Activist science pays off, you might say. As we started the large-scale action research projects on democratic renewal, we had a long-term view. The why and how came from the analyses on the need of networking with citizens, civil administrators, and government in new forms of democracy and active participation. Academics who use action research

methodologies can often apply innovation in practice while learning with the communities involved. It is good that there are consultancies nowadays to further put this thinking into practice.

## **Democracy is fragile**

Yet daily reality is extremely unruly. Democracy is a fragile form of state that is constantly under pressure. Think of the undermining of democracy with the 50+1 rule of the majority that can flatten minorities, while that is not allowed in a democracy. The majority must respect the minority. Or think of the hefty rise of populist forces, specific framing to fuel vote buying, evoking enemy images (asylum seekers, climate activists) for electoral gain. Splintering by one issue parties that prefer the opportunism of a single issue (farmers, migration) to an integral vision of where we want to move together as a society. They serve private interests over the common good with popular opinion. It is often more about personal egos than moving forward together in democracy. With fake news and distortion of facts, the truth is knowingly peddled. That some politicians "no longer have an active memory of it" has become so laughable, but at the same time so worrisome that citizens have even less confidence in political players. The media cannot be exonerated here either, because with the advent of social media and endless series of talk shows, opinions have become more important than science-based facts and substantive arguments. Scientists and experts can come

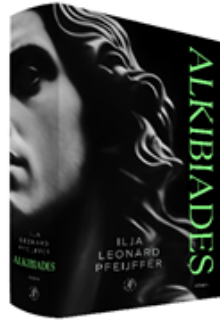
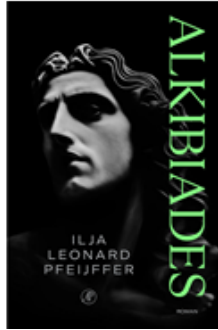


up with evidence, but if it is put down as "just another opinion," then objective decision-making is far away. In a recent book publication, we showed how strategic decision-making can be different. By combining data for objectivity and dialogue for bringing issues to the surface, a simulator program can be used to present a choice of how people, planet and profit relate to each other. Based on data and dialogue, we have shown in numerous cases that balanced and impactful decision-making is possible and apparent contradictions can be bridged.



## Democratic decision-making and legitimacy: inspiration from Alkibiades

For anyone concerned with democracy and leadership, Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer's book *Alkibiades* is required reading. A magnificent book. He describes democracy in decline in Athens in the 5th century B.C., and he holds up a mirror to make us think critically about the present. It is frighteningly recognizable, Pfeijffer argues, when you see the symptoms of 2,500 years ago and the pressures on democracy now.



I quote from Alkibiades the leading politician Nicias giving a lesson in democracy:

(...)The people are divided. It seems like every day there are more factions and parties with outraged sectional interests, investing more energy in fighting each other than in serving the collective interest. " (Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, Alkibiades, p. 287).

(...)Because democracy, by definition, is based on the collective judgment of the people, it is subject to the turbulence of tempers and uncontrollable emotions. Therefore, for democracy to function properly, it is essential to incorporate mechanisms that create distance, slow down and cool feelings. This requires leaders (like Themistokles and Perikles) who do not allow themselves to be led by the fear of whims of the volatile popular mind, who have a vision and the courage to convince the people of it, and who dare to steer the debate rather than be governed by public

opinion. This requires a people willing to compromise for the common good." (Alkibiades, p. 287)

And another apt quote from Alkibiades:

(...)Democratic decision-making must be based on an open and honest exchange of arguments. When it takes place in an atmosphere of imputation and attempts to intimidate opponents with attacks on their good name, it becomes a farce. When personal wins over business and reputations become more decisive than arguments, politicians become will-less slaves to public opinion and a plaything of the emotions of the moment. Athens owes it to its standing to keep itself from slipping into such a caricature of democracy." (Alkibiades, p. 89)

We can draw the lesson that democratic leaders, read the new generation of political leaders, will have to prove to citizens again the legitimacy of governance from vision and deeds. Not from populism and public opinion fuelled by opinions, but from courage to see ahead and take democratic values to heart. Democratic leadership is there to bring citizens along through dialogue in the ambition to improve society, to renew it. Seeking balance and counterbalance. That is the task for democratic leadership.

## Bridging the gap between politics and citizens

In democracy as we know it, there has been an ever-increasing narrowing toward the political arena and the egos of leaders. There, self-interest outweighs the common good. This creates the gap between politics and citizens. Political choices then no longer have to do with the national interest, but with their own party interests and power.



This can be seen painfully clearly in the tax allowance affair that discriminated citizens. It is also abundantly clear in the Groningen gas dossier. Groningen suffers from earth quakes for decennia. Political interests of politicians, financial gain, and support for individual companies as stakeholders, such as NAM (with Shell and Exxon Mobile) prevailed for decades above the general interest of the citizens of the province of Groningen who suffer from the earth quakes. Arguments and facts presented by critical

representatives of the people were not heard. Even dialogues organized to allow citizens to be heard were not taken seriously by political leaders, according to the book "Groningen and the quakes" by Wim Derksen and Mariëlle Gubben (2022).

The parliamentary inquiry on Groningen of December 2022 has confirmed how political leaders belittled, actively hampered, and failed to take arguments of the citizens of Groningen seriously, and how the interests of corporations and state coffers went before safety of residents. The process of a parliamentary inquiry does not in itself lead to change, but picking up leadership and taking accountability to change strategic direction does. The Groningen national coordinator, alumnus of the Nyenrode executive MBA and convinced of the power of networking and networking principles, saw when she took office in 2022 that things had to change. She asked me late last year to create a plan based on my experience with democratic dialogue and mobilizing people to actively involve them in strategic developments that are about their lives and livelihoods. The trust of citizens must be restored. By listening, giving people a voice, simplifying structures, and focusing on the core task: restoring homes, care for mental damage and restoring trust in democratic institutions. In the practice of implementation, it must be proven that the government can be reliable, can be generous to citizens and is there unconditionally for all citizens. In the NCG project in Groningen, we are

working to put into practice networking with civil servants, citizens, and stakeholders to make responsible decisions that contribute to the solution of problems, so that people have a perspective again.

### **Leadership in a democracy**

Living in a democracy is not an all-inclusive stay with the state as all-solver and financial flapjack but is a joint activity of citizens, politicians and governmental institutions. For the issues that arise, democracy must use the power of dialogue every time to shape and give substance and legitimacy to the implementation of policy to practice. The idea that government should just do it also makes citizens lazy. We must shape this form of state, democracy, together from the bottom up and from the top down. With vision, with concrete approaches, with working on challenges, with taking responsibility. That is what makes a democracy dynamic, lively, and innovative. It is the preservation of functioning democratic rule of law in which people have confidence again.

With a democracy under pressure, this requires new political leadership. Certainly not the strong man type, the super technocrat, or the autocrat. Not the screamer, the attention-seeker, the demagogue. Not the ego-tripper. Rather the visionary with a coherent narrative, a perspective, the connector who creates combinations in thinking and doing, explains connections between complex issues, and encourages initiative with citizens

(businesses, stakeholders) at all levels. Political leadership that collaborates with each other, across the artificial divisions of departments. These are the complex issues that are interdisciplinary and require collaboration to achieve supported solutions.



## **Democracy is ours and democratizing means collaboration and networking**

In other words, every day we need to provide democracy with new energy by democratizing. This can be done in organizations, companies, governments, and politics. In this way we will gain new enthusiasm and a reevaluation of the freedom to do better. Look into your organization, company or neighbourhood. That interplay of inclusion of people, diversity of cultures and innovation to do new things is what makes democracy unique. That is the networked fabric of a democracy. We can take a new step together in freedom, a shared vision of the future that everyone can give substance to that ensures support, perseverance, and vitality. Let us set ourselves the task of taking democracy to the next level and securing freedom for now and future generations.



**Prof. dr. Annemieke J.M. Roobeek** is Professor of Strategy and Transformation Management at Nyenrode Business University. Previously, she held the Verolme Chair in Technology and Economics at Nyenrode. At the University of Amsterdam, she held the Wibaut Chair as Professor of Metropolitan Affairs and has been Professor of Management of Complexities in Policy and Strategy.

She has also gained broad experience as a supervisory board member in numerous internationally operating companies (Eneco, Randstad Holding Nederland, KLM, ABN AMRO, Abbott Pharmaceuticals Products). She is a known chairperson of boards and advisory councils (Social Finance NL, Holland Fintech, PGGM, CPI Governance). As an entrepreneur, with MeetingMoreMinds she puts strategic management from the bottom up, networking and ecosystem design with diverse players into full practice. GrwNxt is her latest venture to develop AI and data science models to contribute to sustainable, healthy food production in GrwNxt modules.



## **Democracy and Leadership**

We are at an extraordinary juncture where new political leadership is emerging. At the same time, the societal, economical, and geopolitical challenges are enormous. Sustainability, housing for masses of people, opportunity inequality and broad social welfare are topics for a coherent political narrative with which political leadership can profile itself. Broad-based future perspectives are needed. This is the perfect time to reflect on Democracy and Leadership. How has democracy and its institutions come under pressure? What are the remedies to get the basis of democracy, the citizens, actively involved again in the strategic choices to be made in times of transformation? Can the substance of arguments in democratic dialogue regain space over unsubstantiated opinions and populist framing? This is a reflection on the need for a learning society, about concrete examples of how change can be done in a participative democratic way, about the networked fabric that makes democracy come alive. There is an urgency for ambitious new leadership based on the democratic values of cooperation for the common good. To democratize is a verb. It is about taking democracy to a higher level and securing the democratic freedom of citizens now and in the future.

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