



# Decent Jobs and New Patriotism

*Lodewijk Asscher, Deputy Prime Minister of the Netherlands*

**Twelve years ago**, Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was brutally murdered by a home-grown terrorist. The killer was a young man of Moroccan descent who was raised and schooled in Amsterdam. I was a fresh city councilor at that time, and I can still vividly remember the sense of disbelief and anger that seized the city.

In an attempt to understand the world and circumstances in which the killer grew up, Dutch journalist Margalith Kleijwegt wrote *Invisible Parents*, a book about a class of youngsters in a so-called black high school in his neighborhood. She described the powerlessness of the parents and the chaos at the school. Those in front of the class were forced to act like police officers rather than teachers, and some children did not show up in class for months on end without the school taking any real action to resolve this absenteeism. She talked to parents who had no clue about the world in which their children were living. Some of them did not even know where the school was located.

Even though this all took place just a few miles from the city center of Amsterdam, most people chose to ignore the problem. Cynics said that bad schools come with big cities.

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They told me that it couldn't be fixed, so we shouldn't try. Lack of aspiration was sold as realism.

Many fellow progressives had given up as well. Instead of expecting better results, they were just explaining the bad ones. But when children seem to be given up on even before they've had a fair chance, it should be our instinct to team up and fight to improve this school and others like it. After all, our *raison d'être* is fighting injustice.

We have always done so. In the past century, we fought the societal divide between the haves and the have-nots, the privileged and the nonprivileged, those who could vote and those who couldn't. We built a middle-class society based on the values of solidarity, emancipation, and equal opportunity for all—an accomplishment we should never take for granted because there are always new injustices and battles to fight, especially when you see that so many people fear the future right now.

Today, values that we held for granted are again tested by the threat of radical Islamic terrorism carried out by home-grown terrorists. The enormous challenge of managing the huge flow of refugees from the conflicts in the Middle East adds to the discomfort of ordinary Europeans.

At the same time, they feel threatened by migrant workers who are willing to work for less, by highly educated people working below their level, and by technology making jobs obsolete. They experience that the pathways to a better life are barricaded one by one.

Our society faces the danger of becoming one of my youngest son's favorite gifts brought home from school: a tadpole figure drawing of a person whose arms and legs are growing straight out of his head. As a child's drawing, it is an endearing picture, but as a representation of society, it is quite the opposite. The picture embodies a society from which the core, a strong middle class that typically binds the upper and lower echelons, has disappeared. Unfortunately, the tadpole society is becoming increasingly more realistic.

Some of us blame the Third Way for all that has gone wrong. In their search for economic growth, U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, U.S. President Bill Clinton, and Dutch Prime

Minister Wim Kok supposedly lost sight of our common values. I don't know if this is true, and in all honesty, I don't care for a final verdict on the rights and wrongs of the Third Way. However, I do care about where the Third Way was supposed to be leading: social justice in a market economy.

That aspiration will never be reached if we hark back either to past solutions or impotent rhetoric. Let's not become defenders of the status quo and apologists for modern injustice.

Instead, let's formulate a shared agenda of radical change. We need to embrace our old goals and start working on our future by reclaiming the movement for the middle class. We need to fight today's new inequalities.

First of all, we need to fight for fair and decent work. The road to prosperity should not be paved with disposable work. After all, disposable work creates disposable people. We must fight the conviction that in order to win the global race, people have to lose. In Europe, we see that the free movement of workers can lead to a free fall of labor conditions. In order to prevent the value of work being bartered away in the marketplace, we need to guarantee equal pay for equal work.

Second, we must fight against the new inequalities in life chances and security, such as the insecurity of people who got stuck in low-paid, flexible jobs who are not able to rent a house, let alone buy one. There is an inequality in perspective between kids who go to good schools and kids who have no such luck. In education, we can't afford some to be more equal than others. Opportunity is not a self-managing unit, a guaranteed fait accompli. We need to invest in high-standard education and schooling for everyone.

Third, we have to decrease inequalities in income and wealth. Income from work as a percentage of total wealth continues to fall in comparison to income from capital.<sup>1</sup> Current global wealth statistics are mind-boggling. The world's richest 62 people now have more wealth than the poorest 3.6 billion combined.<sup>2</sup> Equal opportunity involves a political choice regarding the redistribution of wealth. We need to make the employment of low-skilled workers cheaper, prevent tax evasion by multinationals, and reinject the profits of these big companies back into society.

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Fourth, we need to stimulate a new, sustainable economy that provides the middle class with 21st-century jobs. So we have to embrace innovation but on our terms by investing in future-proof education, creativity, and our workforce. We have to aim at real labor market reform by making a radical decision for higher productivity rather than cheaper labor. We should opt for work security rather than job security. The right to training should be a fundamental right for all workers.

Fifth, we also have to tackle growing alienation and the increased feelings of uneasiness. Progressives need to develop a new sense of national pride, not by raising the white flag to the populists and the hatemongers, not by ignoring or wishing away real problems, but by building a society based on solidarity in which people are seen as individuals instead of members of their group and someone's background remains just a background.

This means that we have to teach immigrants our values and persuade them to foster our values. We need to show them that our society is based on the principle of give and take: You can only be part of society when you participate in it. Everyone should accept the basic premise that if you want to be accepted, you have to accept others.

Furthermore, we have to empower our children so they can resist the sick ideologies of extremists. We need to educate them and support them in their long and hard struggle to make their own choices.

Finally, in this society based on solidarity, there is no room for discrimination that wastes talent and destroys dreams. We need to accelerate and increase our fight against discrimination, for example by refusing—as a government—to do business with companies that have discriminated against minorities, women, or older workers.

Is social change of this magnitude even conceivable in this day and age? We know it will not be easy and it will not go as fast as we would like. But we are making progress, and I believe we have time on our side. Internationally, the indignation about inequality is growing. Even the International Monetary Fund is now advocating redistribution of income.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, there is a lively discussion about raising the federal minimum wage. Moreover, the minimum wage introduced by the Grosse Koalition in

Germany has given many people a decent income without being the brake on economic growth so firmly predicted by neoliberals and economists.<sup>4</sup>

And there is more that gives us hope. A couple of months ago, I went back to that same school in Amsterdam to attend the festive opening of their new building. The room was filled with people who had become closely involved with the school. It made me proud when I realized that there were an overwhelming number of progressives among them, both with and without party membership. Over the years, they had formed a collective force of change for good. People who had both the fury and the impatience, both the indignation and the stamina to make a difference. It is easy to get fired up by indignation over injustice, but it is hard to have the stamina to make a real difference.

These people showed that stamina. They all contributed in their own way to bring about change because they simply could not look away and give up on these kids. They did not do so because it was written in the party manifestos or even because it was their job. No, they did so because of what is in our progressive DNA: sharing responsibility, challenging the status quo, reaching for the impossible, and keeping up the fight.

In that classroom in one of the most troubled neighborhoods of Amsterdam, the audacity of hope was almost palpable. We have a job to do.



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## Endnotes

1 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising" (2011), available at [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/the-causes-of-growing-inequalities-in-oecd-countries\\_9789264119536-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/the-causes-of-growing-inequalities-in-oecd-countries_9789264119536-en).

2 Oxfam International, "An Economy For the 1%" (2016), available at <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/economy-1>.

3 Aditya Tejas, "IMF Study Says Inequality Is Hurting Growth, Calls For Wealth Redistribution," International Business Times, June 16, 2015, available at <http://www.ibtimes.com/imf-study-says-inequality-hurting-growth-calls-wealth-redistribution-1968563>.

4 Joris Kooiman, "Gevreesd effect Duits minimumloon blijft voorlopig uit," *Het Financieele Dagblad*, January 5, 2016, available at <http://fd.nl/economie-politiek/1133973/gevreesd-effect-minimumloon-in-duitsland-blijft-voorlopig-uit>.