Against the Current for the Common Good
Interview with Jan Peter Balkenende, former Prime Minister of The Netherlands

The corona crisis apparently reinforces the role of the nation state, of the government and the hard struggle between the United States and China, which put their own interests above the multilateral world order. Yet a different agenda is needed now, says former Prime Minister Prof.dr. Jan Peter Balkenende. "Collaboration, connection and sustainability are now more essential than hammering on the nation state. Europe and Christian democracy can play an important role in this. Christian democracy has always had the courage to row against the current."

by Marc Janssens, editor-in-chief Christen-Democratische Verkenningen

Jan Peter Balkenende has been out of active politics for ten years, after his time as Prime Minister (2002-2010). But sitting still is by no means involved. As an external senior advisor to EY (Ernst & Young), professor of governance at Erasmus University Rotterdam, supervisory board member at ING and involved in various organizations such as the Major Alliance, the Goldschmeding Foundation, the Noaber Foundation, the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition (DSGC), the Order of St. George and since last year the World Leadership Alliance of former Heads of State and Government, he focuses on a multitude of themes that nevertheless have a common thread. This is formed by looking at sustainability, social connection, global cooperation and tackling inequality. The guiding principle in all this is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the seventeen sustainable development goals that the UN member countries have set for 2030, says Balkenende during a conversation in the building of the Major Alliance in The Hague. "These SDGs indicate the direction we need to go. We now see a world where it seems to be about the right of the fittest and about capitalism driven by a mere pursuit of profit. China and the US compete for world power, but are mainly focused on their own interests. Their leaders Trump and Xi Jinping have little interest in multilateral institutions such as the WTO or the WHO."

On the other hand, I would like to draw attention to another, hopeful agenda: that of sustainability, the common interest - the so-called Common Good -, a circular economy and working together. Europe but also Christian democracy can play an important role in this, because they have a long tradition of connection and attention to the moral side of all kinds of issues. If Europe seeks strength in its uniqueness and in the interest of global institutions, it may prevent that it is played apart by China and America."

Politics worldwide have now been taken up by the corona crisis, which is greater than the financial crisis that Balkenende faced as prime minister in 2008. "I have great respect for the way in which the Dutch government and other governments work in this crisis. It is, of course, too early to really take stock and you saw that it was still a search in the beginning: are we going for group immunity or intelligent lockdown? Do we focus on the use of mouth masks or not? Do aerosols contribute or do not contribute significantly to the spread of the virus? I am very concerned about the economy. But that does not detract from my respect for the efforts and considerations made by the government. At the moment you see that national governments have an important task to fight the crisis. But that should not stop us from drawing attention to what
this crisis really needs: a deep reflection on the way in which we have organized our society globally, European and nationally. Let us not blind ourselves to the struggle between China and America. There is more going on at the moment."

*Such as?*

"Global thinking is not only about countries and their governments, but also about NGOs, companies, universities, civil society, religious groups. The SDGs - requiring actions and measurement - and Pope Francis's encyclical Laudato Si’ provide hope and perspective. Worldwide I see all kinds of movements that are not aimed at self-interest and the law of the strongest. Two years ago I was at a meeting of One Young World in The Hague, where young people from all over the world, including Russia, China, Europe and Iraq, were united in common goals of peace and sustainability. I also attended a conference in Thailand where people with a Christian, Buddhist, Humanist and Islamic background, among others, met to seek the power of connection and dialogue in the field of the SDGs. For a year I have been a member of the World Leadership Alliance, also known as “Club de Madrid”. This is a group of more than a hundred former government leaders, who think together about how we can promote democracy in the world in a sustainable way. The future of Europe is being discussed. One of the last meetings before the corona crisis took place in Geneva, where the implementation of the SDGs in the Southern Hemisphere was considered. It is important for people of good will to unite in the world. Christian democracy can be important in this because it is not only a political but also a social movement."

*However, the world does not currently seem to be determined by the soft power of dialogue and connection, but by the hard power of authoritarian government leaders.*

"We are indeed experiencing times when autocracy and the nation state are leading the way. But that strengthens me precisely in the call not to lose sight of the moral, global dimension. We as Christian Democrats have always had the courage to focus on connection and row against the current. In my experience, moreover, government leaders are not insensitive to such a moral appeal. I keep the most geopolitically impressive memory of my premiership at the G20 summit in London in March 2009. We were in the midst of the financial crisis, but there was a clear awareness that we needed each other to build a new financial architecture. Everyone wanted to make a success of that year's Climate Conference in Copenhagen and the WTO negotiations. That spirit is now needed. Today, too, there is a new global crisis. The corona crisis is occurring both in the field of health and economically worldwide. If you want to develop a new perspective on that, you simply need each other. Both globally and in Europe."

*Does not tackling the corona crisis demonstrate that, when it comes down to it, EU countries do their own business?*

"It is not surprising that national states themselves take the lead in a crisis that primarily concerns public health - which falls within the competence of the EU member states. At the same time, you see that we are looking at each other again when the measures are relaxed, because we need mutual coordination. In addition, we are so economically and socially intertwined that European initiative is needed to support each other financially. All kinds of initiatives are now being taken for this. I fully agree with Club de Madrid that we need solidarity and competitiveness in Europe.”
Some parties in the Netherlands say that we are better off leaving the EU like the UK.

"That would be suicide for the Netherlands as a nation. As an open country, we cannot do without Europe in many areas, such as climate, energy, security, migration, the economy, but also our competitiveness in the world. Only we have to redesign the EU to motivate people and organizations. After World War II, the driving force was “never again”, turning the traditional components of war industries - coal and steel - into binders for new European cooperation. In the 1980s, we learned that a customs union would not work without an internal market, and the focus was on “Europe 1992”: free movement of goods, services, persons and capital. After the financial crisis of 2008/2009, Europe was doubted: would the eurozone survive? We have demonstrated through numerous measures that the Union can find solutions. Yet the division has remained. The British have left and the administration of the Union has mainly become crisis management in the last ten years. Now we are faced with the existential choice what we want with the EU and that requires a new narrative, a new story for Europe."

What does the new story of Europe look like?

"Europe must start from its own strength, which connects countries that are also different. In that regard, I have learned a lot from Israeli-American community thinker Amitai Etzioni, who calls Europe a mosaic and points to the power of diversity. Of course, there are concerns in Europe, there is a lack of unity and we have not done everything right - for example, we have not sufficiently maintained the Stability and Growth Pact - but the current crisis requires the commitment and qualities that Europe has always been strong in: bridging differences and thinking together. In addition, Europe must also show results, for example in the areas of climate, environment, sustainability and a circular economy. Showing results will strengthen trust in Europe among citizens, organizations and businesses. Europe must want to reform. Crucial are the awareness and debate about values in Europe: peace, democracy, liberty, solidarity, equality, justice, respect for human rights and the rule of law. Europe is more than market and currency. The Order of St. George, under the leadership of Karl von Habsburg, continuously underlines the importance of reflection on values and Europe."

Christian democracy made an important contribution to Europe after the Second World War, in which the Rhenish – ‘Rhineland’- consultative model was expanded in comparison to the market-driven Anglo-Saxon model. Can you say that this model is better able to cope with such a major crisis than the Anglo-Saxon with its shortages and massive unemployment?

"You see different things. In Anglo-Saxon countries such as the US and Britain, populist leaders like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are now in power, who initially treated the corona virus somewhat laconically. These countries have therefore lost time. In addition, the US in particular has become even more internally divided: Republicans are diametrically opposed to Democrats and the President is more concerned with his own agenda than with a binding agenda. This is in contrast to the Rhenish approach, in which solidarity, consultation and thinking in the longer term are leading. In America you can lose a lot of money very quickly, but you can also win quickly. Due to the corona crisis, unemployment is now high, which is accompanied by a lot of uncertainty, especially because job losses also lead to a loss of the right to health care. That is not good for confidence in politics."
How do you rate the situation in the US?

"The US fascinates with its dynamism. This has enormous appeal in the fields of science and innovation, but also in the business community. Just go to Silicon Valley. I like to go to the US, but politically it is a completely split country. The connection is gone; there is hardness with discussions about fake news that is not good for the country. Nobel Prize winner for economics, Joseph Stiglitz, points to the need for Truth-seeking Institutions. We live in unthought of times. In the late 1980s, Francis Fukuyama wrote his essay "The End of History", in which he declared that there was only room for one world order, the liberal democratic. Now there are books on the shelves with titles such as “The End of Democracy” and “How Democracies Die”. The world order, as it was built up after the Second World War, has proved extremely fragile, but it is therefore important now to draw attention to values such as connection and communality. The Belgian philosopher Michael Vlerick speaks for a reason about 'The era of global cooperation' in his book 'The second alienation' from 2019."

However, this connection and communality are not very successful in Europe either, while the Rhineland model should be leading here.

"Indeed, you also see fault lines emerging in Europe, which we did not think would manifest themselves in this way fifteen years ago. As Prime Minister, I experienced the arrival of ten new Member States in 2004, most notably from Eastern Europe. We were in Ireland and I remember how excited the leaders of Eastern Europe were, because the dividing line that had divided Europe for decades had disappeared.

Unfortunately, new fractures are now emerging. On the one hand, between Southern Europe and the North, and on the other, between Eastern and Western Europe. The first is characterized by financial and economic differences: in the North, we like financial soundness and an approach that focuses on reforms. In the South people wait longer for this, although it would be wrong to say that nothing has been done. Countries such as Greece and Spain have done a lot of work and even steps have been taken in Italy. On the other hand, there is the difference between East and West, which has to do with the attitude towards the democratic constitutional state. In countries such as Poland and Hungary, worrying developments are emerging."

Is there an explanation for that?

"Those countries have faced domination more than we have in the West, whether by an absolutist monarch or by communist rulers. As a result, the democratic embedding is less deep than with us. There are risks, because the focus in these countries on the role of the nation state, on undermining important institutions in the democratic constitutional state such as a free press, respect for minorities, space for the opposition and independent justice, violate the rules of the game as we have agreed with each other in Europe. I personally think that we cannot leave that unanswered. If you break the EU rules and see Europe only as an institution where subsidies can be obtained, sanctions must follow, of course after dialogue. Europe is too important at its core and based on its values to be undermined from within. Social values are also of great importance to companies and organizations."
Doesn't the corona crisis show that many companies in their prime have let their profits flow to shareholders and now have to hold hands with the government, and therefore taxpayers, because they have too few buffers? Shouldn't we get rid of shareholder capitalism?

"Of course I have nothing against shareholders. But it cannot be the case that shareholders only focus on the short-term financial gain and neglect the long-term consequences for the company and society. In this respect, I strongly support values-driven capitalism, in which not only financial growth but also the social involvement of companies is leading. This is really about creating shared value: economic and societal value. I have a lot of contact with Steve Young, Global Executive Director of the Caux Round Table, who has written books on Moral Capitalism, which I can wholeheartedly recommend. This is not new to us as Christian Democrats, but it is now more necessary than ever: it is not just about the shareholders of companies, but about all stakeholders, including employees, customers and communities. It must be about inclusive thinking and acting. That stakeholder thinking - the World Economic Forum recently argued for Stakeholder Capitalism - is essential in this day and age, when we meet the limits of money-driven capitalism. The stakeholder approach was also a key element in the “Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation” of the Business Round Table in the US (2019). We are entering the era of Responsible Capitalism.”

Almost every politician today distances himself from hardcore capitalism and neo-liberalism; even Prime Minister Rutte calls the Netherlands "deeply socialist" at its core. Is there a danger that the pendulum will slip over to the other side and that the government will draw too much power?

"That is why Christian democracy and a deep reflection on the balance between government, market and society is so important. We have an important message for society as a whole, because Christian democracy knows how to value its own value, as well as the state and the market and society with its social institutions and communities. This message can also be found in the document ‘Novus Ordo Seclorum: A new order for the Age’ (2020) of Steve Young.

We have seen what too much emphasis on the market leads to: great inequality, unbound money and consumption thinking and a massive debt position around the world. I am very concerned about that. But we will not get there with a devastated governmental thinking. Then again there are too many rules and controls by the state, which is visible in degenerate form in communist, state-driven countries. Christian democracy is looking for the right balance. There is nothing wrong with a strong market and state role, but both must serve the citizens and society, otherwise you will destroy the space for social initiative, but also the right to privacy, for example. See who owns the huge amount of big data that companies like Ali Baba in China and Google and Facebook have in America. In China, this data belongs to the state, in the US to companies. We in Europe, with the Rhenish model, partly inspired by Christian democracy, say: citizens are the owners of that data."

In what way has the corona crisis made it urgent to rethink this balance between state, market and society?

"It is a hundred years ago this year that Dr. Abraham Kuyper passed away. He founded the Anti-Revolutionary Party (1879), the Free University in Amsterdam (1880) and the Reformed Church (1892) and he became Prime Minister (1901-1905). I myself was very much influenced by his
thinking, partly because I studied law and history, obtained my PhD on the thesis ‘Governmental Regulation and Civil Society Organizations’ (1992) and became a professor of Christian-Social Thought on Economy and Society’ (1993) at the Free University. In 1891 Kuyper gave the opening speech at the first Christian Social Congress, which was marked by the serious “Social Quaestion” of the time. He then spoke of the "unsustainability of the present state" and the need for a profound "architectural critique" of society itself. This is also relevant today, in which money-driven capitalism is under pressure, but in which many people also want to crawl back into the nation state under the influence of populist sounds. We are faced with the question of whether we choose this or whether we are looking for connections, not only in Europe but also worldwide, especially in Africa. If we want to feed the world's 10 billion mouths by 2050, we really need to move towards new global thinking about food. Just ensuring that we are self-sufficient here in the Netherlands or Europe is not enough. As Europe, we may also desperately need the Sahara for solar energy and the storage of hydrogen. We cannot retreat to our nation-state and attack institutions like the WHO and the EU, as Trump and populists in Europe do. Constructive criticism helps, breakdown does not.

What other contribution can Christian democracy make in the debate about the organization of society, both in the Netherlands and in Europe and the world?

"That we recognize that all issues have a moral component. We are now faced with the choice: do we only determine economically what the task of the state, the market and social institutions is, or do we examine from a moral framework what justice is and what the common good, the so-called Bonum Commune. Then it's not just about the question, who does what? No, then we first determine what we want, what public justice means, and then the question arises why the market, government or society can best do this. This is called differentiated responsibility in Christian Democratic thinking, but it is always a spread responsibility normalized by solidarity and stewardship. Something similar is needed now, because all kinds of things will shift due to the corona crisis. Just take the organization of work: digitization means that the relationships between working from home, traffic congestion and sustainability are different."

Trust is part of this, because employers have to trust their staff that they do enough work at home.

"Trust is essential in our society. In 1995 Fukuyama also wrote the book "Trust" which is precisely about this. Societies in which there is a lot of trust between government and citizens, between employees and employers and between citizens themselves appear to function better on all fronts. High trust societies perform better than low trust societies. A government must radiate confidence and only then will trust be restored. That is also part of giving space to society."

Has that also been your motivation as prime minister?

"Absolutely: for that reason we have redesigned activating social security by starting from the question: what can people do instead of what cannot people do? That is why we wanted to reduce the administrative burden. If you want to regulate everything in rules and protocols, that kills creativity. This also means that there must be room to make mistakes and learn from them. Over-regulation can harm diversified responsibility. In the area of sustainability and social responsibility, tools have been developed to measure how companies perform not only economically but also in
terms of their contribution to society. The great thing is that companies now also call each other to account for this. This is in line with Christian democracy: giving confidence creates space for social initiatives, but also for the meaning of values and norms. As Prime Minister I have drawn attention to this, also in Europe. When the Netherlands had the Presidency of the European Union in the 2nd half of 2004 we initiated a series of conferences on the theme ‘Europe, A Beautiful Idea?’ What holds us together in Europe, what about European values? Later, the Austrian government took initiatives in this regard as well."

The CDA is 40 years old this year: what do you want to give the party?

"Last year Arie Oostlander passed away, who played an important role in the creation of the CDA in 1980 and the reflection on Christian Democratic ideas. The CDA is essentially not a middle party, he often said, but "extremely Christian Democratic". I learned from him that substantive thinking is really the power of Christian democracy. Of course it has also been about persons in our party, but the battle between persons has never played the main role in our case. It is about the content: what do we stand for as Christian Democrats? That is why I became a direct member of the CDA in the late 1970s. I saw that a new party emerged that developed its own vision of society. I wanted to be part of that. It was never my motive then to become an active politician, let alone prime minister. I became a staff member of the Scientific Institute of the CDA, because I wanted to contribute to the reflection of the content and connect it to the political questions that arose. And so one thing led to another. You really do not become a prime minister for yourself, but because you feel involved in your country and the world in which you live, based on political conviction. I think that is also very important now. It is my firm belief that the strength of Christian democracy lies in our vision of tomorrow's society: Common Good and Bonum Commune, community thinking, Moral Capitalism, long-term value creation, climate and stewardship, the SDGs, collaboration and connection. We need to develop this further and therefore we must be inspired. That inspiration remains the most important thing a CDA politician needs."

Key elements:

- Precisely at a time when nation-state and autocracy are leading the way, we must strengthen the social undercurrent of connectedness, values and sustainability.

- The global agenda of the SDGs, climate change and the circular economy gives hope and perspective to everyone. This agenda is essential to overcome nationalism, populism and the attack of multilateral organizations.

- High trust societies are performing better than low trust societies.

- Europe must develop a new narrative, in which commonness, diversity, solidarity and competitiveness are leading, discuss the importance of values and show geopolitical leadership.

- EU countries struggling with the democratic rule of law should be subject to sanctions.

- A new orientation and organization of economies is required: Moral, Responsible and Stakeholder Capitalism.
This interview has been published in Dutch and in a slightly different version in Christen-Democratische Verkenningen, Quarterly Magazine of Wetenschappelijk Instituut voor het CDA, Summer edition, July 2020