

Byline: Paul Benneworth

THE big Dutch news in England at the moment is the ban on cannabiscafes. It has been widely reported how foreigners will no longer be free to buy small quantities of marijuana in tightly licensed coffee shops from May 1. The story has been popular as a clear message that chimes with how we see Holland.

Perhaps it is the lack of such a clear message that has led the other important Dutch news to go unreported here. Last week, the coalition government in the Hague fell, unable to agree a package of cuts sufficient to address their ballooning budget deficit.

Reporting the story is difficult because here in England we don't have such a natural understanding of the dynamics of coalition politics. English junkies of the political sort are following the French and US rather than Dutch elections.

That's a real shame, because the Dutch political crisis has some important lessons for the coalition partners here in England. Not least about how they start behaving when it's time to take the blame for unpopular cuts.

The Dutch coalition was from the start a minority government kept in office by support from the right-wing populist Freedom Party. They didn't join the government because some of their policies were too unsavoury for their coalition partners: they voted for the government in return for some of their manifesto promises becoming law.

It was similar to the dying months of John Major's cabinet when, rocked by defections, rebellions and by-election losses, he was forced to rely on Northern Ireland's Unionists to win Parliamentary votes. And like the Unionists, the Freedom Party have been able to use their position to gain all the benefits of power without the responsibilities.

The Dutch government fell when the Freedom Party withdrew their support, unable to agree with the government on pounds 15 billion of government spending cuts.

Populists like the Freedom Party rely on middle-class voters who are generally against welfare payments to everyone but themselves. So when the planned cuts were going to reduce middle-class benefits on mortgage relief and health care, while raising the retirement age and VAT, the Freedom Party remembered that populist parties need popularity not principle. Pulling the plug has done the Freedom Party a power of good in the polls, their figures rising by 7% over the week. The government parties have been punished, and these same polls would see the once-mighty Christian Democrats all but wiped out.

And so to England, where 88% of austerity-led welfare cuts have been announced but not implemented. When that starts, they are going to hit the middle classes hard. The coalition's popularity is going to suffer dramatically.

As popularity falls, both parties will ask themselves who is benefiting from being seen to hold the axe. When the coalition fails, only one party will walk away with any credit.

Forward-thinking government politicians should do their Dutch homework a little better, and start planning for who is going to take the blame when austerity reaches its inevitable failure.

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