Joop den Uyl 1919-1987: dromer en doordouwer

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Joop den Uyl was Prime Minister of the Netherlands from May 1973 to 1977. His was the most left-wing government that the country has ever known. Den Uyl’s own party, the PvdA (the Dutch Labor party), had a solid majority in the government, together with its allies, two smaller left-wing parties. In addition, a number of Christian Democrat ministers also took part in his government. In parliament Den Uyl’s government was supported by the left but only tolerated by the three Christian parties, which had not yet joined forces. This ‘red government with a hint of white’, as it was known, was a unique phenomenon for the Netherlands because of the traditional Dutch conservative majority.

This is a biography of the man who played a central role in Dutch politics during the seventies and the beginning of the eighties of the last century.

Joop den Uyl was born on August 9th 1919 in Hilversum, the son of Johannes den Uyl and Agatha van Leeuwen. He had two older brothers, Nico and Reinier, and one older and one younger sister, Ger and Map. His father had inherited a business that produced cane baskets from his father, Klaas. The Den Uyls were a strict Calvinistic family. Joop went to an orthodox Christian elementary and grammar school in Hilversum. He was an excellent student with high marks for everything but gymnastics.

Joop’s younger years were not very happy ones. His father died when he was ten. His mother needed all her energy to keep the business going. Her marriage had been happy and she found it difficult to cope without her husband. The children had to take on a lot of responsibility at young ages. Things were not helped by the Great Depression that began shortly after the death of Joop’s father. The economic crisis hit the Netherlands hard and unemployment rose to dramatic heights. In his own
neighborhood, Joop would see the unemployed standing around idly on the streets. The young boy was deeply moved by the misery he observed. His mother later told a newspaper that he once asked her to give his sandwich to a beggar, ‘because I can have another sandwich tomorrow and this man has nothing to eat’.

At an early age, Joop became interested in politics but, at that time, it was not the left he felt drawn to. Like most Calvinists, his family supported Prime Minister Colijn’s Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP). Joop became a member of several Calvinistic youth clubs. In a number of essays he wrote for school he expressed sympathy for nationalist right-wing ideas and denounced parliamentary democracy as a fraud. As a schoolboy, he was drawn to fascism, which was popular in Europe in the thirties. But he never joined a fascist organization and was not anti-Semitic or racist. His authoritarian and nationalist leanings remained in a Christian framework.

He was a passionate reader and particularly loved poetry. As a student at Amsterdam university he would write poems himself, some of which were published in the students’ club paper, Libertas ex Veritate. He studied economy but was also interested in theological issues and was influenced by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Barth taught him that every human being has to find their own way of communicating with God and that there is no such thing as Christian arts or Christian politics. Den Uyl was always open to the ideas of others and, during his years as a student in Amsterdam, he quickly became more liberal. Still, it is remarkable that he left for Nazi Germany in the summer of 1939 to follow courses in economy at the Wirtschaftsinstitut in Kiel. A good friend of his, Jo van der Hoeven, later commented that ‘Joop has never been a Nazi-sympathizer, but he was the kind of intellectual who wanted to figure everything out himself’. In Kiel, Joop also fell seriously in love for the first time with a friend of his elder sister, a Christian girl named Helga.

The German occupation of the Netherlands in May 1940 not only ended this love affair, but it shocked Joop den Uyl deeply and profoundly changed his political thinking. As editor of his student paper, he criticized the occupation and those who were prepared to accommodate it. He praised freedom and democracy, whose value he now fully came to appreciate, and vehemently condemned the anti-Semitic measures introduced by the Germans. Later on during the
Second World war, he made contact with the Dutch resistance, wrote for underground papers and helped Jewish people in hiding. In those years he became a Social Democrat. He also lost his faith in God after a girlfriend was deported to Auschwitz. He felt utterly powerless and depressed, and read a lot of Kafka (and any other books he could get his hands on). His lust for life eventually returned when he met the girl he would marry, Elisabeth (Liesbeth) van Vessem. They were together for their whole lives. Soon after the war their first daughter, Saskia, was born. She was followed by six other children: Marion, Barbara, Marten, Xander, Rogier and Ariane. Like Joop, Liesbeth was interested in literature and politics, and she was ambitious. But she had to combine her social activities with being a mother and that made her envious of her husband, whose political career took off. It sometimes led to clashes, but she nevertheless supported him and he considered her an important advisor.

In 1945 Den Uyl became a journalist, first with Het Parool, then with Vrij Nederland, both formerly underground papers, left-wing but independent. The chief editor of Vrij Nederland, Henk van Randwijk, asked Den Uyl to become his deputy. Den Uyl also joined the PvdA (the Dutch Labor party). He had an interesting but tough time working for Vrij Nederland. The weekly news magazine criticized the way the government – in which the Labor party took part – handled the decolonization of Indonesia and it had misgivings about the Cold War. Those were unpopular views at the time and they cost the magazine a lot of readers. After a while, Den Uyl began to feel sidelined. When he was offered a job as Director of Science with the PvdA, he was happy to accept. In this position, he wrote a number of important programs for the Dutch Social Democrats, including De weg naar vrijheid (The Road to Freedom) and Om de kwaliteit van het bestaan (About the Standard of Living); the latter was based on John Kenneth Gabaith’s theory in his book The affluent society.

From the fifties onwards, Den Uyl’s political star continued to rise. He became a board member of the PvdA, a member of the Lower House of Parliament and, in 1962, was appointed a councilor in Amsterdam. He had ambitious plans for the city; he promoted the expansion of industry, especially in the harbor, which he believed should compete with the harbor of Rotterdam. In those days his relations with the captains of industry were excellent. He wanted Amsterdam to become a
modern and dynamic city, with skyscrapers like Manhattan. Later on, these ideas became outmoded and the city council worked to keep the beautiful old parts of the city unimpaired or tried to restore them. But by then Den Uyl had already left Amsterdam. His reputation as a forward-looking, energetic politician had earned him the post of Minister of Economic Affairs in Cals’ centre-left government. The Cals government remained in office for only one and a half years. Its downfall, brought about by one of the coalition parties (the Roman Catholic KVP), caused an uproar in Dutch politics. The traditional political system began to fall apart and could no longer be taken for granted that Catholics would vote catholic, Protestants protestant, workers socialist and so on. In particular, the three Christian parties were in for a difficult time. Meanwhile, Den Uyl had earned credit for the way he handled the impending closure of the Limburg coal mines. He was elected as the new leader of the PvdA in the autumn of 1966. However, although they fought a vigorous campaign, Den Uyl and his party lost the elections.

The next few years were both troublesome and full of learning for Den Uyl. He was accused by the upcoming New Left of being part of the establishment and an old-fashioned politician. This, however, was only partially true. He had adapted to the quiet and moderate style of Dutch politics during the fifties, but in the years before, as a journalist, he had often criticized the lack of democracy in society. This was one of the main issues for the group calling itself ‘Nieuw Links in de PvdA’ (New Left within Labor). Although there was a lot of mutual suspicion, Den Uyl and his opponents inside the party eventually agreed on a reformist platform that was more left-wing and radical than it used to be, but still remained fully inside the framework of parliamentary democracy. Den Uyl was proud that he had succeeded in making the young radicals an integral part of his Labor party. In order to keep his party together he was prepared to debate endlessly, if necessary. Only a small number of older, more conservative Social Democrats left the party, among them two sons of the former Prime Minister, Willem Drees. They formed a new political party, which did not last.

The PvdA scored a good result in the elections of 1971 and even better in 1972. It had cooperated with two other left-wing parties and had asked voters to support an alternative, progressive government. They did not win a majority, however, and it proved difficult to form a
coalition. Eventually, under much pressure, two of the three Christian Democrat parties were willing to tolerate a Den Uyl government. The government, under its enthusiastic Prime Minister, focused on a more honest and equitable distribution of income and power, and tried to reform the education system. Den Uyl and his ministers preferred an open style of government, they rejected secrecy and refused to adopt airs and graces. They were convinced that strong links were necessary with civil society to promote political commitment. Den Uyl not only held regular meetings with the press, but went on to meet with students, members of trade unions and even sometimes took part in demonstrations. His was an outgoing style of politics. In concrete terms, however, the Den Uyl government did not achieve many of the reforms it pursued. It was also confronted with unexpected difficulties: economic growth was diminishing, government expenses were rising, and employers were becoming nervous about the intended reforms.

During Den Uyl’s term in office, the Netherlands became the victim of terrorist activities. These were mainly by a group from Indonesia who fought alongside the Dutch in the Second World War, were now living in Holland and wanted to create their own independent state on the South Moluccas. Young people from this community hijacked a train twice and occupied a school. Den Uyl, who abhorred violence, tried to solve those crises with patient negotiations. In a few cases he succeeded, but he was met with growing resistance from his deputy, Andries van Agt, a Christian Democrat whose relationship with Den Uyl worsened during their time in office. They clashed fiercely over abortion policy. Soon after, Van Agt became the leader of the Christian Democrats, who were in a process of uniting, and he distanced himself more and more from the Den Uyl government. Meanwhile, Den Uyl had to cope with a crisis concerning the Royal Family. Prince Bernhard, the husband of Queen Juliana, was accused of taking illicit commissions from the Lockheed company, an American aircraft constructor. An investigative committee was set up and came to the conclusion that the Prince probably had made grave mistakes and he was forced to resign from some of his public positions. Den Uyl was widely praised for the way he had handled the matter, however, he had kept quiet about the fact that Prince Bernhard had also received bribes from yet another aircraft firm, Northrop. Den Uyl’s reason for keeping this a secret must have been his fear that, if it became public knowledge, a constitutional crisis would be
inevitable. Not only would Queen Juliana’s position become untenable, but their daughter Beatrix was not willing to succeed her mother to the throne under those conditions. Den Uyl’s silence is understandable, but still constituted a break with his policy of openness.

In the spring of 1977, the fall of the Den Uyl government occurred over one of its pursued reforms. The elections were in May; they were won convincingly by Den Uyl and his party. The PvdA achieved its best result ever and won ten extra seats. Van Agt, who led the Christian Democrats, won only one seat, but the ongoing decline of the Christian parties had been stopped. The right-wing liberals the VVD, who had led the opposition against Den Uyl, also scored well. The Social Democrats were jubilant; they were absolutely sure that this time no government could be formed without them. However, they greatly overestimated their power and made unrealistic demands. The negotiations between Den Uyl and Van Agt took many months and, when at last a deal was struck, a majority from the PvdA refused to accept it. As usual, Den Uyl did his utmost to try and persuade his party to decide otherwise, but did not threaten to leave if they did not do it his way. Later on, when the PvdA was left out of the new government, Den Uyl was severely criticized for not asserting his will. The ‘trauma of 1977’ became legendary among Dutch Social Democrats. Van Agt formed a government with the VVD’s Wiegel. A saddened Den Uyl went back to parliament and led the opposition against his erstwhile deputy. At first, he hoped that the Van Agt government would be short-lived and he kept telling his supporters that ‘there will be a next Den Uyl government’. But he was proved wrong. Van Agt remained in office until the next regular elections. When the Christian Democrats and the VVD lost their majority in parliament, there was no other option than to once again try a centre-left coalition with Van Agt and Den Uyl. Both men hated the idea and the atmosphere in the Van Agt/Den Uyl-government was awful. Den Uyl had now become Van Agt’s deputy and he found it difficult to live with. As Minister of Social Affairs he did his best to enhance employment, but he had little money at his disposal. Government expenses had to be greatly reduced and Den Uyl, who had always favored good relations with the trade-unions, was forced to cut expenditure on social security and suffer the anger of employees. The Van Agt/Den Uyl government lasted for only nine months. In the elections of 1982 and 1986 Den Uyl, still leading the PvdA, did
remarkably well, but the results were not good enough to bring about a centre-left coalition. Instead, a new leader of the CDA (Christian Democrats), Ruud Lubbers, who had been the Minister of Economic Affairs in the Den Uyl government, led a centre-right coalition for eight years. By cutting the budget and promoting a deal between employers and trade-unions, Lubbers was able to overcome the severe economic depression. He also dealt with a NATO decision to deploy cruise missiles in Europe (and the Netherlands) as a response to Soviet SS-20s. This NATO policy caused huge protests in Holland, with half a million people taking to the streets against the deployment of the new missiles. Den Uyl supported the Dutch peace movement, though at first hesitantly, for he had always been a – critical – supporter of NATO. By the time Lubbers was finally in a position to see the deployment through, it was no longer necessary, because of an arms reduction agreement between Reagan and Gorbachov.

Den Uyl continued to tenaciously lead the opposition, but his finest hour had passed. There was unrest in his own party about his succession. Den Uyl had in mind a trade-union leader, Wim Kok, and after a lot of debate he succeeded in getting him elected as the new party leader. Even then, Den Uyl stayed on as a member of the Lower House. However, he started to pay increasing attention to international affairs. He spent time with the United Nations in New York and devoted his still considerable energy to the Socialist International Movement of which he became Deputy Chairman. During one of his international travels, he became unexpectedly ill. It turned out to be incurable brain cancer. At the age of 68, Joop den Uyl died on Christmas Eve 1987, at home, with his family. The whole country was in mourning, with even his former opponents praising his devotion to his political ideals and his democratic mentality.