

Step 1 – 02-02-09

I get e-mails from people all over the world asking the same question: “how do I go about setting up a party for the animals?” Quite understandable as the Dutch Party for the Animals is the first animal rights party to have been elected to a national parliament anywhere in the world. That’s why over the few weeks I will be telling you something about the history of our party in the context of the Dutch political landscape. Then I will talk you through the various steps in setting up a party for the animals in your own country. This is already happening in many places in the world and if you would like to share experiences from your own country, please e-mail me!

The idea for a Dutch Party for the Animals was first suggested by Niko Koffeman, at the time a copywriter and campaign advisor for a number of animal rights organizations and a campaign strategist for the SP, a Dutch political party. Like many others, Niko was dismayed by how animal rights activists were largely fobbed off by the political establishment with just an annual meeting with lobbyists which was characterized by little more than an exchange of courtesies and the consumption of coffee and cake.

Although many thought Koffeman’s idea had real potential, it took exactly ten years before it became a reality. Together with Lieke Keller (director of the Dutch anti-fur organization) and Ton Dekker (committee member of the same organization), I decided the time was ripe to argue for the rights of other living beings not from outside parliament but from within it.

The condition was that we could find at least 70,000 Dutch citizens who would, come election day, be prepared for a moment to put aside their primary human interests in favour of giving a voice to animals, nature and the environment. If that figure could be achieved, it would in any case be clear that a substantial number of voters wanted a departure from human-centric politics and it would provide the cause with considerable publicity.

Oddly enough, many animal rights organizations were lukewarm or even dismissive about the plan. The fear of failure overwhelmed their feelings. What would be the fallout if hardly a person actually voted for the Party for the Animals? How would other political parties react? Would they still be prepared to welcome lobbyists from the animal rights organizations? Was a “one issue party” in parliament a realistic option?



Despite the scepticism, we contested the elections in 2003 and, despite the fact that the campaign budget was virtually non-existent and campaign workers very few, we almost got enough votes for a seat. And we made a splash in terms of media attention! That strengthened our conviction that we had to continue building the organization for the next elections. We went to work expanding the organization and attracting funds. An important aspect was finding well-known figures from the world of art and culture (writers, painters, cabaret performers, TV personalities) who were prepared to be fielded as candidates in unelectable seats. Our next chance came in 2006 – but I’ll leave that exciting story for next week!