

POLITICAL ACTIVISM WITH AN ENVIRONMENTALLY-CONSCIOUS VISION: AN INTERVIEW WITH KARIM MAAREK

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Date: February 18, 2010

Karim Maarek is a district representative of the environmentally-conscious Dutch political group, GroenLinks. I sat down with him to gather his perspective on climate change, Copenhagen and the general interplay of politics, law and environmentalism in The Netherlands.¹

Why did you decide to run for elected office, and why did you choose GroenLinks as your party?

I really love my city. Amsterdam is great and within Amsterdam, Oud-West is fantastic. It has given me a chance to do really important things for my 'hood. As for your second question, the answer is simple: I'm very green and progressive left. Other left of center parties just don't combine both or lack the ideas that I feel we need to solve the issues we face as a city and a nation. And I strongly believe that leftist and green politics can be creatively combined. One example, we recently passed a proposal that will provide low income renters with extra money each month by investing in insulation for their homes and taking all kinds of green measures such as LED-lighting and water saving. All the measures combined will cost the city € 100.000 for 1000 homes but provide these households with about € 300.000 in energy bill savings each year. Forever.

What are the major environmental policies that you and GroenLinks would like to see enacted on the City and National level, and what are the roadblocks to having these policies implemented?

In Amsterdam, three things. We need to start a large-scale insulation programme like the one we've introduced in Oud-West. Secondly, we have to invest in innovative technologies such as wind and solar energy. Both these policies will create hundreds, maybe thousands of jobs in these hard economic times. And third, we have to totally rethink how we handle mobility in this city. For example, we're the cycling capital of the world and we should make it even more attractive to bicycle everywhere. In the next four years, we also have to create thousands of Park and Ride spots on the city edge. On a national level, the most important thing we need to do is copy Germany and create a feed-in tariff for sustainable energy. All fossil fuel energy needs to be taxed extra, and that money has to go to creating a level

¹ For more information about Karim Maarek and *GroenLinks*, please check the website:

www.groenlinks.nl

playing field for clean energy. Then we won't need to build coal plants. We also have to get rid of the bureaucracy that is holding back offshore wind and increase taxes on the use of natural resources instead of labour. All these measures again would be an enormous stimulus for the job market and put the Netherlands back where it belongs at the forefront of green tech innovation.

Many people are skeptical about the usefulness of the Copenhagen Accord. Do you think there was anything positive to be taken away from it? Does GroenLinks agree with the 2 degree philosophy?

Copenhagen failed for the most part. But it was also the most difficult endeavour the world has undertaken. I think it was 190 countries that had to reach a collective agreement. That would be hard whatever the topic is, and what I'm optimistic about is that it shows that the whole world can start working together to solve a worldwide problem. What it did do was get China and the U.S. to acknowledge their role which is a great first step. But we won't stop climate change at 2 degrees on the basis of what was agreed upon there and that is what is necessary I believe that the other great thing that happened at Copenhagen was that cities took up the gauntlet much more than the national leaders. Seventy percent of the world's population lives in cities, and what we can't do yet on an international level, we already have started doing worldwide on a local level.

Since we are in The Netherlands, perhaps we can discuss the potential interplay between what's happening in The Hague and environmental policy. Do you think there might be a day when companies are held liable for crimes against humanity due to their environmentally-degrading activities? If so, describe a situation where this might be plausible?

It's already happening. Milieudefensie - Friends of the Earth Netherlands, together with Nigerian farmers, have succeeded in getting a ruling in December last year that Dutch courts have jurisdiction over alleged crimes in Nigeria by Shell. The Dutch multinational has been degrading the environment for decades. People are dying there because Shell won't stop flaring gas and won't clean up oil spills. Farming land needed to feed people that are the neighbours of the oil giant is unusable. And, of course, Shell defends itself by saying they're not responsible for the spills. Well, the anger against Shell in Nigeria is justified because they have been such a bad neighbour. It will be interesting to see how this case develops and hopefully by the end of the year there will be a ruling that will frighten a lot of other Dutch companies into getting their act together in developing countries. There has to come a day that we'll hold these enormous multinationals accountable for their deeds. National and international governments need to regain control over companies that often are bigger than the GDP of a lot of countries. If a crime against humanity can be enacted by a government or a political leader, why not by a company? And why would companies then not

be tried? This Shell jurisdiction ruling proves that it's possible. And the Dutch parliament has also recently agreed to create a remedy for victims of corporate social irresponsibility.

I think it would be really interesting to see if groups of citizens could bring a large coal burning energy company to the European Court of Justice on the basis of their share in climate change. If we agree about climate change being an enormous threat to life on earth, why not try the companies that are largely responsible for endangering us all? There is obviously a problem there concerning the fact that we all through our consumption habits contribute. I would liken an individual's environmentally threatening contribution to that of a parking misdemeanor and the companies' damage to that of a capital offence.

