



The farmers' revolt in the Netherlands: Causes and consequences

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Abstract

The Netherlands is blessed with abundant water, flat countryside and an openness to trade. This has helped to propel the agricultural sector to be one of the most productive in the world. Dutch farmers are savvy, well-educated and work within strict environmental regulations. What explains, then, the farmers' revolt that started in 2019? It almost brought the country to its knees, led to the largest post-war electoral shift and started an international movement of farmers. How could such a ubiquitous chemical element, nitrogen, have such a significant effect on farmers, Dutch politics and eventually the biodiversity directive of the European Commission? The revolt led to the strong presence of farmers' issues in parliament and a new dynamic in the debate about social change in the countryside, agricultural interests and nature protection. This article gives an overview of the events that led up to the farmers' revolt, its connection with earlier movements and its longer-term ramifications.

Keywords

Farmers' revolt, Populism, Party politics, Dutch politics, Status quo bias, European Parliament, Common Agricultural Policy, Natura 2000

Introduction: The unfolding of the events of the revolt

On 29 May 2019 the highest general administrative court in the Netherlands (Raad van State) ruled that the existing permitting procedure for nitrogen-emitting activities was at odds with the EU directive on the matter (Raad van State 2019). Existing permits had to

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be re-evaluated. Thousands of construction sites were effectively temporarily shut down by the uncertainty of obtaining planning permission. In response to the ruling, a report commissioned by the government and published on 25 September concluded that a radical change was necessary. *Not Everything Is Possible* was the title of the report (Advisory Board on Nitrogen Problems 2019). The report itself was not hostile to farmers, but laid out the problems of nitrogen emissions in the agricultural sector, the desire to build more houses and the requirements of protecting natural habitats.

The perception of a farmer-hostile attitude was fuelled by a statement by a Member of Parliament from the social-liberal Democrats 66 (D66), on 9 September, that the live-stock of Dutch farmers should be reduced by 50%. The statement was perceived as an affront to all farmers in the Netherlands and gave rise to the idea that farmers were the victims of a political elite that had no concern for their livelihoods.

On 1 October 2019 farmers in the Netherlands took their tractors to The Hague to protest against the perceived threat to farming. Around 2,200 tractors were involved and the convoy caused the longest morning traffic jam in Dutch history. After this first demonstration, more followed. A complete timeline (in Dutch) can be found on the Levend Landschap (2024) website.

The initial demonstration was followed by other forms of protest that took place over a period of several months. Early on, there was some violence, such as the ramming of the door of the provincial parliament in Groningen on 14 October (*NOS Nieuws* 2019). Later, protests were mostly confined to blockades and the bullying of politicians. They had an intimidating effect, but little actual violence was committed.

At the height of the protests, solidarity with farmers was shown through the display of the inverted national flag almost everywhere: on highways, farmland and along city roads. During that period, one might have been forgiven for being confused about the proper ordering of the colours (it is red on top). Another sign of protest was the display of a farmer's red handkerchief. These were seen attached to houses as well as to trucks and cars to show support for the farmers' protests.

Throughout the whole period, from October 2019 to July 2022, public support for farmers remained consistently high. Polling in July 2022 put support for the farmers' actions somewhere between 39% and 60% (respondents answered that they supported the farmers 'a lot' or 'fully', Ipsos 2022).

After the protests began in 2019, a series of new judicial opinions, model updates (for measuring nitrogen deposition), government reports and solutions followed at speed. At the same time, farmers started organising further. This led to the creation of the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BoerBurgerBeweging, BBB) in 2019 and its entry into parliament after the 2021 general election.

In the 2021 elections for the House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer), one seat went to the BBB. This gave the party leader, Caroline van der Plas, increased visibility

and credibility as the spokesperson for farmers' interests. Her tone of voice and folksy image contributed to the subsequent increase in the popularity of the BBB.

The inability of the government to end the confrontation and resolve the nitrogen problem in a satisfactory way led to more widespread support for the farmers. As a result, the BBB won a landslide victory in the 2022 provincial elections: it became the largest party in every one of the 12 provinces and subsequently the largest party in the Senate (which is elected by the provincial delegates), holding 16 seats out of 75 (Kiesraad 2023).

The election outcomes show that support for the BBB was not limited to the countryside or to areas with many farmers. In Amsterdam, 5% of the vote went to the BBB. In the province in which Amsterdam is located, North Holland, the BBB became the largest party, with 14% of the votes. The prime minister's party, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD) took second place, with 13% of the vote (AlleCijfers.nl 2024).

In 2023 the BBB gained 7 seats in the House of Representatives, an increase of 6 seats (out of a total of 150). In the 2024 European elections it won 2 seats in the European Parliament (out of the 31 allotted to the Netherlands, equal to 5.4% of the Dutch vote). The BBB was subsequently admitted to the European People's Party Group in the Parliament (Vasques and de La Baume 2024).

Populism and agrarian revolts

As Brett (2018) notes in his review, these contemporary protests build on a long tradition of dissent in the countryside. In the Netherlands, the BBB is actually the third farmers' party that has managed to get into parliament. In 1918 the Peasants' League (Plattelondersbond) was elected (changing its name in 1933), and the Farmers' Party (Boerenpartij) was elected in 1963 (see Vossen (2015) for the rise and fall of these two parties). The BBB is thus the latest incarnation of the Dutch farmers' party.

In the post-war period, farmer Hendrik Koekoek (known as 'Boer Koekoek') was the leader of the Farmers' Party, holding a seat in parliament between 1963 and 1981 (Tunderman et al. 2022). The Farmers' Party had been elected to parliament because of a revolt earlier in 1963 in which thousands of farmers had visited Hollandscheveld to protest against attempts to evict three farmers from their home.

It is often the case in the Netherlands that protests catalyse new movements or political parties. This was how the first political party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party (Anti-Revolutionaire Partij), was formed in 1879. It merged with others to become the Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen-Democratisch Appèl, CDA) in 1980. The founding of the Anti-Revolutionary Party came after unexpectedly large support for a petition to the king regarding the financing of religious schools. This support had shown that people could be organised to achieve a common purpose. In this way, popular unrest around one issue morphed into the forming of a broader political party (Janse 2019). This also happened

with the protests against nuclear armament, which led to the creation of the Pacifist Socialist Party (Pacifistisch Socialistische Partij). And it happened again in 2019 with the formation of the BBB.

Intentionality

At several points during the farmers' revolt, there were opportunities for the government to strike a deal with farmers' organisations in a peaceful way. One would expect this to be the case in the Netherlands, the land of 'polder culture' and love of compromise (Graaf 2023). There was a willingness to spend money, several stakeholders were willing to talk and it was in the best interests of the ruling coalition to solve the problem quickly. However, ultimately no deal was struck, which was the result of several small but symbolic events that eroded the trust of the farmers.

One such event was the aforementioned statement by one Member of Parliament that the number of livestock in the Netherlands should be reduced by 50%. Tjeerd de Groot was a member of D66, one of the senior partners in the third Rutte cabinet (2017–21). Because D66 was a coalition partner, the words had impact and they catalysed the farmers to start up their tractors and travel to The Hague.

Another such event—at a later stage of the revolt—was the publication of a report that contained a map of the areas where farming would have to be reduced. The report aimed to solve the crisis and give farmers a fair deal. The map was intended as a 'starting point', a visual aid for further negotiations (Van de Hulsbeek 2022). But the mere existence of the map, made without consulting the farmers, supported the farmers' belief that their interests were not being considered.

These two examples bore a striking resemblance to the problem-solving approach of the government in two other areas: the allowances scandal and the compensation for earthquake victims. In both these cases, the initial empathetic words of the government were deemed to contain empty promises. The BBB used these two cases in their campaign to emphasise the low level of trust in the government. According to the party, the government was taking a top-down approach that focused on solving a *political* problem instead of a real problem, and this reinforced the distrust in it among ordinary citizens.

What people perceived was intent. With that I mean the human sensitivity to perceived intent, regardless of the actual actions. C. S. Lewis described this as the reality of a moral law: if someone on the subway attempts to make us fall, we get angry. The anger is there, even if the attempt fails. Contrast this with an accidental run-in that leads to a fall. Here, there is an actual accident (we fall), but because there is no bad intent, we are much less angry. Thus, Lewis concludes, intent matters (Lewis 1952).

What farmers observed was a government that did not seem to have the best of intentions towards farmers. And even when the government announced different policies, the suspicion of bad intent remained. Once someone's real intention has been seen, thoughts of it are not easily erased by subsequent actions that try to suggest otherwise. Intentionality

is accepted as an empathetic part of how politics is consumed by voters. Intention, image matters. Once the image of a detached or uncaring government is formed, it is near to impossible to dispel.

This is exemplified by a similar situation in Germany, where the announcement of the abolition of fuel subsidies for farmers led to widespread anger. The cancellation of this policy did not completely take away the impression that the government wanted to make life more difficult for farmers. The intent had already been shown.

In the Netherlands, as in other countries, it turns out that farmers and rural communities are sensitive to the message that their way of life or existence is not deemed important. Political messages that suggest the ‘need to reduce cattle’ or to ‘downsize farming’ are immediately framed as being hostile to the community.

Contributing factors

In Europe, the Natura 2000 network is a conservation tool for biodiversity. It consists of sites that the member states have designated themselves, under the Birds and Habitats Directives (European Commission n.d.(c)), as being vital to protecting biodiversity. Over time, the Netherlands has designated a total of 162 areas as protected. Currently, 118 of these are deemed to be vulnerable to nitrogen depositions (Arcgis.com n.d.).

To deal with the need for industrial and agrarian development, in 2015 the government decided to set up a special Plan Aanpak Stikstof (Plan to deal with nitrogen, PAS) (*Bij12* 2023). The plan entailed an ‘offsetting’ approach, whereby nitrogen emissions in one area could be offset by lower emissions in another area. In this way, the total level of nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands could be managed, without affecting individual Natura 2000 areas.

From the outset, it was clear that this approach could not fulfil the Natura 2000 obligations properly: each designated area had to have sufficient safeguards in place for protection; one was not simply permitted to reduce nitrogen levels in one place at the expense of another. Legal scholars had warned the government as early as 2015 that its approach of ‘netting out’ nitrogen emissions would not pass muster in terms of providing effective protection for conservation areas. The protection of these areas could in no way be compensated for with measures elsewhere. Such is the nature of Natura 2000: it protects what needs protecting. It is the limited and targeted approach of the network that makes it so effective (Trochet and Schmeller 2013). Member states are free to pursue whatever approach they want, except in these areas (which they themselves have selected). Against the backdrop of earlier agrarian revolts and the strict regulations of Natura 2000, one might ask why the government behaved as it did.

Without claiming to have a sufficient explanation, let me offer a possible mechanism: the status quo bias. The status quo bias is the human tendency to avoid short-term, small losses. In political terms, ‘losses’ can be anything from a public relations setback to a

financial deficit, a tax increase or a negative development that affects voters. The bias is rooted in reference-dependent framing, where every situation or situational change is coded against an existing reference point. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) found empirical evidence for the theory and developed it to assess decision-making in risky circumstances. And ‘risky’ certainly describes the circumstances of political life (Alesina and Passarelli 2019; Osmundsen and Petersen 2020).

In the run-up to the farmers’ revolt, it was thus the status quo bias that led politicians to avoid taking measures such as imposing stricter regulations on nitrogen emissions or building permissions. Such measures could have been taken, and may have avoided bigger problems later on, but taking such actions in 2015 would have been painful. It would have led to direct problems with farmers who wanted to expand their activities. Also, in 2015 the economy was still recovering from the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, and therefore growth-limiting measures would not have been popular. The PAS gave politicians a way out, by appearing to protect nature as well as allowing for the growth of farmers’ activities. So, while the gains from EU subsidies for conservation and agriculture were received with much enthusiasm and organisational effort (Bouwma 2018), the costs in terms of the effort required to meet the standards necessary for nature conservation were happily postponed to be dealt with in the future.

The need for conservation efforts was also blurred by status quo thinking. The current conditions of the nature areas were seen as the natural reference point, including the existing practices of natural management (Ferranti et al. 2010). Many local governments viewed the Natura 2000 designation as confirmation of the beauty of a natural area in the status quo, instead of as a challenge to improve its conditions so that the habitats of species would be conserved.

Of course, one cannot claim to have insight into the exact decision-making mindset at the time. But the lure of immediate gains set against vague and uncertain future costs may well have been too great for politicians to resist.

Longer-term ramifications

Whether the BBB will become a durable political party remains to be seen. On the one hand, it taps into a wider dissatisfaction with the four consecutive governments led by the liberal VVD helmed by Mark Rutte. In criticising the ruling coalition, the BBB campaigned on more than just farmers’ interests, including the housing crisis, the allowances scandal and the enormous delay in earthquake settlements for those in Groningen province.

There are, however, some evident weaknesses of the BBB as a political party. It does not have its own distinguishing programme apart from ensuring representation of farmers’ interests. In other political areas, it appears to have quite ad hoc policies. In terms of key personnel and provincial programmes, it borrows heavily from the CDA. Many of its politicians were formerly active with the CDA. Given the recent European elections, in which the CDA received around 10% of the vote (compared to just 5% for the BBB), the BBB

no longer seems to be a direct competitor for the CDA (European Parliament 2024).¹ However, in the populist political landscape it has to compete with Geert Wilders' more outspoken and xenophobic Freedom Party (Partij van de Vrijheid, PVV).

On the other hand, it is quite possible that the BBB will develop into a more mature political party. Such a transformation will depend on its board; the party-building talents of the popular leader, Caroline van der Plas; and also on outside forces. If the other parties are not able to regain the trust of farmers, the BBB is here to stay.

There are three areas where the BBB and the farmers' movement in general have had an impact on broader societal patterns. First, the BBB has had a lasting effect on political decisions. It is part of the ruling coalition in 10 of the 12 provinces, where it will shape policy for years to come. It is still the largest party in the Senate and has obtained two seats in the European Parliament. And as of July 2024, it has been instrumental in forming a right-wing populist government in the Netherlands. The BBB was the most vocal party with regard to wanting to form a government with the PVV, which was not a preferred coalition partner for the other parties, that is, the liberals (i.e. the VVD and the New Social Contract (Nieuw Sociaal Contract)—another spin-off from the CDA).

Second, the BBB has pioneered large-scale agrarian protests, which have ensured the farmers' cause has received attention and the party has gained influence. The blockade of the highways by farmers was a logical element of the protests. The blockades were not necessarily intentional, but the result of tractors clogging up the highway. In the old days, farmers would protest with pitchforks and torches; now they use their heavy machinery to make their point. It was partly because of the traffic jams caused by the tractors that Extinction Rebellion was inspired to carry out its own blockades. In 2022 it started to regularly block the A12 at the point where it enters The Hague, the seat of parliament and the government. Later it began to blockade the ring road around Amsterdam, the A10, at the site of the former headquarters of ING (a landmark building).

Third, the movement has laid bare the tension between two societal aims. On the one hand, there is a strong desire to keep the countryside alive. Although urbanisation continues to rise throughout the world, the lure of the countryside will never be far away in the public consciousness. On the other hand, global problems such as climate change require an efficient ecology for the production of food.

The future of rural areas

Much has been written about the benefits of urbanisation (see, for example, Glaeser 2011). Cities thrive because of the network effect—the benefit of people sharing ideas and pooling resources for creative businesses and services. The flipside of urbanisation is that in many areas people feel like they are being left behind. In the US, this is happening in what is known as the 'Rust Belt'. In Europe, this process takes place at both a European level and a national level. On the European level, it is the countries in the east, and particularly their rural areas, that have seen populations shrink (Krastev and Holmes

2019). This is part of the reason for the populist backlash that began around 2000, which has seen progressive values targeted. Applebaum (2020) documents how the embrace of free markets, European integration and an urban lifestyle suddenly seem to have gone into reverse in the early twenty-first century.

On the national level, the emptying out of the countryside is a concern in the minds of both urban and rural citizens. The case of the Netherlands, with the high support shown for farmers in the big cities, bears this out.

Farming remains one of the most complex areas of EU policymaking. That this is the case is one of the tragic aspects of the EU. Farming, and the work of a farmer, is a way of life. The rise of farming in 10,000 BC (i.e. the start of the Neolithic era) is even considered the defining moment in the development of civilisation (Brown et al. 2009). The development of farming has made the rise of cities possible.

The voting patterns of city dwellers, which indicate their support for the BBB, show that the inhabitants of cities are aware of the importance of agriculture in the continued rise of urban development.

Biodiversity policies

The development of biodiversity policies at the EU level, such as the Nature Restoration Law (European Commission, n.d. (a)), has been influenced by the farmers' revolt. The development of regulations has been much affected by the sentiment of farmers that strict rules on nature restoration cannot coexist with the current style of farming (Canas 2024). The economic position of many farmers is still far from sustainable, and new ways of addressing how to support their livelihoods while protecting biodiversity need to be developed.

Climate change policies

The farmers' revolt had nothing to do with climate-change policies or carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions because these are both still underdeveloped themes in agricultural policies, at both the national and the European level. The effects of the Common Agricultural Policy on CO₂ emissions have not been measured, and this will remain the case for the foreseeable future (European Court of Auditors 2021). CO₂ emissions from agriculture are not included in the EU's Emissions Trading System. Instead, member states have submitted national plans for limiting emissions, using instruments other than pricing (European Commission n.d.(b)).

The events of the Dutch farmers' revolt over the period 2019–23 are instructive, highlighting how high-level policies on the reduction of emissions play out in political decision-making and the consciousness of farmers and non-farmers alike. The development of policies to address agricultural CO₂ emissions should take heed of this episode.

Conclusion

The farmers' uprising and subsequent formation of a political party, the BBB, fits into historical patterns whereby concerned citizens have raised their voices to confront their rulers. The revolt succeeded in capturing the public's attention and garnering political support for farmers, and has resulted in the formation of an influential political party. It has been an example for other farmers' uprisings, such as those in Germany.

On an abstract level, we can understand such movements as a natural, almost predictable, response to policies that are rooted in the status quo bias that is inherent in political strategy. When the Natura 2000 programme was implemented, the EU funding to protect natural areas was quickly claimed. The expenses of and effort required by such designations were underestimated or left to future governments to address. Farmers continued to expand their farms and livestock, despite it being clear that there was a natural limit to such expansions. What resulted was an unsustainable situation that would come to a head sooner or later.

The failure of consecutive governments to understand these natural limits and the reality of nature conservation reminds us of the words of the late Richard Feynman: 'For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for Nature cannot be fooled' (Feynman and Leighton 2001, 237).² Further back, Galileo, in his letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany in 1615, noted: 'demonstrated conclusions about *natural* and celestial phenomena cannot be changed with the same ease as opinions about what is or is not legitimate in a contract, in a rental, or in commerce' (Galileo 1615, author's emphasis). The reality of the natural world, be it a nature reserve, agriculture or a combination of both, needs to be confronted with the same sincerity and truth-seeking attitude with which Galileo examined the motions of the planets and the sun.

Notes

1. CDA, 9.45%; BBB, 5.41%; PVV, 17%.
2. This was Feynman's own conclusion about the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster.

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