

REVIEW: GREEN PARTY MEMBERSHIP

Inger Kuin

Lynn G. Bennie, **Understanding political participation. Green party membership in Scotland**, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, hb, 252pp, £52.50, ISBN 0754617238.

On 5 May 2002, I joined the Dutch Greens, 'GroenLinks'. On 6 May Pim Fortuyn was murdered, and the Dutch political system would never be the same. Why had I joined the Greens the day before? I had been sympathising with the party for a long time and both my parents voted green. On 5 May we celebrate liberation day in the Netherlands, to commemorate World War II. I went to a small manifestation where, amongst other things, all political parties had a small stand and presented themselves. I remember being appalled and scared by the populist and xenophobic rhetoric of Pim Fortuyn's party. When I came home that night I felt the urge to do something to stop Fortuynism. Joining the Greens through the Internet is what I did. It was also a way of showing my colours. I was expressing myself and establishing my identity by becoming a Green.

Lynn Bennie has written a book about why Scots join the Greens. In **Understanding political participation: Green party membership in Scotland** she investigates the rapid growth and dramatic decline of Green party membership during the 1980s and early 1990s. It is an account of a remarkable slice of recent political history, particularly seen from a Dutch viewpoint.

In 1979 the Scottish Greens had just under a hundred members. In 1990 the figure had risen as high as 1,250, but in 1993 it was down to 200 again. Bennie argues that preceding the dramatic increase in membership figures

Inger Kuin was an intern with the Scottish Green Party for three months in 2004. She has been involved with the Dutch Greens on a local level, and is currently writing as a political journalist for a Dutch daily newspaper.

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there was a heightened awareness of environmental problems, mainly because of media coverage of the subject. The dramatic decrease of membership numbers can, to a large extent, be attributed to poor internal party organisation. After 1993, membership figures started to rise again, to a current number of around 800. The most probable reason for this is Green representation in the Scottish Parliament. In 1999 Robin Harper MSP became the first ever Green parliamentarian in the UK. In 2003 seven MSPs were elected to the Scottish Parliament.

Scottish Greens are extremely well educated and belong to the 'new middle class'. They have middle class incomes and work in 'softer' professions: education, culture, health care etc. An interesting aspect of 'why' Greens joined, according to Bennie, is value-based alienation. People join an organisation because they have values that are not accepted in society in general. They seek membership to be able to express their identity. In all other fields – socially, economically, democratically – Scottish Greens are not alienated at all.

The Dutch Greens have never experienced fluctuations in membership on the scale of the Scottish Greens. At its foundation in 1989 – a merger of four smaller, leftwing parties – the party had 15,900 members. Then a slow but steady decline began, reaching its low of 11,700 members in 1996. Figures started rising again slowly, until 2002, to 15,000 members. Following the murder of Pim Fortuyn, figures rose steadily to a figure of 20,700 (1 January 2005). The decline after 1990 could be attributed to a decline in membership figures for political parties in general. It could also be the case that members who had joined the party as members of one of the smaller parties that merged became disappointed with the new party.

The profile of Dutch Greens is rather comparable to that of the Scottish Greens. They are generally very well educated and have a middle-class income. A difference is that Dutch Greens are more likely to live in the city than Scottish Greens, who are more likely to live in the country. This might be explained by the fact that Scottish country dwellers attach more value to the environment than the Dutch farmers, who often feel harmed by strict measures to protect the environment.

Comparing the Dutch and Scottish Greens, using the value-based alienation argument, the best explanation why so many more Dutch joined the Greens in the aftermath of the murder of Pim Fortuyn is because they felt their values were becoming less and less accepted in society: multiculturalism,

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international solidarity, individualism etc. They became alie lerAite

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importance of binding members to the party. Referring to the work of C.J. Bosso, Bennie writes: 'recruiting new members who pay a membership fee and contribute no more can in fact be a financial burden to the organisation unless they can be persuaded to make larger financial donations.' (p.53)

A comparative glance at the Dutch Socialist Party (SP), which is not unlike the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), is illuminating. They have become the third party in terms of membership figures in the Netherlands, while they only have eight parliamentary seats. Key to their success is the way they approach new members. Right after a member has joined the party, someone representing the local board of the party visits the new member. The new member is asked if and how he or she would like to get involved in party activity. Also, the new member is asked after his or her profession, education, hobbies, other memberships etc. The party then knows how the new member can be of use and how best to motivate him or her. This way party members tend not only to stay in the party, but also to become active (a third of SP-party members are active). This makes it easier to recruit even more new members, and so on. Why members stick with a party, and why they leave, is clearly an area that needs further research.

Overall, the book offers an interesting analysis of Green membership figures, not only as a part of Green Party history, but also as a reflection about why people become active, join clubs, societies or political parties and are motivated. Bennie uses a quote from Robert Dahl that all politicians and party strategists should always bear in mind: 'instead of seeking to explain why citizens are not interested, concerned and active, the task is to explain why a few citizens are'. (p.43). Political parties should have the modesty to ask themselves why people do get involved – and use this knowledge – instead of being offended when they do not.

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