



WHAT DOES HISTORY TEACH US ABOUT THE FUTURE OF BELGIUM'S INSTITUTIONS ?

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The Re-Bel initiative aims to rethink in depth, in an open, rigorous, non-partisan way, what the institutions of the Belgian federal state - or of whatever else this part of the world needs to become - can and must look like in the longer term, taking full account of the evolving European context.

The Re-Bel initiative does not aim to produce one programme or manifesto to which everyone involved could subscribe. Its ambition is rather to provide a fertile intellectual environment in which new ideas and promising initiatives of all sorts can germinate and develop, with a concern for their relevance to a thorough reform of Belgium's institutions, but also to the institutional design of other complex polities, most obviously the European Union.

The Re-Bel initiative involves scholars from all Belgian universities, runs a web site, publishes e-books and organizes workshops and public events. It intends to associate to its activities both foreign colleagues and the Brussels-based international community. The working language will usually be English.

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Introduction

Bruno De Wever (Universiteit Gent)

Historia magistra vitae est. For centuries the past held a major position in political discussions about the desired future. Modern historical science has dismantled this 'historicism' and thus deposed the past as preceptor. Nowadays historians are aware that the past is 'a foreign country' as David Löwenthal stated in a work which has meanwhile become a classic¹. The past evokes alienation rather than familiarity. Lessons from the past are often based on an extremely selective and sometimes erroneous reading of the past, generally on the basis of contemporary interests. But none of this has to mean that knowledge of the past no longer has any significance for the present or that history would no longer have any predictive significance. Although the past never repeats itself literally, the possibility that more or less comparable circumstances would probably lead to a more or less similar outcome should attribute some predictive value to history. Historians are generally very reticent to utter statements on the future. The present texts are no exception to this rule. But they all start from the premise that patterns can be found in history. Analysis of the course of the linguistic and community conflict in the last one and a half centuries shows which solutions worked and which ones failed. It shows the actors, their interests, political strategies and their outcome. It does not result in ready-made answers about how Belgium should proceed, but it does guard against oversimplifications and naivety.

An earlier version of some of the following texts was presented at the inaugural public event of the Re-Bel initiative on 30 April 2009. All of them were written before the Belgian federal elections of 13 June 2010.

Herman Van Goethem (Universiteit Antwerpen) outlines a history of the Flemish-Walloon collective identities and points to the influence regionalised institutions and elections have on the process of the estrangement and evaporation of the Belgian national feeling. Although unitarianism remained dominant until the 1960s, the process of estrangement had already started with the introduction of the General Multiple Voting Right in 1893.

Vincent Dujardin (Université catholique de Louvain) points out that the Belgian nation state was under pressure from the outset, also because of Flemish language demands that were not satisfactorily complied. But he doubts whether Flemish nationalism will ever be satisfied with less than the division of Belgium. The duality of Belgian federalism with its two large language communities, but with Brussels as the strong bond between them, makes the Belgian national economy unique. Its future will have implications for the functioning of the European Union.

Jean Pirotte and **Luc Courtois** (Université catholique de Louvain) see how Flemings go their own way. They are of the opinion that the Walloons and French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels should also resolutely take their own future in hand as two regions. A Walloon-Brussels federation is at odds with the socio-economic differences. A self-aware Walloon identity will have to be promoted. A return to a unitary Belgium or to forms of French-Dutch bilingualism is not realistic.

¹ D. LÖWENTHAL, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge, 1999 (9th ed.) (1st ed. 1985).

Bruno De Wever (Universiteit Gent) demonstrates that the actual community conflict is the product of a historical development which might also have run another course. Here a great responsibility is borne by the administrative powers-that-be, who have to keep their finger on the pulse of society and in this respect should not be blinded by their own interests and 'condition humaine'.

Marc Hooghe and **Luc Huyse** (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) investigate why the pacification mechanisms of the Belgian political system, which so often appeared to be able to bridge political tensions, nowadays no longer seem to work for the community conflicts in Belgium.

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What Can History Teach Us About the Current Impasse and Crisis in Belgium?

Herman Van Goethem (Universiteit Antwerpen)

1. The investigation of nationalist phenomena teaches us that nationalism is a process based on the creation of a collective national identity. Each individual has the feeling that he belongs to a particular collectivity. However, this feeling is declining or becoming blurred. Today I can quite easily feel that I am an Antwerper, a Fleming, a Belgian and a European – all at the same time. This is perfectly possible, but it also means that some layers of identity will be felt less intensely than others. This sense of identity is related to: 1° geographical boundaries, 2° the distinction between 'us' and 'them', and 3° the internal solidarity felt by 'us', a solidarity in which 'them', the others, cannot participate. Consider the current situation in today's Europe of 27 nations, where the EU refuses to adopt an 'open door' policy to immigration from Africa. This is also a matter of 'us' and 'them'. And so the real question – and it is both a political and an ethical question – is this: where exactly do we draw the boundaries?

2. The identity-forming process of the Flemings and the Walloons is much older than we sometimes think. These identities were already being defined and experienced at the end of the 19th century, even amongst the ordinary people. In more concrete terms, this means that within Belgium the concepts of 'Flanders' and 'Wallonia' were already a part of the political landscape. For example, when coal was discovered in the Kempen in the years around 1905, it was strongly argued that the new mines must be Flemish mines, financed by Flemish capital and operated by Flemish staff. There was to be no 'colonisation' by the Walloons. Similarly, during the 1930s there were furious parliamentary debates about the introduction of children's allowance. Many Walloon politicians were against this proposal, because they did not want Wallonia to pay for the larger numbers of children in Flanders.

Nowadays, the concepts of Flanders and Wallonia are put forward in a crude and simplistic manner within the context of the Flemish-Wallonian transfer debate. These concepts only reflect a part of the true situation and fail, for example, to deal with the question of internal transfers within the individual regions. A clearer analysis of transfers at arrondissement level could teach us much in this respect.

However, such arguments are not really relevant within the context of the identity-forming process. The group tends to regard its internal solidarity as self-evident. Flemish politicians will therefore never be unduly concerned about transfers between, e.g., Antwerp and Limburg. The strengthening – and general acceptance – of the differences between the Flemish and Walloon identities has been particularly noticeable since the reform of the state structure in 1970. In Flanders, people are now very aware of this identity and experience it as an important element of their psychological make up. To such an extent that it is probably fair to say that Flemish public opinion on the whole is a Flemish nationalist opinion. In contrast, Wallonia and French-speaking Belgium still have a far greater sense of being 'Belgian', but they fail to realise that this feeling does not extend beyond the areas where French is spoken. In other words, it is confined to Wallonia and Brussels. Yet here, too, arguments are frequently based on the identity-creating concept of 'us' and 'them'.

3. While it is possible to speak of a clear internal solidarity within Flanders and Wallonia, the concept of national solidarity is becoming much less evident. This is tied up with the fact that the Belgian national identity – as a constructed identity – no longer really exists. This was not always the case and at times there has been strong national sentiment in both Flanders and Wallonia, such as in the years around 1905 and certainly in the 1960s, when the three major national political parties were all unitary parties. We are inclined to forget, for example, that this unitarianism was particularly strong in the CVP during this period. However, this is no longer the case. The idea of a 'unitary' Belgium now belongs to the past and it will not be possible to resurrect it. History teaches us that a new national cohesion can only be achieved within a totalitarian context or within the context of a long period of war.

4. Consequently, a very clear regional identity has now been developed in both Flanders and Wallonia, to replace a Belgian national framework which no longer exists. Which institutional processes lay at the root of this failure of the unitary Belgian project?

Nationalism has a rational element and an emotional element. The rational element involves a struggle to obtain power, to allow the differences between 'us' and 'them' to be settled in 'our' favour. The emotional element is more closely related to the manner in which the collective internal identity is cultivated and experienced by the group.

Nationalism has a strong influence on the collective mechanisms of society. As inheritors of the Enlightenment, who believe in the autonomy of the individual, this is a phenomenon with which many of us are not familiar. In a democratic society, this collectivism usually finds its clearest expression during the electoral process.

This expression of the collective will through elections is really little more than a constructed form of interpretation, since it is impossible to define its precise 'content' in political terms. In the first instance, it is therefore a matter of perception, whereby politicians and the media give a certain interpretation to a certain result, which is then generally accepted by the public as being 'true'. This is certainly the case, for example, if the result of an election is deemed to be 'regionally sensitive'. This also happened after the election of June 2007.

In other words, in a democratic society elections are a way to give shape and form to the collective emotions of the people. It is this aspect which is particularly destructive for the Belgian national identity. It is no coincidence that the start of the 'disintegration' of Belgium can be dated to 1893, the year in which universal male suffrage was introduced for the first time. Time and again, radical election results – and the interpretation given to them – have pushed the different regions further and further apart. From the 1960s onwards, this has certainly been the rule rather than the exception. The low watermark of divisiveness was reached with the election of June 2007, but this merely confirmed a trend which had been growing since the 1970 state reforms. Such developments not only force the regions further apart, but also the political parties.

5. The elections have ultimately resulted in an institutional organisation which reflects and further strengthens this electoral reality. Admittedly, the first major institutional reforms of 1970 were carried out with the intention of preserving the unitary Belgian state. However, unitary politicians such as Gaston Eyskens have all made a fundamental mistake. They fail to realise the scope and power of the mechanisms which they have unleashed: for example, the right of the regions to pass decrees which have the same status as national law. They also seriously underestimated the extent to which state-funded cultural autonomy for the regions (after 1971) would undermine Belgian national sentiment and speed up the process of national division.

The following are the most important institutional elements which have contributed to the institutional weakening of the unitary Belgian state.

- 1° The political parties were split along regional lines, with no unifying national structure. It is crucial to realise this fact, if we wish to make a correct diagnosis of the Belgian problem. The widening gulf between the CD&V and the CDH is symptomatic of this malaise.

- 2° Partly as a result of the cultural autonomy introduced in 1970, the media has also divided into two distinct regional camps. A brief glance at the daily newspapers in Dutch and French could give you the impression that you are reading reports about two different countries. This is also fundamental to a correct understanding of the current crisis.
- 3° The combined effect of this regional split in the party political world and in the media has not only served to strengthen the separate identities of Flanders and Wallonia since 1970, but has also led to a fundamental change in the nation's political culture. Historical research has repeatedly emphasised the importance of an effective political culture. Above all, this means the existence of a common frame of reference for basic strategy and debate. However, such a common framework scarcely exists in present-day Belgium. It only lives on in the minds of a number of older politicians.
- 4° The partition of a unitary state seems to be much more difficult to achieve than was originally envisaged. There are conflicts of competency between the various levels of state, and financial powers are frequently ill-matched to the competencies which have been agreed.
- 5° Closely related to the previous point is the need for national compromise in negotiations conducted at national level. But this also seems harder to achieve than ever. Since 2007 the country has found itself in an institutional vacuum, leading to a new form of political *perpetuum mobile*.

6. What recommendations can be formed on the basis of this brief historical analysis?

- 1° The concept of Belgian nationality will not rise like a phoenix from the ashes. This process has been in irreversible decline since the end of the 19th century. Even the preservation of a status quo is unthinkable. People who believe in the permanence of our national institutions are sadly mistaken.
- 2° A great deal of patience will be needed to achieve national compromise and a new national consensus. This will be a long-term process.
- 3° Those who wish to reach a compromise must be fully aware, either as politicians or as media players, of the need for great care when dealing with the emotional sentiments of the masses on both sides of the language divide. In this respect, it may be advisable to reduce the number of political campaigns by allowing all the different types of election to take place at the same time.
- 4° Those who wish to hold the Belgian state together must take every opportunity to strengthen the Belgian national identity. This may be possible by seeking new institutional mechanisms which strengthen the role of 'the nation' in return for a further transfer of competencies to the regions, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. However, there will need to be a clear political consensus for any such policy – and this, as previously mentioned, will require a great deal of time, patience and care.
- 5° Even if it proves impossible to strengthen the Belgian state and Belgian sentiment at national level, or if it transpires that this is not a sufficient remedy by itself, there is still one factor which – in my opinion – will always act as a powerful incentive to reach a new large-scale, long-term compromise: namely, the recognition that a complete partition of the country is simply not an option.
- 6° It is possible that the Belgian project may not recover at national level but will continue to exist in a kind of vegetative state. This will result in a series of 'artificial' governments, such as Verhofstadt III, thrown together by circumstance and only capable of dealing with 'current business'. Such governments will find it difficult to pursue the creative new policies which are capable of providing answers to today's new political challenges, such as the financial crisis, the ageing of the population, the environment, the problems of a multi-cultural society, etc.

This being said, history once again shows us that periods of crisis can sometimes generate a new dynamic which is capable of overturning the normal laws of politics. If the national level is *de facto* obliged to confine itself to the handling of current business, then it is only reasonable to assume that the regions will seek to acquire more and more authority for themselves. The constitutionality of this process may be open to question, but we should not forget that the Constitutional Court has already

given its approval to the setting up of a Flemish sickness insurance system. Institutions do have the capacity to be innovative – and certainly in times of crisis.

The New Challenges of Belgian Federalism: a Historical Approach

Vincent Dujardin (UCLouvain)

I. Introduction

In October 2008, the historian and journalist Alexandre Adler wrote: “Like Helmut Kohl in 1990, Nicolas Sarkozy is very likely to govern a larger France, [...] that has indeed been deprived of its most Parisian elites but that has been redefined on the old popular basis of the Borinage (a coalmining area) and the valley of the Meuse river; and that is not to mention the sores of Brussels which are ours as well”. As he further adds, “Who said that History wouldn’t have many big surprises in store for us, especially where we are not expecting them?”¹. The Belgian state seems to be particularly prone to surprises and to speculations. To the question asked by the *Revue Générale* in January 2007, “Will there be a Belgian war?”², *Le Nouvel Observateur* later replied in its headlines: “The Belgian war” (without question mark)³. Similarly, “Belgium’s separatist crisis” was *Newsweek*’s title on the 24th September 2007⁴.

II. Historical overview

In autumn 2007, international newspapers were continuously questioning the future of Belgium. From Washington to Seoul, from Vienna to London, a split-up of the Belgian state was seriously considered. It is however worth mentioning that such thoughts are hardly new. On 19th January 1980, while Belgium was celebrating its 150th anniversary, *The Economist* already wrote that it was “the most unnatural country in Europe. It has neither a common language, nor natural frontiers, nor traditions to give its people a sense of national identity. (...) Although Belgium is a small country (...) there is a risk that it will break up into two semi-independent states in this decade (...)”⁵. It is only true that during this period, some disruptive events were about to weaken the Belgian state. Between 1978 and 1981, Belgium went through eight governments and between 1965 and 1981, seven legislative elections took place. In June 1983, King Baudouin wrote to his father: “The country seems to be more divided than ever. Yesterday, it was the Royal Question, today, national solidarity together with State’s structures are questioned (...) The Prime Minister spares no pains to save and rebuild our country”⁶. That kind of concern was already evoked on 22th July 1966 by French Ambassador to Belgium. According to him “Belgium (...) [is] progressively disappearing...”⁷. Even earlier, in 1962, the future Prime Minister Pierre Harmel already stated that a new agreement on the Belgian union had to be found for the following twenty years, until political Europe is implemented⁸. In reality, the precarious Belgian situation was already referred to as soon as in the 19th century. In 1866, Bismarck said: “I believe Belgium will not be a viable State in the long run” and Leopold I himself reckoned in a letter to his son in 1860 that “there is no national feeling in Belgium”.

Admittedly, until 1914, the legitimacy of the Belgian State is not obvious abroad. But then, with the war, the Belgian national feeling is probably at its height although, at the same time, the first cracks occurred with the emergence of the Flemish national feeling that had become, for a minority, anti-

¹ A. ADLER, *Le Figaro*, 14 Oct. 2008. My translation.

² F. DELPÉRÉE, “La guerre des Belges aura-t-elle lieu ?”, in : *La Revue Générale*, Jan. 2007, pp. 5-14. My translation.

³ C. Askolovitch, “Et si Bruxelles devenait française? La guerre des Belges”, in : *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 7 Aug. 2008. My translation.

⁴ “Belgium’s separatist crisis”, in: *Newsweek*, 24 Sept. 2007.

⁵ *The Economist*, 19 Jan. 1980. My translation.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* My translation.

⁸ In a speech he delivered to the Chamber on 31 Oct. 1962.

Belgian. In reality, as soon as Belgium's birth, times have been difficult though with variable intensity depending on periods and contexts that I cannot picture here. Trouble times are surely not exceptional but this should not lead to over-optimism. Borders are not unchangeable and everything can evolve. On 11th March 1882, Ernest Renan claimed: "Nations are not everlasting: they emerged, they will vanish"⁹.

Unarguably, the Belgian context is quite complex and may be better explained when related to some specific historical developments. The following section provides an overview of some Belgium's historical particularities.

III. Belgium's Characteristics

1. Belgian Federalism

First, Belgian federalism is above all a "distancing federalism" that did not introduce any centripetal force. As a consequence, collaboration and cooperation agreements between the different levels of power require the use of positive law. Those agreements, which are therefore not spontaneously reached, come out of negotiation strategies. This means that tensions may result from those negotiations.

2. Flemish Demands

Second, some key political personalities are today demanding a state reform in order to quieten Flemish demands. Nevertheless, it is very daring to believe that a state reform will calm separatist thoughts in the long term. It does not mean that this reform should not be realized: it would actually be a mistake not to take these demands into account. Flemish are the majority of the Belgian population and they deeply wish an evolution on that subject. Bearing this in mind, it seems however essential to draw some lessons from history.

Generally speaking, when the political world did not mind considering Flemish requests, the linguistic matter was then revived with much more strength. It was already the case with the Commission des Griefs in 1857. For Charles Rogier, the Flemish question was "closed". The same feeling also prevailed after the first linguistic laws in 1870s. In August 1893, Minister Vandenpeereboom even said to the Chamber: « we don't need to broach the Flemish matters, they are ended". It will also be true in 1966 with the Vanden Boeynants (VDB) cabinet which wanted to push aside the issues about the language and about Leuven, and which eventually collapsed... with the Leuven story in 1968. The Francophone's lack of concern for the Dutch language will deepen the tensions. The use of Dutch however increases in official texts and circles. For the first time in 1960, there are more speeches to the Chamber in Dutch than in French. In 1967 the Dutch version of the Constitution eventually acquires the same legal value as its French counterpart¹⁰. The Flemish representation as well has become much stronger in the last decades. For instance, since 1954 (that is for more than 50 years), there have only been three French-speaking Prime Ministers who governed in total... 43 months all together (abstracting from the vacancy period called "affaires courantes")! And the last time was in 1973...¹¹

Conversely, when Flemish demands were taken into account, we must unfortunately admit that it was to no avail. Each time we thought the linguistic (or "communitarian") question was solved, new claims immediately cropped up. Did we not make lots of linguistic reforms saying that Belgian unity was at stake? Minister Arthur Gilson¹² already said in 1961 that an agreement on the linguistic border had to be found in order to keep Belgian unity. For the purpose of saving Belgium, the former Prime Minister van Zeeland advocated the idea of a provincial federalism in a folder entitled: "SOS help us break the deadlock". We can find some similar statements among those who have crafted state reforms since 1970 up to now. However none of the successive reforms were able to soothe Flemish

⁹ E. RENAN "Qu'est-ce qu'une Nation ? ", conference 11 Mar. 1882. My translation.

¹⁰ As a matter of fact, although the Dutch version of the Constitution had been official since its publication in the *Moniteur belge* in 1925, it is only in 1967 that it finally acquires the same legal value as its French counterpart.

¹¹ We just have to mention the VDB cabinet which governed from 20th October until 18th December 1978

¹² Arthur Gilson was a Belgian politician and member of the PSC (Parti Social-Chrétien).

nationalism. A new state reform seems to be essential nowadays but more federalism might not be enough to damp communitarian tensions. As a matter of fact, in 1970, while cultural federalism had just been achieved in Flanders, even more claims for economic federalism arose on Dutch-speaking side and particularly regarding the development of economic capacities. The devolution of power was already on the agenda, especially on the side of the Flemish employers' association VEV.

Today, after five state reforms, the Flemish movement seems to be politically more powerful than ever. The Volksunie (VU), for instance, has never been so strong as since it broke up. From the Meeting Partij of 1862 to the VU, every party in favour of the Flemish movement's ideas has disappeared. Nevertheless their principles were taken up by others and often used more radically. Unlike protest marches in Brussels or during the 'Walen Buiten' phenomenon, the Flemish movement takes only very occasionally to the streets. But it is politically more powerful than ever. Many observers agree that separatists account for 9-10% of the Flemish population. It is exactly the same result as ten years ago. This should lead us to question the voters' deeper motives.

3. A Particular Situation

Third, the Czechoslovakian case is often brought up. However, the comparison with Belgium is not relevant for several reasons. The country existed for a bit more than 70 years, about 40 of which under Soviet domination. The collective public debt was low and the commercial relations between Czech Republic and Slovakia were weak. Even more, the social security was split between both parts of the former country. The Slovakian "economic miracle" that followed independence should be put back in its historical context and especially in its European one. Finally, whether in geographic, economic, politic, or linguistic terms, Brussels is not to be compared with Bratislava or Prague. Brussels is four times a capital: of the federal state, of Flanders, of the Wallonia-Brussels Community and of the European Union. Brussels is probably the most powerful cement of today's Belgium and can play a go-between role. The journalist Paul Lévy wrote in 1960 that the capital was the « grave of Flanders and Wallonia », because it turns Flemings into Francophones and Walloons into Belgians. Brussels has therefore become the separatists' and the Union federalists' nightmare. It is from there that several "storms" have emerged¹³. Besides, Flemish parties were opposed to the establishment of the Brussels-Capital Region. They actually feared of being twice in the minority: firstly in the Brussels-Capital Region that counts a huge majority of French-speaking people, and secondly within the Belgian state where the Flemish Region should therefore face the Walloon and the Brussels-Capital Regions. When the Region of Brussels was eventually created (1989), the Dutch-speaking leaders did not fail to emphasize every single difference with the other regions (bilingualism, executive parity, international vocation...).

4. The Split-up of National Parties

Fourth, the "Walen buiten" period (1968) shattered the political chessboard with the proliferation of communitarian parties and the progressive break-up of national parties. It eventually led to the transformation of national elections into regional elections, which helped creating two distinct public opinions. Since 1970, no state reform has addressed the problem caused by the separation of the political parties that started from this period onwards.

5. A Dual Federalism

Fifth, we created a dual federalism as the reform plan of 1970 clearly indicates. The alarm bell, the parity within the government and the double majority, are protections that were considered on the basis of two linguistic groups and not of three regions.

6. Various levels of power

Sixth, the multiplication of elections at the various levels of power these last twenty years has lowered the possibilities for political leaders to achieve bold state reforms (like in 70, 80 or 88, or 93). As a matter of fact, there is always some kind of pressure caused by the proximity of the next elections.

¹³ Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens already mentioned these storms just after the first state reform (1970).

After the June 2007 elections, politicians and observers stressed the fact that it was difficult to enter into real negotiations on state reform, because it was so close to the regional and European elections of 2009. We are today told that some progress has been made and that many things can be settled “in one weekend”. We shall see. But in June 2009, it was two years from the legislative elections of 2011, except in the case of anticipated elections. Moreover, we know that the five state reforms were all carried out at the beginning of a legislative term, and in any case, without any electoral deadline for the legislative being planned in the near future. It is true for 1970, 1980 as well as 1989, 1993 and 2001. It seems therefore essential to bring regional and federal elections together.

7. Two Belgian States

Seventh, I hardly mentioned the Walloon movement so far. Actually, there are two nations in Belgium that are meant to coexist. I am not referring to the Flemish nation and the French-speaking nation, or Walloon nation, as it is pictured abroad, but to the Flemish nation and the Belgian nation. The last one is supposed to include the former as the Flemish nation is a by-product of Belgian nationalism. As a matter of fact, Flanders as it is today would not exist without Belgium. Can Flanders live on within a Belgian context? It is rather ambiguous: a nation can become a state but the opposite is also true. If the Flemish nation is really going to develop into a new nation-state, there will never be any solution to the communitarian problems. Conversely, if the Flemish nation keeps existing within the Belgian State, a balance will have to be found, but History has already shown us many times that accidents may result from an incoherent institutional system. As for a Walloon nation or a French-speaking nation, it is still missing, which probably also largely explains the limited political representation of the French-speaking communitarian parties in the History of Belgium, with the prominent exception of the RW (Rassemblement Wallon) and the FDF (Front démocratique des francophones) after Gilson's laws and the “Walen buiten” movement. Unlike the Flemish movement, the Walloon movement does not have any homogeneous geographical framework, which leads to a Walloon regionalism independent of Brussels, as can be seen from Destrée's letter in 1912 and his comments about people of Brussels. Walloon regionalism remains exceptional.

IV. An impact on the whole European group?

In a newspaper article published in *La Presse* (daily newspaper of Montréal) on the 19th November 2007 entitled “Pauvre Belgique” (“Poor Belgium”), former Canadian Ambassador to the Netherlands and to Germany, Mrs Marie-Bernard Meunier, wrote: “Flemish people don't want to pay for Walloons anymore, just as the Northern League in Italy doesn't want to pay for the Mezzogiorno or Catalans for the rest of Spain. Czechs didn't want to keep on paying for Slovaks too. Everywhere there is the same wish of the rich to get rid of the poor. This attitude bears the seeds of destruction of the social consensus in many European countries, and it is potentially a drain on European construction. Up to now, the European Union has always enabled its new members to catch up economically in a spectacular way. The word “Solidarity” was meaningful and, at the end, there was something in it for everybody”¹⁴. And the Ambassador concluded « the way Belgians will get out of today's crisis will certainly have an impact on the whole European group ». The Belgian problem is not only a financial matter, but it must certainly be put in a European context and the questions this issue raises should definitely be further deepened.

¹⁴ M.-B. MEUNIER, “Pauvre Belgique”, in : *La Presse*, 19 Nov. 2007.

Looking Beyond Belgium? A Walloon Regionalist Viewpoint¹

Jean Pirotte and Luc Courtois (UCLouvain)

Considering the end of Belgium may seem an exercise in political fiction. While it seems clear that the Belgian State has been in a phase of permanent reorganization for about fifty years now, with phases of acute crisis, it is not obvious that this process must necessarily lead to the dismantling of the State. The Walloon viewpoint developed here seeks to be anchored in pragmatism. It is not situated in a radical “After-Belgium” (Who knows if and when that will happen?), but within the context of what is foreseeable in the medium term: a Wallonia constrained to emerge in a period of economic difficulties, in a Belgium which is undoubtedly breaking up, but which is not likely to disappear quickly ².

Any observer of Belgian political life knows that the driving forces of many of these successive rearrangements are located in Flanders. However, Flanders, the current economic driving force in the Belgian State, while having demanded and still demanding institutional reforms, hesitates between two strategies: either obtaining an increasingly broad autonomy with, on the horizon, the constitution of a Sovereign state; or preserving its leadership in a Belgium that can further serve its development. And it is probable that this hesitation will go on as long as the Brussels question has not been solved in a manner that is satisfactory in the eyes of the Flemings, for whom the independence of Flanders is not worth the cost of abandoning Brussels.

The Walloon regionalist viewpoint developed here on the Belgian question seeks to be as open and irenic as possible, avoiding all virulent polemics, and embodying a maximum of understanding for the Flemish positions. In wishing the best development for the human community that supports and nourishes us, one does not necessarily become the adversary of the neighbouring community.

A fundamental point should be made from the start. A Walloon regionalist viewpoint is not necessarily reducible to a French-speaking Belgian viewpoint, as if the official linguistic component exhausted the entire Walloon reality, as if Wallonia and Brussels’ fights to survive were identical. The diversified human community living in Wallonia does not define itself solely by the official language. Unlike some of our Flemish neighbours, we do not take to heart the expression : “De taal is gansch het volk” ³.

The present reflections turn on four points. First of all, we should point out some milestones in the history of Belgium and the rise of the Flemish and Walloon movements in the context of European nationalisms. The second point is a reflection on present-day facts. The third point evokes illusory solutions to the Belgian malaise; it closes some doors leading to dead ends. The fourth point tries to define realistic options for the Walloon future and the reconstruction of a Belgian State facilitating a flourishing of its regional components.

¹ The authors wish to thank colleagues of the Fondation Wallonne Pierre-Marie et Jean-Fançois Humblet (<http://www.fondationwallonne.org>) for comments on the french version of this text. They also wish to thank Frédérique Bracoud and Jean-Pierre Lemaître for revising the english translation from John Cronin . Views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the commentators or of the authors' institutions.

² The point of view developed here dates from March 2010. Subsequent political negotiations can obviously change the reality.

³ The language is the whole people.

I. Milestones in history

1. Nations and nationalism

Everyone knows that States are transitory forms in the organization of human beings in society. All States have a beginning and an end; they only have a mid-range lifespan. Belgium will not be the only State to escape from that destiny.

The Belgian State is a creation of the 19th century. That creation in 1830 benefited from an international conjecture; some have said that the English wanted it in the context of competition with France and in the framework of European balances of power. Few believed in its viability at the time, not even the first king of the Belgians, who still wrote, twenty-eight years after assuming the throne: "Belgium has no nationality and considering the character of its inhabitants will never be able to have one" ⁴.

European nationalisms were born in the 19th century, in the same breath with the people's coming to awareness of their sovereignty, an awareness resulting from the philosophy of Enlightenment, the French revolution and the rise of democracies. Sovereignty belongs to the people and the people's right to look after themselves was proclaimed. The romantic movement of the 19th century fuelled the growth of nationalisms, exalting the idea of a fatherland. National poets and historians invented and exalted the "soul" of peoples. The great European nationalisms go back to that period: Poland, Russia, Serbia, etc. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, which extended over the whole centre of Europe, was literally undermined in the 19th century by nationalist surges; subsequently collapsing in the 20th century. Germany, on the other hand, unified itself at the same time on the basis of Germanic nationalism.

For its nationalist construction, Belgium also benefited from the romantic conjecture: its historians crafted a "Belgian soul" which, going back to Antiquity, was supposed to have lasted over the centuries ⁵. The two fathers of Belgian historiography, Godefroid Kurth and Henri Pirenne, exerted a strong influence on the Belgian national consciousness. For them, Belgian unitarism relied on a bilingual Flanders, a microcosm of Belgium and Europe (a meeting place of Germanic and Latin cultures) ⁶. After 1918, in the wake of World War I, the victory and ambient nationalism lent those theories new vigour. Speaking globally, those nationalisms exasperated one another during two world wars, developing a veritable culture, almost a sacralization of violence, in the name of the fatherland.

2. Birth and development of the Flemish movement

The Flemish movement was born in the mid 19th century as part of that same Romantic Movement that exalted peoples. But, whereas in Wallonia that movement worked in the sense of exalting Belgium, in Flanders it worked in the sense of exalting Flanders. Why? Because the Flemish romanticism was based on a popular movement born in reaction to a threefold inferiority situation.

Initially, it was a situation of economic inferiority. Flanders, which had known prosperity in the Middle Ages, experienced an unprecedented economic decline in the mid 19th century. The flax and potato crop crises were catastrophic for these primarily agricultural regions. Driven out by misery, many Flemings then found permanent employment in prosperous industrial Wallonia.

Added to this, there was a cultural inferiority. Flemish, as a language, was then divided into a multitude of dialects, whose unification would only come much later. To have access to the culture, the Flemings were thus required to take the step of learning another language, French in fact.

⁴ Letter of Leopold I^{er} to Jules van Praet, 19 Nov. 1859.

⁵ It was Edmond Picard (1836-1924), a jurist and socialist parliamentarian, the creator of *Pandectes belges*, who discovered the "Belgian soul", resulting from the mixture of two cultures.

⁶ Godefroid Kurth (1847-1916), an admirer of the German historical school, introduced research seminars into our universities. With regard to our concerns, he preached bilingualism and saw a prefiguring of Belgium in Brabant, via its resistance to French influence (G. KURTH, *La nationalité belge*, Namur, 1913). Better known, HENRI PIRENNE (1862-1935) published his *Histoire de Belgique* in seven volumes, from 1900 to 1932, a vast fresco in which a prestigious Flanders plays a leading role (the importance of the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302, which marked the refusal of French influence). The formation of contemporary Belgium is not fortuitous, but is the natural culmination of a long evolution (Belgian finalism). Economic interests pushed the principalities to rapprochement, creating a community: their union under the dukes of Burgundy and later developments consolidated that unity. Pirenne's brilliant construction fails to take sufficiently into account various realities, like the resistance and the particularity of the principality of Liège, or the French Revolution's role, exploding the echelons of the ancien régime and setting the scene for the country's unification. It is, moreover, guided by a nationalist conception.

However, in Flanders itself, the bourgeoisie had long since been Frenchified; the people speaking the Flemish dialects were thus cut off from their elites.

Finally, there was a political inferiority. The Belgian democracy born in 1830 was very incomplete at the beginning. Not all citizens had the right to vote. By the censal electoral laws then enforced, only those who paid very high taxes voted. However that small minority (i.e. the grand bourgeoisie), in Flanders itself, was long since Frenchified (Fransquillons). It follows that the officials elected to Parliament, Flemish as well as Walloon, were all French-speakers. Legal Belgium thus gave the impression of a French-speaking country overlying two types of popular dialects: Flemish dialects in the north of the country and Walloon dialects in the south.

Let us notice that the Walloon population was not to blame, as is sometimes said, in this situation of subjugating the Flemish people; the Walloons were above all victims of their own ruling class.

The year 1840 marks the beginning of the Flemish movement. It is the date of petitioning in favour of the Flemish language, launched by some intellectuals to promote recognition of Flemish as a language; that petitioning only met with the contempt of the Flemish bourgeois, long since Frenchified. On the other hand, the movement met with success among the low clergy close to the people and among romantic litterateurs. The novelist Hendrik Conscience (De Leeuw van Vlaanderen, 1838) and the poet Guido Gezelle, inter alia, count among those awakening a Flemish national mystique. Others, like the liberal J.R. Willems (1793-1846), fought for the place of Flemish in public life⁷. The movement spread little by little and met the approval of a downtrodden minority, victims of a cultural injustice. The 19th century was marked by that movement's rise to power, going from conquest to conquest in gaining the recognition of its rights: the use of Flemish in judicial matters (1873), in administration (1878), in official secondary teaching (1883), in corrective procedures (1889), in legislative acts (the De Vriendt-Coremans law, 1898), etc.

The two world wars particularly ignited Flemish sentiments and widened the gap between the two parts of the country. During World War I, the occupant set up a policy favouring Flanders, known as Flamenpolitik. At the front, in the trenches, a frontist movement was born (Frontbeweging) among Flemish soldiers dissatisfied with getting orders in French. During World War II, Nazi Germany renewed its policy of favouring Flanders; for example, in 1940, 106,000 Flemish prisoners of war were repatriated, while 65,000 French-speaking prisoners remained in captivity until 1945. Additionally, collaboration with the occupant seems to have relied on a more widespread consent in the north than in the south; thus, the UTMI, a trade union based on the New Order's principles, and founded during the war by H. De Man, numbered only 17,000 Walloon members out of a total of 109,000; another example, during the occupation, out of 11,500 press resistants, 9,400 were Walloon. It should be said that since the interbellum period, part of the Flemish movement had been contaminated by fascist ideology, particularly with the birth of VERDINASO (Verbond der Dietse Nationaal-Solidaristen), founded by Joris van Severen in 1931, and especially the VNV (Vlaams Nationaal Verbond), a party created by Staf De Clercq in 1933. That contamination is still perceptible in the current Vlaams Belang.

Cultural at the beginning, the Flemish movement became political, and then economic: here we have all the ingredients of a romantic and integral nationalism, which was modernized with Flanders' economic rise to power from the 1960s on. Currently, an economically strong region, political Flanders claims an ever increasing autonomy, affirming itself as a nation and providing itself with an increasingly State-like symbolic system.

3. A Wallonia Nostalgic for Belgium

In Wallonia, the question of languages was perceived differently. An analogous situation of domination by French-speaking elites led to radically divergent positions as compared to Flemish regions. We have seen how the Flemish party reacted in unifying its dialects and promoting its language in public life. In Wallonia, romanized since Antiquity, the Romance dialects (Walloon,

⁷ With the creation of the *Willemsfonds* in 1851. The Catholic side saw the creation of the *Dauidsfonds* in 1875.

mainly, but also the dialects of Picardy, Lorraine and, to a lesser extent, Champagne) remained confined to the domain of private exchanges without there really ever having been a question of making them emerge in official sectors. Public life was dominated by the French-speaking elites of wealth, power and knowledge.

It must be said that Wallonia too was affected by the European Romantic Movement, which, in the mid 19th century, from Friesland to Catalonia, in passing through Flanders and Brittany, caused a flowering of associations seeking to develop the traditions of the people, their dialectal and historical heritage. The most famous of these initiatives was *Félibrige*, created in Occitania in 1854⁸. The founding, in 1856, of the Liège Society for Walloon Literature (since 1909, the Society for Walloon Language and Literature) illustrated the will to cultivate what was specifically Walloon: their language and their traditions. Other initiatives conformed to that pattern: in 1889, in Liège, E. Monseur and G. Doutrepont created a Society of Walloon Folklore; from 1893 to 1914, the review *Wallonie* appeared in Liège, directed by O. Colson, J. Defrecheux and G. Willame; the orthography of the Walloon language was established in 1899 by J. Feller. For that matter, even the name “Wallonia” goes back to that period⁹. However, those movements never envisaged raising the dialects of Wallonia to the rank of a unified language, rivalling French and imposing it on Belgium as an official language.

In fact, the frustration of the lower classes of the Walloon regions did not relate to questions of languages but to social demands. The working populations of Wallonia directed their combativeness towards social conquests. However, the Walloon speakers were often just as ill at ease in front of an employer handling French correctly as in front of a judge not knowing the dialects. This hiatus is serious and we can ask ourselves whether historians have sufficiently perceived the consequences of that alienation. Going further back in history, was there ever an attempt to measure the burden that situation of rupture between a people and its elites placed upon Walloon cultural creativity? The need for changing languages in order to accede to culture and power, combined with the developments in instruction in French, led to a clear regression in spoken Walloon in the 20th century. In daily practice, until the mid 20th century, schools contributed to targeting and inhibiting Walloons from childhood on by reprimanding them for their expressions and regional accents as being incorrect or coarse. Walloon speakers began an underground life a century ago, reserving for themselves the world of intimacy and voluntarily remaining in the background of public or cultural domains.

In Wallonia, unlike the Flemish regions, the Belgium ideology had penetrated spirits profoundly. The “historical assembly” and the theory of the “Belgian soul” had functioned well and been propagated in schools. Moreover, since the 19th century, the industrial regions of the Walloon valley (Sambre-Meuse) had been the economic driving force of a successful Belgium, with which the elites of Wallonia were flattered to be identified.

Thus, when the Flemish movement was born, it was perceived in Wallonia and Brussels as a divider of the Belgian fatherland. In reaction, the first Walloon movement, born at the end of the 19th century, was not at all Walloon autonomist, but was centred on the defence of Belgium against the Flemish activism. During the 20th century, the Walloon movement only gradually became aware of the scope of the Flemish factor and, not without ambiguity, came to be directed towards what was then called the “administrative separation” of the north and south of Belgium.

However, it was only in the 1960s, with the perception of the twilight of Wallonia’s heavy industry that a gradual awakening of the Walloon consciousness, hitherto rather confined to bourgeois or intellectual milieu, really penetrated into the population. Facing industrial decline, facing too an awakening Flanders that seemed to be gaining hegemony in Belgium, the Walloon movement increasingly concentrated its efforts on obtaining a decision-making capacity in economic matters. In

⁸ Founded near Avignon by seven poets, among whom Frédéric Mistral, the ‘Félibrige’ sought to stimulate a renaissance of Occitan language and literature. Among other associations, we mention: the ‘Association bretonne’, 1843; ‘Selskip for Frysker Tael’, 1844; ‘Willemsfonds’ in Flanders, 1851; and ‘Jeux floraux’ in Barcelona, 1859.

⁹ If the word “Wallon” is older, the word “Wallonie” dates from 1844 (François Grandgagnage), but remained confined to philological circles. The word “Wallonie” didn’t really enter the public domain until 1886, with the creation of the review, *La Wallonie*, by Albert MOCKEL, belonging to the symbolist poetic current of the French language. See A. HENRY. *Histoire des mots « Wallon » et « Wallonie »*, Mont-sur-Marchienne, 1990 (3rd ed.).

this new awareness, the role of the great strike of the winter of 1960-61 was decisive, with the action of the Liège union leader, André Renard, founder of the *Mouvement populaire wallon*.

We shall not point out here the innumerable adventures that took Belgium from being a unitary State towards Federal State status after the political crises of the past half-century. In 1962, one of the first milestones was the fixation of the linguistic border, until then a mobile line, and increasingly considered by the Flemings as inviolable, equal to a State border. The fruit of compromise and a complex institutional engineering developed in the stress of acute crises, the Belgian style federalism thus developed over a half-century appears as a quite incomprehensible hybrid (a chimera in the proper sense). After various phases of adjustment, a revision of the Constitution and a vote of reform laws were adopted by the Parliament on July 14th, 1993¹⁰. Henceforth, article 1 of the Constitution clearly affirms: "Belgium is a Federal State which is composed of communities and regions". However, the institutional architecture of this federal Belgium remains complicated; some institutions that are rather incomprehensible for the citizen overlap, nourishing a chronic dissatisfaction.

As for Walloon consciousness, despite an increasingly clear break-through, and also despite the sting of the Flemish movement's victories (like the move of the French-speaking university of Louvain to Walloon Brabant, achieved in 1968), and finally despite the progressive installation of Walloon and French-speaking community regional institutions at the end of the 20th century, it must be said that the feeling of belonging to Wallonia remains rather weak compared to the Belgian feeling. Whereas a great many Flemings are concerned about promoting their own heritage, many Walloons, on the other hand, link all the elements of their heritage to Belgium. Even now, Walloons rather spontaneously pin the epithet "Walloon" onto companies in difficulty or the painful legacies of their industrial past, but seldom onto the exploits of the athletes, the inventions of scientists or the works of artists, who naturally come along enriching the Belgian heritage. Moreover, the media often reflect this usage and contribute to further anchoring it, despite the present-day existence of an increasingly perceptible Walloon reality on the institutional landscape.

Are the Walloon people cut off from their collective memory, as some claim? Do they forget the richness of 12th and 13th century Mosan goldsmithing, the brilliant musical school lasting from Roland de Lassus to Guillaume Lekeu or, further, the contributions of litterateurs and painters, "hennuyer" (from Hainaut province) notably, to the surrealist movement? Are they unaware of the brilliant period of Walloon blacksmiths in Sweden in the 17th century, creating in that country one of the most efficient metallurgies of the time and earning a reputation there that is ever dynamic¹¹? Aren't there a good number of more or less unconscious mechanisms, complex and hard to define, at work, occulting the Walloon heritage? Should we blame a teaching of history placing little emphasis on Walloon cultural wealth? Or is it the result of the absence of a major attractive cultural centre within the Walloon perimeter? Or is it a spontaneous attitude of reserve on the part of Walloons, leaving their creations modestly hidden? Or is it, finally, the elites and writers' disaffection, scorning Walloon realities as skimpy and provincial? One thing is sure, and we will come back to this, the absence of cultural competencies within Walloon institutions contributes greatly to the lack of visibility of Wallonia and to the symbolic deficit described previously¹².

We should add one crucial element in this absence of a strong image; a paradoxical absence when one realizes that Wallonia was the economic driving force of Belgium at the time of its prosperity. The fact is that the Walloon economic elites very quickly established themselves in Brussels, where they were to some extent "Belgicized", losing their Walloon rootedness and promoting an industrialization lacking any real development¹³. More concerned with international diversification than regional dynamization, Brussels was where "Belgian" financial institutions concentrated their capital: wealth produced in Wallonia was not sufficiently reinvested there, whereas the Flemish

¹⁰ In February 1994, a grooming of the revised and amended Constitution led to a new numbering of its articles.

¹¹ See L. COURTOIS, M. DORBAN and J. PIROTTE (eds.), *De fer et de feu. L'émigration wallonne vers la Suède au XVII^e siècle. Histoire et mémoire (XVII^e-XXI^e siècles)*, in: Publications de la Fondation Wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2003 (Série Recherche, V) and L. COURTOIS and C. SAPPÀ (eds.), *De Fer et de feu. L'émigration wallonne vers la Suède. Histoire et mémoire (XVII^e-XXI^e siècles)*, in: *Exposition au Parlement Wallon, Namur, 19-29 février 2008*, Publications de la Fondation Wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2008 (Série Études et documents, V).

¹² See L. COURTOIS and J. PIROTTE (EDS.), *L'imaginaire wallon. Jalons pour une identité qui se construit*, in: Publications de la Fondation Wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994 (Série Recherche, I).

¹³ See M. QUÉVIT, *Les causes du déclin wallon. L'influence du pouvoir politique et des groupes financiers sur le développement régional*, Brussels, 1978, and ID., *La Wallonie : l'indispensable autonomie*, Collection Minorités, Paris, 1982. See also F. BISMANS, in: F. JORIS (ED.), *Une odyssée économique*, in *Wallonie. Atouts et références d'une Région*, Namur, 1995, pp. 145-175, and Ph. BOVEROUX, P. GILISSEN et F.-L. THOREAU, *50 ans d'histoire économique de la Wallonie*, Liège, 2004.

bourgeoisie adopted an opposite attitude. Indeed, the Flemish movement very rapidly enriched its linguistic struggle for an overall social vision, integrating intellectual development (with the question of the Flemishization of the University of Ghent) and promotion of an economic “flamingantism” (of which Lodewijk De Raedt can perhaps be seen as the founder, at the turn of 19th and 20th century), placed at the service of an integral emancipation of the Flemish people. It was that movement which led to Flanders acquiring powerful instruments of development, notably with the Vlaams Economisch Verbond (1926) and the Kredietbank (1935), etc. In Wallonia, the absence of a politico-financial “centre” – a part played by Brussels – has also nourished a sub-regionalism, which has long obfuscated an awareness of the economic destiny of the region as a whole. The domination of an “acculturized” Belgian bourgeoisie (“we’re from nowhere”) in Wallonia, coupled with the emergence of a strong Flemish bourgeoisie, has also resulted in privileging Flanders in terms of investments, both public and private.

In closing this look at history, we can say that Wallonia has been putting its trust in Belgium, has placed all its bets on it, and has refused to see soon enough that Flanders, in the meantime become prosperous, has been withdrawing from the game. As a result, Wallonia has found itself in a profound symbolic destitution, in a solitude that it did not see coming and that it often still continues to deny. It was phagocytized by its mother Belgium.

II. PRESENT-DAY FACTS

Since the elections of 2007, Belgium’s institutional and political present has been largely conditioned by tensions between the communities. A majority in the Flemish political opinion demands important institutional adjustments in order to increase competencies (and thereby the autonomy of Flanders) and to increase the regions’ responsibilities. A majority in the Walloon political opinion refuses such adjustments, as some of them would be unfavourable to the French-speakers of the outskirts of Brussels, while others could destabilize the social security system, or even put the equilibrium of Belgium in danger. We shall formulate three considerations on the Belgian institutional present.

1. The Flemish movement is not giving up the fight

The persistent sentimental attachment of many citizens of Wallonia to the Belgian project sometimes makes them refuse to assess the Flemish factor. For them, each phase of appeasement is thus interpreted as a halt in the Flemish movement’s march, a prelude to a return to what they consider to be the harmony of yesteryear, that of the unitary Belgium.

If it is true that the past does not allow us to trace the lines of the future with precision, some facts deserve reflection. Born of a small seed in 1840, the Flemish movement has enjoyed 170 years of growth. In ceaseless amplification, it has diversified its goals, passing from the phase of linguistic demands to the cultural phase, then to the economic phase, and then to a more political phase of leadership in the Belgian State, coming finally to the more global phase of an increased autonomy in view of a Flemish national destiny. Despite notorious political divergences, the Vlaamse Beweging has succeeded in always redefining a common platform of demands. Despite tactical retreats imposed by circumstances, it has always managed to push up its platform. Flanders has irresistibly increased its external visibility and is completing its symbolic construction (including road signs in black and yellow, the colours of Flanders).

There can be no question here of blaming the Flemish movement. Nor will we try to blame Flemish economic and political leader’s short memory. At a time when there are talks of transfers of wealth between the north and the south of Belgium to the advantage of Wallonia, have we ever seen a Flemish historian or economist rigorously tally up the transfers which took place formerly in the opposite direction, at the time of the serious crisis that afflicted the Flemish regions during the 19th

century¹⁴? In the period of Walloon prosperity, the Walloon populations of the industrial valley welcomed a good number of workmen coming from the north, as the many Flemish family names in Hainaut and Liège testify¹⁵. Neither economy nor politics are primarily matters of good heartedness.

Let us simply try to understand the dynamics of the Flemish movement in its dialectical relationship with Walloon opinion. For 170 years, a good many Walloon political leaders, having met Flemish demands, have naively believed that the latest request would be the last. At the time of the long governmental crisis following the June 10th, 2007 elections (149 days without a government and then formation of a “temporary” government by Guy Verhofstadt in December 19th 2009), several of them affirmed not having seen any of it coming; yet, the Vlaamse Raad had defined a clear and broad majority position on all the demands. Many Walloon political leaders were deluded because they often refuse to look straight at truths that disturb them. It is simpler to blind oneself in attributing the Flemish demands to politicians eager to win elections and misleading the good people, rather than seeing the obvious: the Flemish separatist project, far from being only a few surface ripples, is born of a popular ground swell. Denying it stems from blindness, naivety or bad faith.

The community lull of the year 2009 is not definitive. It was undoubtedly due to the urgencies of the banking and economic crises. A doctrine currently gaining grounds in Flanders is based on the wearing effect of time. Let issues that the French-speakers regard as important get bogged down. Let the economic situation of Brussels and Wallonia degrade in order to make the political officials of those regions start *quid pro quo* negotiations: the means of Walloon survival against an increased autonomy for Flanders.

2. Belgium is being emptied of its substance

Since 2007 the question of the scission of the electoral constituency of Brussels-Hall-Vilvorde (BHV) has been the focal point of Flemish demands and French-speaking resistances. A new bout of fever is brewing for spring 2010. In whatever way the evil is rooted off, it is certain that this burning question will not be the last and that the Belgian State will continue its progression towards an increase in the competencies of the federal entities. Political Flanders insistently asks for this increase in competencies. Social security seems to be the last bastion of solidarity among the regions, a bastion so far bitterly defended by the French-speakers. Yet it is predicted that arrangements will be made on the sly.

As to a good number of the contentious issues, in the long run and in good democratic style, the representatives of the Belgian French-speaking people (40% of the country's population) will not be indefinitely capable of opposing the emancipatory will of a majority of the Flemish elected representatives (60% of the population). A stubborn refusal to do justice to their institutional demands will simply humiliate the Flemings, exasperate them and swell the ranks of the independentists. It would be suicidal to scorn the will of the Flemings to that point. Sentimental nationalist wounds can become dangerously infected. One does not put a heavy cover on a boiling pot. Tito's Yugoslavia had wanted to pour a cement slab over the various Yugoslavian nationalisms; the country exploded in violence.

Often put forward by Flemish politicians, the word “confederation” indicates the constitutional status towards which some of them want to head. For our purpose, it is useless to enter into the legal details on the differences between a federal State and confederated States. Everyone knows that, in the first case, a State remains with important competencies and that, in the second case, various Sovereign states unite to entrust a given number of competencies to the confederation. Let us just remember the essential: if the competencies of the confederated entities increase substantially, the Belgian State

¹⁴ We should moderate this assertion. In recent years, economists have taken interest on this matter for the most recent period, but only after 1955. For studying this reality since 1830 raises complex problems, as well for the sources as for the methodology, see O. MEUNIER, M. MIGNOLET et M.-E. MULQUIN, *Les transferts interrégionaux en Belgique*, in: B. BAYENET, H. CAPRON, P. LIÉGEAIS (eds.), *L'espace Wallonie-Bruxelles. Voyage au bout de la Belgique*, Bruxelles, 2007, pp. 283-305, more specifically point 4, *Les transferts interrégionaux en Belgique ont-ils historiquement toujours bénéficié à la Wallonie ?*, pp. 292-300. Only one study was published, but its contents is subject to serious criticisms (*ibid.*, pp. 293-294) : see J. HANNES, *De prijs voor België was altijd Hoog*, in: *Secessie. Kwartaalblad voor de studie van separatisme en directdemocratie*, 2, jan.-feb.-mar. 2001, pp. 25-37. One shall refer also to M. QUÉVIT, *Flandre-Wallonie: Quelle solidarité. De la création de l'État belge à l'Europe des régions*, Charleroi, 2010, just published, which provides some details on the most recent years.

¹⁵ On Flemish emigration to Wallonia in the 19th and 20th centuries, see Y. QUAIRIAUX, *L'image du flamand en Wallonie (1830-1914): essai d'analyse sociale et politique*, Brussels, 2006.

will end up resembling an empty shell. Without making forecasts or drawing conclusions on an unknown future, we will limit ourselves to noting that the two major cultural communities of Belgium pay less and less attention to one another and follow divergent paths.

Let us observe that the rise of Flanders and its exigencies do not necessarily imply the disappearance of Belgium. On the one hand, the Flemish nationalists may perhaps be satisfied with an increasingly broad autonomy, because total independence would probably imply their losing Brussels. On the other hand, and paradoxically, one should take into account that Belgium has a certain level of political stability: whereas, over the past two centuries, the majority of neighbouring countries changed regimes and constitutions several times (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, and Greece), Belgium still has its Constitution of 1830, certainly modified on several occasions, but never abandoned. A weaker State politically, Belgium has always privileged a culture of ideological, political and linguistic compromise. It has often privileged institutional creativity, a complex engineering by which none of the partners loses face, over direct confrontation.

There are thus chances that the Belgian State will remain, even with reduced federal competencies. Its explosion is probably not set for tomorrow and, rather than towards divorce, Belgium may be heading for a separation of assets under a hybrid regime. For that matter, what would each partner do if it were forced to part with its confrontation-compromise dialectic, a two centuries old well-worn habit?

3. Wallonia is ill-served by its institutions

Summoned into existence with the 1971 constitutional revision, this is the political uncertainty the Walloon region must emerge in, as well doing so within a degraded economic and social environment. However, the current institutions do not favour Walloon reorganization. Deprived of cultural competencies, Wallonia lacks the symbolic means for building an enhancing and dynamic image for herself¹⁶. The population of a Wallonia in economic decline for half of a century is rather unsure of itself and, in fact, has taken to heart the image of itself as a lazy and decadent people which a triumphalist Flemish press often throws in its face. An injustice of history for a region that until the mid 20th century made the prosperity of industrial Belgium! ... How can one get out of this vicious circle without putting cultural and mental resources to work? Can we imagine a business obliged to enter the market, deprived of its symbolic means: a heading, a logo, a trademark?

A small reminder is called for here. Born the same year and shortly before a Walloon region competent in the economic region, the French Community (la Communauté française) of Belgium received competencies in cultural and social welfare matters¹⁷. The fruit of a laborious compromise, the Constitution was revised in 1971 in a semi-federal direction. It was a compromise between federalism with two parties (Flanders-Wallonia) and federalism with three parties (Flanders-Wallonia-Brussels). Generally speaking, the communities' cultural autonomy was more a response to the Flemings' wishes (a federalism based on two major cultural communities); whereas the economic autonomy of the regions corresponded more to the Walloons' wishes (a federalism based on three economic regions). This is also the context in which the German-speaking Community of Belgium (Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft Belgiens) was created, exerting Community competencies over nine mainly German-speaking communes belonging to the "German language region" and integrated into the Walloon region as regards regional competencies¹⁸.

¹⁶ The regions' competencies are exercised in a well delimited territory and relate more to economic aspects: economy and credit, foreign trade, territorial management and urbanism, housing, environment, rural renovation, agriculture, water management, supervision of provinces and towns, employment, public works, transport, energy, scientific research, as well as the international relations for those various areas. Moreover, certain competencies of the French Community have been transferred to the Walloon region (health policy and assistance to persons).

¹⁷ Use of languages, culture, education, audiovisual, medicine, child protection and scientific research, as well as the international relations regarding these various areas.

¹⁸ In fact, the reality is more complex than is often thought: 1) in administrative matters, the towns of the German language region must propose linguistic facilities for the French-speaking minority living in the German-speaking Community; the 2) adjacent towns located in French language regions must offer certain facilities for the German-speaking citizens: resulting in two towns with veritable facilities in German (Malmédy and Waimes) and three towns with German and Dutch facilities only in the area of education (Baelen, Plombières and Welkenraedt); 3) moreover, in the German language region, the German-speaking Community exercises certain competencies transferred by the Walloon region: monuments and sites (1995), employment policy and archaeological excavations (2001), supervision over towns and police zones (and, since 2009, over the *intermunicipals*), the implementation of subsidized works, towns financing, public administration of churches and assimilated establishments, funerals and graves (2005).

Leaving aside this German-speaking Community for a moment, such bicephalous institutions (Community and Region), which should contribute to the construction of Wallonia, in fact do it ill service. The territories and interests of these two institutions do not entirely overlap and their interests are not always convergent¹⁹. To undertake an economic recovery, the Walloon region can neither use cultural leverage nor count on symbolic capital. Its institutional duality is not suited to clarify the symbolic landscape of a Wallonia suffering from a failure to understand itself. In 1983 and 2003, two Walloon Manifestos put their finger on the problem... unsuccessfully, for the French Community of Belgium benefits from the support of the French-speaking Belgian cultural establishment²⁰.

Independently of the necessary bond of solidarity it preserves between the Walloon and Brussels regions, the French Community of Belgium has fostered a still-born cultural plan. That institution expresses the aims of the heirs to the bourgeoisie of 1830 who formerly built a unified Belgian State on a French-speaking base. With the Flemings having refused to adopt that model, the French Community is pursuing the Belgian dream without them. This residual State thus counts a capital city, Brussels, and a province, Wallonia, whose name and aspirations are blotted out. The French-speaking establishment has named its ideology: “belgitude” (Belgianness), a current term launched in the 1970’s in French-speaking Brussels circles. A catch-all and narcissistic characterization, functioning for the exclusive use of the French-speaking part of Belgium, this “belgitude” is just a fallback concept...

The coherence needed in dealing with economic, social and cultural questions, as well as the clearness and visibility of institutions requires that Belgium should recompose itself around its regional components: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, without forgetting the German-speaking community, which may inherit Walloon regional competencies for the “German language region” already defined by law for the exercise of its community competencies... Each of these regions should thus have “packages” of homogeneous and complementary competencies. It should be recalled that the Walloon movement historically privileged that form of federalism.

III. MIRAGES AND DEADLOCKS

Before drawing some pragmatic paths for the Walloon future, it seems important as a preliminary, to close a few doors which seem to lead only to mirages or impasses.

1. Nostalgic solutions

We have sufficiently shown that a pure and simple return to square one, the “lost paradise” of a unitary Belgium, was unrealistic. For that matter, that solution is only envisaged by a handful of nostalgic individuals ill-advised of the real evolutions. On the other hand, mitigated variations of this solution surface regularly: generalized Belgian bilingualism, bilingualism for the province of Brabant, or a single electoral constituency for some of the elected officials of the federal Parliament. Roughly speaking, such rather unrealistic, watered-down misadventures result from over-simplification along the lines “all we have to do is”. However, there is no salvation in nostalgia. Nostalgic Belgians will undoubtedly have no alternative to converting to a new type of cynicism brought on by regionalization.

- **Generalized Belgian bilingualism.** It is sometimes said that generalized bilingualism would arrange all Belgium’s problems, as if such a generalized bilingualism were even possible and as if the Belgian malaise were only linguistic. And, while they are at it, the Walloons are made to feel guilty in holding them responsible for rejecting that bilingualism at the time of a vote on laws governing the

¹⁹ A defect of the French Community is a lack of precision as to its territorial limits, owing to the fact that Brussels is a bilingual region. It also suffers from not having economic competencies. Additionally, the fiscal power belonging to the French Community is hardly applicable, because in Brussels the two communities (Dutch-speaking and French) are competent for the same territory. Finally, composed artificially by two socially and economically very different regions (Brussels and Wallonia), united to one another simply by the language, the Community proves to be a hybrid with little mobilizing power for the populations.

²⁰ Manifeste pour la culture wallonne (1983) and Manifeste pour une Wallonie maîtresse de sa culture, de son éducation et de sa recherche (2003).

use of languages in 1932, which in our view leads to a concealment of the Walloon historical reality and, upon analysis, to a paradoxical reasoning²¹.

If everyone agrees in saying that knowing languages is an asset and even a pressing need at certain levels of responsibility, the idea of a “generalized bilingualism” appears to us as surprisingly ingenuous. Without going back to the tower of Babel myth, the whole history of languages shows that integral bilingualism is always - and can only be - “diglossic”²². Historically speaking, the generalized cohabitation of two languages has always been the result of a “necessity” which leads a population to have to learn another idiom than its original tongue, with, as a corollary, an unavoidable relationship of domination: the second language is learned because it is “dominant”; the other is threatened in the long term because it is “dominated”. That was the case with the Walloon languages, practically eradicated today, as would have been the case with Thiois (Diets) speakers if the Flemings had not opposed it... It is nevertheless surprising to have to recall, in the debate, which concerns us, the example of Flanders! Initially, the Flemish movement, wanting to save its language and its culture, demanded the use of the language of the people, parallel to French: that was the time of bilingualism, which was expressed, for example, in the creation of the bilingual University of Ghent (the Nolf law, 1923). Almost immediately, in a second phase, they necessarily ended up calling for unilingualism... Indeed, in the Belgian society of the time, the recognition of Flemish as an official language in Flanders, alongside French, changed nothing: French, the dominant language, continued to be a necessity for anyone wanting to legitimize him/herself, “to rise” in society, and the Flemish oral dialects continued their slow relegation to private space. It was the same in Canada. The official bilingualism of the Federation never fooled anyone: only the French-speakers are really bilingual and if the inhabitants of Québec had not voted Law 101 (August 26th, 1977), the continuous erosion of French would have continued there inescapably. Applied to today’s Belgium, where the Flemings are demographically, economically, politically and socially dominant, the choice of generalized bilingualism would necessarily lead to making French in Wallonia a dominated language - – as it already is in all bilingual organisations, both public and private -, condemned to slowly fade away, before disappearing.

The idea of generalized bilingualism raises another objection. If it would incontestably oil the machine a bit, it would nonetheless solve nothing. It could not stop the rise of Flemish nationalism nor the identity search in progress for 170 years. In contrast to what is often said, the Belgian malaise is not a simple linguistic matter, it is much more important: it is economic, sociological, behavioural, and cultural in the deepest sense. The French historian Jules Michelet had already noted this at the dawn of an independent Belgium. On his first visit in 1832, he showed sensitivity to the reality of the linguistic border: “Waterloo, a beautiful route via the forest of Soignes, with its tall beech-trees. The French language begins after Brussels. The route from Liège to Brussels forms the separation of languages, according to our driver. Waterloo, a Flemish name, beside Mount-Saint-Jean, a French name”²³! But in its spirit, this duality is not only linguistic: in connection with an innkeeper in Ypres, he notes, “she was a marvellous example of the practical universality of this former population of the Netherlands, ardent like a Walloon, laborious like a Fleming”²⁴. Granted, this is of course a stereotype, but involving cultural membership. There is even better: an early expression of community economic concerns: “We left Bruges at eleven, for Lille [...] Spent two hours in Courtrai. Read the newspapers [in French, then]: the Flemings complain that the Walloons are always favoured in road building, etc, that the government finances”²⁵. Nothing new under the sun.

The idea of generalized bilingualism is not just a pipedream or an erroneous (linguistic) answer to a (community) question. During an interview granted to the Newspaper *Le Soir* during the governmental crisis of 2007, former Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene developed an argument

²¹ See M. LIBON, *Lois linguistiques*, in: P. DELFORGE, Ph. DESTATTE and M. LIBON (eds.), *Encyclopédie du mouvement wallon*, II, pp. 942-959, especially pp. 945-948.

²² The word diglossia was originally synonymous with bilingualism, before being used by socio-linguists to characterize a linguistic system where two languages cohabit one and the same territory and end up being in competition, often fatal for one of them. This is one of the sources of the “linguistic insecurity”, we shall return to later. Besides the references cited note 27, see, for French: G. LÜDI, *Französische Diglossie und Polyglossie*, in: G. HOLTUS, M. METZELTIN and Ch. SCHMITT (eds.), *Lexikon der Romanistischen Linguistik*, V, I, *Le français*, Tübingen, 1990, pp. 307-334.

²³ J. MICHELET, *Journal*, in: VIALLANEIX (ED.), I, 1828-1848, Paris, 1959 (5th ed.), p. 107 (7 September 1832). And he moreover adds in relation to the linguistic realities of the Walloon populations: “Yet, the Waterloo guide says that the French spoken there [in Waterloo] is real French, and that there they don’t understand people from Liège. [the patois speakers]”...

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 338 (26 Jul. 1840).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249 (16 Jul. 1837).

making the Walloons responsible for the current Belgian malaise: “If Wallonia had accepted the bilingualism system in 1932, Belgium would not be where it is today”²⁶.

In fact, this accusation fails to take into account historical realities that are systematically clouded over, starting with the unitary Belgian, French-speaking bourgeoisie, supposed to have defended the interest of Walloons, to whom it in fact never paid any attention, as well as to the Flemings: under the French-speaking elites’ ideological domination, the 1830’s Belgian project was indeed intended to “belgicize” the lower classes, Flemish as well as Walloon, who, at the time, did not speak French. From that point of view, the linguistic situations of Wallonia and Flanders were hardly different: with Frenchified elites on both sides, with the people speaking, here Romance dialects, and there Thiois (Diets) dialects. With a notable difference however: whereas from the Middle Ages on, the Walloon country had taken part in a linguistic unification of the domain of the Oil languages, which gave birth to French (with a generalized use in Wallonia for everything written as of the 16th century), the wars of religion were to cut the Thiois dialects off from the Dutch unification movement (while continuing to employ those languages in written usage). Thus the result, in 1830, was asymmetric: while the Walloon people spoke its dialects in daily life, they had been indebted to French for all written usages for centuries (and thence a phenomenon of diglossia); while the Flemish people spoke their dialects, there existed a longstanding scribal tradition for their dialects (and thence, certainly, a different reaction to Frenchification). Grafted onto this linguistic asymmetry came a class reaction, different too: in Flanders, remaining rural, lower class opposition to the French-speaking bourgeoisie played a role on the terrain of languages; in Wallonia, industrialization led to an opposition of a social nature, where French, moreover the language of the Revolution and human rights, seemed a tool of emancipation.

In 1932, the common Walloon folk were actually still confronted with the laborious task of learning French, oral and written, of which it had little mastery at the time: in a survey carried out in November 1920 by the Walloon Assembly, for example, among “Justices of Peace” (62% answered), 76% of those questioned declared “that judges must understand Walloon”, and 65% added “that judges must be able to speak Walloon”. Compulsory schooling, voted in 1914, was still far from having instilled a sufficiently fluid and correct knowledge of the official language. World War II is often cited as a moment of a generational cleavage: orality shifted from spoken Walloon to French. How, under these conditions, would it have been possible, in 1932, to impose on all Walloons while they were learning French, the additional task of learning another language, Dutch, which moreover had not terminated, at that time its unification process? This is even truer since, again, the historical yet completed heritages were different: French had been spoken in Flanders since the Middle Ages (with a movement of spontaneous Frenchification of the “elites”, which was accentuated in the 18th century), whereas Flemish has only been introduced in Wallonia for a few decades, and only through teaching.

Finally, we cannot help being astonished by the paradoxical character of such an invocation of the 1932 laws in the person of Jean-Luc Dehaene. For let us return to the facts. What was the goal of the 1932 laws for the Flemish movement? Precisely to put an end to French-Flemish bilingualism in Flanders, which - diglossia oblige - did not manage to stop the erosion of Thiois (Diets) dialects, and to impose Flemish unilinguism on it, the only thing capable of saving the people’s language. How can one then blame Wallonia for not having done precisely what the Flemings were fighting? And what would have happened on the assumption of a Belgian Dutch-French bilingualism? Simply the beginning of a slow and inexorable movement of linguistic unification to the advantage of the dominant language: undoubtedly French at the outset (which would have caused a Flemish reaction), and then, with the rise in power of Flanders, Flemish (which would have caused a Walloon reaction)...

- **Brabantine bilingualism.** Little brother of generalized bilingualism, that of the former Province of Brabant poses the same problems and seems hardly more realistic. Just imagine, in Brabant, abruptly imposing bilingualism in all public employment, even among subordinates? What would be the real utility and what type of linguistic examination would you have to take, even for a modest, unqualified public employment? Concretely - and to say nothing about the Wavre firemen, whom cannot be

²⁶ *Le Soir*, 3 Aug. 2007.

recruited any longer, as is the case in Brussels -, one would have to explain to us how, for example, we are to “bilingualize” the municipal administrative management of Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve. Perhaps in hiring Flemish civil servants, considered more bilingual than the Walloons (which is explained by the historical context and yet turns out to be less and less often the case)? Let’s not fool ourselves; from that situation with all the town’s bank accounts being concentrated in the Kredietbank or the policemen coming from Alost or Hasselt every morning, there would be only a short step away...

- **A unique electoral constituency.** Creating a unique electoral constituency in Belgium to elect some of the members of the federal Parliament is a solution which is sometimes considered and which was even discussed publicly at the time of the crisis in 2007²⁷. Some of the representatives would thus be elected by the entire Belgian electoral body (Dutch-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking altogether). Seen from afar, this solution might appear able to inject a bit of cement among the various Belgian entities: it would enforce the legitimacy of the federal central authority, moderating a federalism that political scientists unanimously see as centrifugal.

Yet we wonder whether it is advisable to further complicate the institutional landscape by such electoral assemblies, designed to glue back together human communities, which anyway are moving away from one another. The glue might not hold. Eager for increased autonomy, would the Flemings accept a regression that would further tighten their bonds to Wallonia? As for Walloons aware of their region’s ‘lack of visibility’ problems, as well as of the nostalgia of many French-speakers for Belgium, would they agree seeing a part of the Walloon electorate orientating its electoral choice towards Flemish political personalities, with the risk of worsening Wallonia’s subjugation? And finally, how would the elected officials of that federal district behave during the inevitable conflicts of interests opposing north and south? In fact, it was the distancing of these communities that led to the explosion of the national parties, and then to a centrifugal federalization of the country, and not the reverse. In other words, the community conflict is not the consequence of a centripetal federal system: thus “correcting” the system will not change a pre-existent reality. Dictated by Belgian good will, but complicated and taking little account of realities in the field, this solution appears illusory.

2. The Wallonia-Brussels Federation

The common name “Wallo-Brux” indicates a more integrated Federation of two regions: Brussels and Wallonia. Recommending such a solution has the advantage of proclaiming strong bonds between Wallonia and Brussels. It also has the advantage of proclaiming a strong Brussels region, exercising its prerogative of federating itself with the Walloon region.

On the other hand, this proposal presents the great disadvantage of appearing as a union of the French-speakers, a union based more on cultural aims than on economic and social realities. Among some of its advocates, one suspects a will to continue the Belgian dream without Flanders, which would reject it. This solution suffers from an enormous disadvantage, that of recomposing the Belgian State on the basis of two major communities which are likely to clash permanently, rather than on the basis of three economically and socially different regions. In this respect, a strong union of Wallonia and Brussels seems to be an inexhaustible source of potential conflicts.

Additionally, from a Walloon viewpoint, what will be the destiny of Wallonia in a Federation one might describe as “Belgium without the Flemings”? What it has always been in the Belgian State: a province deprived of a sense on its own, at the service of a centre, Brussels, which is supposed to capitalize on the “wealth” of the whole in what is supposed to be the general interest. This project of Federation is to some extent a “French-speakers” recycling of the unitary Belgian model, which is in fact at the origin of the Walloon decline. Indeed, the mechanism producing a “Belgian” elite implies not only the Frenchification of populations, but also a centralization process - (remotely resembling the Versailles model) aimed at attracting the Frenchified “elites” to a centre of the two regions, in order to create a dominant “Belgian” class transcending the traditional “elites” on their way to “provincialization”. The consequence will be an absence of a Walloon bourgeoisie, who will be

²⁷ See, for example, K. DESCHOUWER and Ph. VAN PARIJS, *Une circonscription fédérale pour tous les belges*, in *La Revue Nouvelle*, 4, Apr. 2007, pp. 12-23. All the elements of the discussion are to be found at <<http://www.paviagroup.be>>.

straight away replaced by a Belgian bourgeoisie whose “territory” is Brussels, and who are certainly worried about Belgium, but not at all about Wallonia. The Flemings rejected Belgium, there is a strong temptation to continue Belgium without them, but without changing anything else: this would be a Wallonia-Brussels Federation, in which Brussels will continue “to capitalize”, as well as for investments as for profits, to the detriment of its Walloon “province”.

Let us note finally that Flanders would not give up Brussels easily on the assumption of a dismemberment of Belgium. If it decided to leave the Belgian State, which it dominates politically and economically, Flanders would obviously make arrangements to guarantee a situation, both on the Belgian and international level, whereby its prerogatives would be safeguarded and locked in. Dreaming of a strong and recognized Wallonia-Brussels federation for now seems confined to fiction.

3. *The rattachiste solution*

Fastening Wallonia to France might seem an attractive solution, having as assets a cultural community and an economic anchoring to a large country. Generally, the advocates of this proposal are divided around two options: either purely and simply attaching the current Walloon provinces to France, thereby becoming French departments; or negotiating an association preserving a certain Walloon autonomy within France, a possibility envisaged by the Constitution of the Fifth Republic.

We might first of all wonder about some of the postulates justifying such a proposal, which seem so obvious, but which can actually seriously be called into question. Doesn't presenting its partial or total dissolution into another State as an enviable solution show a lack confidence in Wallonia, in its real existence and in its potentialities? The patient is in convalescence, and what he is offered is just a “treatment of symptoms”! In addition, while it is true that Wallonia has shared more than its language with France for centuries, it appears reductionist to us to purely and simply identify community of language with “cultural community”, as some occasionally do. The “culture” of a human community - in the broad sense of a shared way of feeling and acting - is also explained by a spacial and historical rootedness. Mosan art, for example, cannot be described as a “French-speaking” creation, but, in this case, represents a specific and open territorial dynamic, having multiple influences, which are not only French. And, for example, the respective conceptions of laicity, which were worked out on opposite sides of the border in institutional distinct contexts and historical heritages, do not match, despite a debate which was largely shared between them, authorized by the common language.

In concrete terms, what would be the Walloon future within a French scenario? The question is far from simple! It is obvious that if it were really on the agenda, the answer provided there would be the fruit of vast, Belgian and international negotiations, with thorny problems to be solved, like the fate of Brussels, the take over the national debt, etc. The negotiated solutions would necessarily be between the two hypotheses mentioned above. On the hypothesis of an association with an autonomous regime, the alternative could be the following: either Wallonia works things out on its own and doesn't really need France; or it “needs” it and its autonomy will be as weak as its need is great, which in fact brings us back, if Wallonia does not take charge of itself, to the scenario of a pure and simple absorption. And what about that second hypothesis? Concretely, we wonder whether those proposing this fastening to France have ever thought seriously about it and whether their position doesn't simply represent a prolongation of the 1945 Walloon Congress dealing with the future of Wallonia, wherein the organizers foresaw a two-stage vote, initially “sentimental”, in which a majority chose the *rattachement* to France, and, then, “realistic”, which decided almost unanimously for a “Walloon autonomy within a Belgian context”²⁸? If the absorption of Wallonia by France would incontestably provide advantages for its inhabitants, in terms of openings and mobilities, etc., of a large country, it would also mean an erosion of their identity in the long run, with the risk - real despite the emergence in France of genuine regions - of a perpetuation of the process of “provincialization”.

That being said, whatever terms of this proposal might be, such a solution could only be carried out if the Belgian State disappeared beforehand. However, that explosion may not be for tomorrow and, additionally, such a *rattachement* to France could only be achieved with a broad consensus in the Walloon populations. Taking into account the sentimental attachment of many Walloons to Belgium (perhaps irrational, but real), it seems foolish now to try to drive this message in their mindsets.

²⁸ See Ph. RAXHON, *Histoire du Congrès wallon d'octobre 1945. Un Avenir politique pour la Wallonie ?*, Charleroi, 1995.

Moreover, the French solution encounters enormous elements of resistance, instinctive but strong, in broad layers of the Walloon population, nourishing a small neighbour complex in relation to France. This love-hate relationship is undoubtedly partly conditioned by a linguistic feeling of insecurity, well analyzed by socio-linguists ²⁹. This reticence is also fed by all sorts of stereotypes about “the Frenchman”, declared to be chauvinistic, Jacobin and condescending. Advocates of the French solution systematically minimize this psychological aspect. However, according to an expression attributed to Einstein, it is harder to disintegrate a prejudice than an atom.

As long as Belgium survives and Wallonia is not up against the wall, it thus seems foolish to dream of an institutional rattachement of Wallonia to France or even to negotiate with the French Republic a status making provision for a broad Walloon autonomy. How can one mobilize the masses to answer a question which has not been raised, and which will perhaps not be raised for a very long time, or which will perhaps never be raised?

One of the principal reproaches Walloon militants sometimes make to advocates of a rattachement to the French Republic is that of having their eyes turned more towards France than towards the Walloon populations. It is said that to get their way, some pro-France militants would go so far as wishing the Walloons the worst: a total degradation of the Walloon situation in a dilapidated Belgian State; all the better for expressing the relevance of their proposal. A passionate attachment to France cannot justify plunging the Walloon populations into a social debacle. Given the circumstances that Wallonia has known for more than forty years, there would be a certain element of irresponsibility in accelerating the disintegration process of Belgium.

Lastly, in the field of culture, the integration of the French-speaking populations of Belgium into the French Republic would reduce by one the number of partially French-speaking countries, which would inevitably weaken the position of francophony in the world.

IV. OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

No one knows the future. The Walloon option for which we are trying to prepare the ground here intends to be realistic, in the sense that it is based on what currently exists and what is relatively controllable in the near future. After defining two lines of action which should take priority, we will sketch out some features of the future architecture of a Wallonia within the context of a decreasingly unitary Belgium. If Flanders does not appear in this scheme, it is quite simply because it is not up to Walloons to present their options for a neighbouring region. It is up to the Flemings to determine their own future.

1. Two lines of action

- **Making up for a clear symbolic deficit.** There is a flagrant imbalance in the Belgian State between a Flanders conscious of itself and promoting its own image and a Wallonia whose populations are still mourning for a unitary Belgium that is fading away. For the Walloons, the importance of a symbolic appropriation is striking. Earlier we showed how harmful the absence of cultural competencies was for the Walloon Region. For a society, the possibility of recovering its capacity to create and the control of its future necessitates the construction of a self-image combining past, present and future visions coherently. Deprived of the symbolic means of building a valorizing self-image, Wallonia ends up only being seen through the misadventures of a tough economic reconversion and in no way via the Flagships of its past and present know-how. Working on the mentality of the Walloons is urgent, to reconcile the Walloons with themselves and with their region. We might reflect on one of

²⁹ Created under the auspices of Université catholique de Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve, for some years now, the VALIBEL research group has been studying the sentiment of linguistic insecurity felt by many Walloon speakers in relation to the French, thought to express themselves more fluently and correctly in French. See, among others: M. FRANCARD, J. LAMBERT and F. MASUY, *L'insécurité linguistique en Communauté française de Belgique*, in: collection « Français et Société », 6, Brussels, 1993 ; M. FRANCARD, G. GERON and R. WILMET, *L'insécurité linguistique dans les communautés francophones périphériques*, in: Cahiers de l'Institut Linguistique de Louvain, 19-20, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1993-1994 ; etc.

Antonio Gramsci's principles, for whom there can be no political takeover without a preliminary seizing of cultural power. It is thus imperative that the Walloon Region be in possession of cultural competencies.

- **Building a common platform.** The history of the Walloon movement has been marked by fractures, whereas the Flemish movement, despite dissensions, has had the wisdom to assert itself on the basis of a common platform, in placing the bar a little bit higher after each success. If the Walloons want to avoid the curse of their militant disagreements, it is paramount that they cease the mutual anathemas sometimes exchanged between regionalists, independentists and Francophiles. It would be suicidal to bring the Walloon movement into these ruptures, given that the Walloons themselves do not have that healthy a recognition of Wallonia as a region. Reason dictates a tactical union around the emergence of Wallonia, in order to develop its potentialities, so that it might have the full means of its development at its disposal, along two lines of action: one economic and the other cultural.

Yet a common platform would simply be to obtain the maximum for Wallonia and to make it a strong and coherent Region whatever the future political context might be. The goal would be a maximal valorization of the real potentialities for autonomy that its current institutions provide and also those that future reforms will provide. In this sense, it is imperative to exhort Walloons to reinvest in the political scene, to once again become full-fledged actors in the development of Wallonia, prime actors in what they will become.

If Walloons do not have the intelligence, the courage and simple good sense to mute their dissensions, then the future is seriously compromised. If Walloons do not manage to stop their writers, their men of power and their entrepreneurs denigrating themselves, then the future is likely to be dark: the region will become the insignificant toy of an increasingly self-confident Flanders.

Whatever the long-term future of Wallonia, the short-term need is to work towards a Walloon awakening, towards a harmonious "living together" in a common space. That "living together" is not an ethnic question; it involves all citizens living in Walloon institutional space, whatever their origins. It is not a question of Walloon nationalism, but of political realism, an awareness of the sense of history: inhabitants of Wallonia, of old stock or of recent migration, must imperatively invent a dynamic and attractive "living together". They must learn the lessons from recent evolutions and, rather than staring at the phantom of a Belgium which evaporates from year to year, they must reinvent new solidarities and turn resolutely towards the world.

2. The Walloon institutional option

Arriving at the end of this argumentation, let us risk presenting an institutional sketch based on the Walloon regional option, on the assumption of the maintenance of a federal Belgium. It is important to delineate these Belgian institutions and lend them more coherence and clarity.

- **An emphasis on the regions.** Only institutions called regional, having a defined territory on which they can exert their competencies, are apt to make this clarification. A fusion of institutions cannot be carried out on the basis of cultural communities because that would sooner or later lead to cultural confrontations between the country's two major communities (the "French-speaking nation" standing against the Flemish nation) and would perpetuate the provincialization of Wallonia and its decline. This is not the case with regional institutions, centred on the economic and human development of the citizens living in their territory, whatever their origins or their language. The desire of the Walloon Minister-President, Rudy Demotte, formulated in spring 2010, to rebaptize the French Community (Communauté française) as the "Wallonia-Brussels Federation" seems to move in the direction of recognizing two autonomous, but associated entities.

- **A Walloon Region controlling its culture.** To emerge, Wallonia must recover its competencies in everything having to do with its symbolic image and culture. Rudy Demotte's proposal to change the Walloon Region's name at the same time as the French Community's is not a simple lexical fantasy: talking about "Wallonia" instead of a "Walloon Region" in fact fits into the perspective of erasing the

petty connotations linked to the term “region” and providing a more valorizing self-image. How can Wallonia recover in relying on economy alone, without being able to use the cultural leverage? Creating a “democratic living-together” on a “common territory” calls for a mobilization of every energy. How could an economic revival blossom in a region in difficulty without its having the cultural tools of its own brand image in hand? Compared to Flanders, unceasingly polishing its brand image on the international level, Wallonia is penalized because it has no tools to ensure its visibility. Earlier we showed how the “French Community of Belgium” (the community of French speakers), the heterogeneous institution, mostly cut from realities on the ground, was not able to fulfill its function and overlooked Walloon realities. Notwithstanding, it has the merit of maintaining a cultural bond between the Walloons and French-speaking Brussels inhabitants. Without necessarily destroying what exists, that institution’s wingspan can be reduced. Removing it would perhaps be harmful and would require long political negotiations on the federal level. The least costly solution would be to proceed either to transfers of cultural competencies between the French Community and the Walloon and Brussels Regions (as was already undertaken for questions of inheritance or social security, more related to a territory), or to “delegations” of competencies (for example in the domain of education, the budget, or the status of personnel, etc, would remain largely common, but the Walloon Region and the French Community Commission of Brussels (COCOF) ³⁰ would exercise these competencies in their region in fully autonomous fashion.)

- A full-fledged Brussels Region. The same applies to the “Brussels-Capital-City” Region. Its citizens must have all the assets needed for building a multi-cultural and democratic “City-Region”. That by no means implies abandoning some forms of solidarity freely agreed between the two regions, Brussels and Wallonia. The operation of trimming the French Community of Belgium, while maintaining the bonds between Wallonia and Brussels, would also allow the Brussels region to present itself in the form of a full-fledged region, with a better profiling of its particular image as the European Capital City. The COCOF is capable of managing the cultural competencies recovered from the French Community for the Brussels region.

- A German-speaking Region free to choose. A small community often neglected in Belgian debates, the German-speaking Community, must obviously keep the control of its cultural development. Currently forming an integral part of Wallonia for economic questions, it is recognized as having cultural rights equal to those of the other two major communities. The choice of its destiny, in Wallonia or outside it, must be left to the inhabitants of this community. But it is a safe bet that, in the Belgian context, the German-speaking Community will choose a German language Region where they will exercise both their current competencies and the territorial competencies of the Walloon region. What is taking shape, from this point of view, is a Belgium with four regions defined on a territorial basis, the only one viable in our view: Republics (*Res publica*) only recognize territories where laws apply in an equal way; a right which applies to persons is always feudal by nature... The debate here, opposing advocates of “territorial law” to partisans of “personal law” is actually obscure: the Flemings, who defended territorial law in linguistic matters, were elsewhere promoters of the concept of “community”, allowing them to include the Dutch-speakers of Brussels; the Walloons, who were promoters of the concept of “Region” with a view to their economic recovery, finally entered a logic of creation of a “French Community” liable to defend the interests of “French-speakers” vis-à-vis “Dutch-speaking” interests ³¹, a Community which nonetheless reproduces the domination structures of a unitary Belgium! Only territory can guarantee the principle, fundamental in democracy, of equality regarding taxes and the political responsibility resulting from it: “I pay, I decide; I decide, I pay”. The French Community’s still-born project,

³⁰ The French Community Commission is competent for French-speaking, uni-community institutions of the Brussels Region, in cultural, educational and welfare matters. Since January 1st, 1994, like the Walloon region, it moreover exercises competencies delegated to it by the Council of the French Community (private physical education infrastructures, sports and outdoor life, tourism, social advancement, professional retraining and recycling, school transport, health policy and assistance to persons).

³¹ We will underline here the problem posed by the names of our institutions: if we have chosen “French” Community, given that “logic”, why haven’t we opted for “Dutch” Community and “German” Community? It’s much more than a question of “terminology”... On this subject, read J.-M. KLINKENBERG, *Citoyenneté. Des mots pour la dire*, in: Toudi, VI, 1992, and Id., *Enfin le temps des projets ? Quatre langages pour la Wallonie*, in *Pour la Wallonie. Fondation wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet. Vingt ans d’action wallonne (1987-2007)*, Publications de la Fondation wallonne P.-M. et J.-F. Humblet, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2008, p. 51-61 (Série Recherche hors-série).

because impracticable, of introducing a community tax in Brussels, under the Executive committee chaired by Bernard Anselme (1992-1993), illustrates this principle perfectly. In the same order of ideas - but that is another debate – we understand the Flemings’ irritation in dealing with certain peculiarities and oddities of our current State: ‘the Federal State’ pays unemployment, but the regions are responsible for employment policies...

CONCLUSION

The regionalist Walloon point of view developed in this paper seeks to be pragmatic and realistic: it takes into account the facts of current policies and the sensitivity of each component of Belgium; it only requires a few institutional rearrangements. And yet the route seems long, for the real, major obstacle to overcome is of a mental nature. Rather than wearing themselves out in resisting Flemish surges in seeking to save a unitary Belgian dream, Walloons and French-speaking Brussels inhabitants would be better advised to build their own image, a positive image, attractive and open. Walloons must begin by referring to themselves with kindness. What is not named has no existence. In their vast majority, the media forming public opinion in Wallonia do not “teach” Wallonia in a constructive way. The current conformism of spokesmen and writers consists in being ironical about a Wallonia that has trouble recovering but nonetheless provides them with a living. They certainly do not improve their stature in addressing sarcasms to people suffering from unemployment but manage to keep their heads high. We have to make them understand that Wallonia needs their solidarity as well as their talents.

Wallonia sits between two chairs: unitary Belgium that will not come back, and “after-Belgium” that has not started yet. No one knows if this “after-Belgium” will ever come. Today, in this unstable situation, the only certainty is that the Walloons (and the Brussels inhabitants for their “Capital-City-Region”) must organize themselves and reinvent their Region, making it operational and consistent, and providing it with an image of dynamism and openness to the world.

From Belgian Nation State to Nations in Belgium: Past, Present and Future¹

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It is common knowledge that the history of Belgium is characterised by three fault lines:

1. a socio-economic fault line between 'labour' and 'capital', the contrast between capitalism and the labour movement, or in contemporary terms, between employers and employees;
2. an ideological fault line between Catholics and freethinkers;
3. a linguistic fault line between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking people which has now developed into a 'community' fault line between communities and regions.

Each of these fault lines has led to severe conflicts in Belgian history, conflicts that are bridged time and again by historical compromises. For example, the Social Pact (1944-1945) ensured definitive integration of the labour movement in the civil-capitalist state, and the School Pact (1958) and the Culture Pact (1973) invalidated the ideological fault line. In the course of the 20th century language laws and state reforms pacified the linguistic and community fault lines, but did not solve them, as appears from the state of the Belgian Kingdom in the year 2010. Nowadays they are even endangering the very survival of the country.

At present there are approx. 6,000 languages and around 200 sovereign states. The existence of different linguistic groups within one state is therefore rather the rule than the exception. The use of languages also often leads to political problems; in this respect too Belgium is no exception. In history, the politicisation of the use of language occurred at a more recent date. Multilingualism was the rule in the Ancien Régime. For centuries the Southern Netherlands were part of the Habsburg Empire, which was a multilingual empire. Language became a political problem in the 19th century as a result of nationalism. Language became an important identification for nations, in contrast to the situation during the Ancien Régime when language was actually an item in the feudal negotiations between the sovereign and his subjects, but not a subject for horizontal solidarity between citizens. A country such as France was a multilingual country until the French Revolution. Half of its population did not speak French but Occitan, Breton, Basque, Flemish or another regional language. It was the French Revolution with its *égalité*, *fraternité* and *liberté* which ended this. This seems to be a paradox. Freedom, equality and fraternity should in fact provide space for diversity. Nothing is further from the truth. The principle of the sovereignty of the people, which was the issue in the French Revolution, precisely necessitated a demarcation of that people, and this in turn implied a clear identity characterised by a homogeneous culture. In a literal and figurative sense the people had to speak the same language.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the British philosopher and one of the most influential thinkers of the 19th century and the founder of modern liberalism, considered a uniform language as a *sine qua non* for an administrative system on the basis of democratic representation². In 'Considerations on Representative Government' (1861) he argued that it is impossible to construct a democracy in countries in which people speak different languages. He was actually convinced that this purpose

¹ This article is based on historical analyses of nationbuilding and nationalism(s) in Belgium: K. DEPREZ EN L. VOS (eds.), *Nationalism in Belgium. Shifting identities, 1780-1995*, London ; New York, 1998; J. KOLL (ed.) *Nationale Bewegungen in Belgien. Ein historischer Überblick*, Münster ; New York ; München ; Berlin, 2005; J. STENGERS, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, Tome 1, *Les racines de la Belgique. Jusqu'à la Révolution de 1830*, Bruxelles, 2000; J. STENGERS AND E. GUBIN, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, Tome 2, *Le grand siècle de la nationalité belge. De 1830 à 1918*, Bruxelles, 2002; L. WILS, *Van Clovis tot Di Rupo: De lange weg van de naties in de lage landen*, Leuven/Apeldoorn, Garant, 2005; E. WITTE AND H. VAN VELTHOVEN, *Language and Politics. The Situation in Belgium in an Historical Perspective*, Brussel, 1999; *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tiel, 3 delen, 1998.

² The following section is based on PH. VAN PARIJS, *Belgium Re-Founded*, in: F. DE RYNCK, B. VERSCHUERE AND E. WAYENBERG (EDS.), *Re-Thinking the State. Critical Perspectives on the Citizen, Politics and Government in the 21st Century*, Mechelen: Kluwer; University College Ghent, 2009, pp. 85-102.

requires a defined public opinion and he thought this impossible if people do not read the same newspapers and books. Democracy needs a forum in which people can exchange thoughts on an equal basis and therefore one single language is required. For Mill the boundaries of nationality had to correspond to those of the state. This is also the classic dogma of nationalism, viz. that nation and state have to concord, although Mill is not a nationalist; for him it is a matter of a public forum, the possibility for communication, not national identity as such. In his opinion, language is purely functional.

His point of view was thus completely different from that of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1804), a generation older than Mill – in fact he died when Mill was born. The latter is known for the witticism 'language is the entire nation', the idea that a nation as it were reveals itself in the language. In this notion language acquires an existential value. The context in which Herder formulated this thought was that of German nationalism, of which the German language was the major vehicle. Unlike France, which had been a strong state for centuries with its regal absolutism, until 1870 there was no German state but a patchwork of larger and smaller states where German was spoken – more than 300 in Herder's time. Herder's concept of language has the same effect as Mill's view, i.e. the need for homogenisation. If language is the entire nation and the nation is the power basis of the state, there is no room for other language groups in the state.

The views of Herder and Mill set a challenge for the Belgian politicians of the young Belgian state with its different languages. What were the options and how were they manipulated in the course of history?

A first option was implementing monolingualism. In the 19th century this could only mean Frenchification throughout Belgium and therefore also of its Dutch-speaking inhabitants. It was also the firm conviction of the leading elite: the necessity of one single language for efficient administration of the country. All major political, economic and cultural matters were dealt with in French. This was a matter-of-course for the leading elite in Belgium, which had been Frenchified for generations in the part of the country where the population also spoke a Dutch-language dialect. In the 18th century and in the first half of the 19th century French was a language with a very great cultural prestige. The aristocracy and the elite outside of France too liked to speak French. This is more or less comparable to the way in which English is now becoming dominant in certain sectors. So the Belgian leading classes considered Belgium as a French-speaking state. Why were they not able to implement that plan?

In the first place, those elites did not take any initiative to eradicate the Dutch-language dialects in the Northern provinces – in contrast to the state of France where this was done after 1789. This vernacular in fact still had a function for the young Belgium because it could be used as proof of the self-image of the young Belgian state, viz. that it was at the crossroads of the Romance and German cultures.

In the second place, the Dutch language was an argument against the French lust for territory. France was the imperial power to be feared and the use of the French language in Belgium could be an argument for annexation.

In the third place, the elite hardly bothered about the social and cultural conditions of the common people. Compulsory education up to the age of 14 was only introduced in Belgium in 1918. Until then the people received very elementary mass education, which was insufficient to implement Frenchification of the population.

In the fourth place, a political movement developed which resisted the dominance of French. This 'Flemish Movement' demanded recognition of Dutch as a cultural language, as an administrative language, as a language for education etc. The Flemish Movement found following among lower middle-class groups, who earned their bread in language-sensitive sectors and who also saw the Flemish Movement as a means to take a stand against the higher classes in a battle for political and cultural supremacy.

In the fifth place, Belgium was a liberal democracy with a very liberal constitution that considered freedoms as being of paramount importance. This also included the use of language, which was free. In the first instance, this played into the hands of the strongest and therefore gave full scope to Frenchification. In the second instance, however, freedom of language also provided space for the Flemish Movement to expand freely and to undertake cultural and political actions.

The fact that the complete Frenchification of Belgium did not occur in the 19th century can also be read as a paradox: in the 19th century Belgium was actually excessively and inadequately democratic. It was inadequately democratic in the sense that it only promoted the political and social interests of the higher classes and did not provide education and other tools for cultural and social edification of the common people. If this were to have been the case, for example, by introducing compulsory education, it would probably have been the death-knell for Dutch in Belgium. At the same time Belgium was too democratic in the sense that there was room for opposition and therefore for a pressure group such as the Flemish Movement. If the Belgian state would have been more authoritarian, like most states in the Europe of the 19th century, it would have violently suppressed the Flemish Movement and in that case Flanders would probably not have existed. For contemporary Flanders is a product of the Flemish Movement and not vice versa. The Flemish Movement brought about the awareness of the speakers of dialect in the northern provinces of Belgium that, because of the mother tongue, they lived in opposition to the French of the elite. These language dialects were gradually defined as 'Flemish', even by people in Brabant and Limburg, who also started to call themselves Flemings, whereas that name was restricted to the provinces of East and West Flanders for a long time and also still after the birth of Belgium.

At the end of the 19th century the Flemish Movement gained more following and therefore more power. A major milestone was the introduction of the General Multiple Voting Right in 1894. The elected rulers had to persuade Flemings who could not speak French to vote for them. This boosted Dutchification of public life and affected the balance of power. In 1898 the Flemish Movement had acquired sufficient political power to enforce fundamental linguistic equality in the Belgian constitution with the so-called 'Act of Equality'. It was to take over 30 years before this fundamental equality also became legal equality and even many more years before legal equality became de facto equality. Nevertheless, the Act of Equality was a turning point.

Thus the language conflict entered a second stage. By then the assimilation of Dutch speakers was no longer a politically feasible option. The French-speaking elite, who were still dominant in Belgium but by that time had to suffer a solid Flemish-minded contra-elite, wanted to maintain French as the standard language, in addition to the recognition of Dutch as the second language in Flanders. The second language in various respects, viz. a language secondary to French, which remained the superior language, suitable for example for university education for which Dutch was not an eligible option. A second language in the sense that French remained an official language in Flanders, which therefore became de facto bilingual, while Wallonia was considered to be a monolingual French-speaking region. However, because of economic migration in the course of the 19th century, an estimated 300,000 Dutch speakers lived in Wallonia who continued to speak their language for one generation. That group was not much smaller than the approx. 5% French-language mother-tongue speakers in Flanders. So in theory the Act of Equality also could have had another consequence, viz. equality of languages in the entire Belgian territory. It is not a theory in the sense that no-one would have thought of that consequence. At the end of the 19th century, voices were heard within the Flemish Movement to achieve equality of language in this way.

However, it remains theory because the political and social conditions rendered this option impossible. In the first place, the language minorities on both sides were socially incomparable. The Flemings in Wallonia were lumpenproletariat in search of a better life in the Walloon mines and metal industry, fleeing from the terrible economic conditions in rural Flanders where agriculture and cottage industries were facing a crisis. 'Poor Flanders' is a well-known image. The French speakers in Flanders belonged to the elite. Often, they were either long-Frenchified indigenous people or immigrant Walloons who could get the better jobs there because of the Francophone administrations.

The second reason why generalised bilingualism remained a purely theoretical possibility was that the French-speaking elite was absolutely convinced that French was a superior language to Dutch and that it could in no way be justified for French speakers to be obliged to learn Dutch. Recent historical research indicates that this notion was also prevalent among common Walloon people³. In this respect the Dutch-speaking Flemings remained what they had always been. As a demographic majority in Belgium they were a sociological minority because of their mother tongue.

There was a third reason why generalised bilingualism was not a realistic option and that reason has to be found in what we know from socio-linguistic research. Voluntary bilingualism, in which two languages can evolve freely within one single territory, always leads to the gradual disappearance of one of the two languages. There is a simple reason for this phenomenon, viz. if two population groups want to or have to communicate with each other, knowledge of one of the languages suffices. Learning a language requires great effort and this effort is not made spontaneously. It always leads to a scenario in which the more dominant language ousts the other language or languages. Belgium is an example of this. In spite of the official equality of languages announced in 1898, Frenchification simply continued in Brussels, along the entire language border and in Flemish towns with a French-speaking presence. There appears to be only one way to maintain bilingualism, viz. when the state imposes bilingualism from above by demanding bilingualism for public service posts and therefore also imposes it as a qualification requirement. The option was illusory in the Belgium of the Belle Epoque, in the first place because of the constitutionally imposed freedom of language which renders enforcement of a language impossible and, in the second place, because the French-speaking elite did not acknowledge Dutch as a language in its own right. This is illustrated by the statement of the Walloon lawyer, socialist politician and leading man in the Walloon Movement Jules Destrée (1863-1936). When confronted with the proposal for generalised bilingualism, he frankly called it 'imbécil'. It is also in that context that we should interpret his famous 'Lettre au roi' from 1912. "Sire" – Destrée wrote – "il n'y a pas de Belges", there are only Walloons and Flemings. For Destrée, language was in actual fact the entire nation and in this respect he was on a par with the Flemish radicals of his time, with the difference that Destrée considered the historical bilingualism of Flanders as an argument to retain French in Flanders and thus not harm the career opportunities of Walloons in Flanders. The continual resistance of French speakers against Dutchification of higher education should be seen in that light so, in retaliation, Dutchification of Gent College became one of the key demands for the Flemish Movement. The three crowing cocks, Frans Van Cauwelaert, Louis Franck and Camille Huysmans, three Flemish-minded politicians from the three Belgian parties who together demanded Dutchification of Gent University, were a symbol of the broad Flemish-minded resistance. That was the situation on the eve of World War I.

What does this teach us for the future of Belgium? In the first place that there should be no dreaming about naive solutions as if Flemings and Francophones were to get together spontaneously by, for example, learning each others' language. In the second place it teaches us that there is quite a responsibility for the administrative elite, the powers that be, who have to keep their finger on the pulse of society and should not be blinded by their own condition humaine and political interests. Destrée and his generation of French-speaking rulers misjudged the language problem, since they sacrificed the complaints of the Flemings to their own interests and the interests of a French-speaking minority in Flanders.

The latter was to become apparent during and after World War I in the third stage of the Belgian language fault line. By then we can call this fault line a community fault line, since because of the language dispute linguistic communities had developed as well. The Flemish Movement had made Dutch-speaking Belgians aware of belonging to a Flemish nation and the Walloon Movement – which as we saw was generated by a reaction against the Flemish Movement – had given the Walloons Walloon awareness, although to a far lesser degree. But in spite of this and notwithstanding Destrée's witticism of "sire il n'y a pas de belges", an all-embracing sense of Belgian nationalism was still very strong. This had been demonstrated meanwhile during World War I when the Belgian enthusiastically defended their fatherland against the German invader. It was also apparent from the fact that the German occupier hardly succeeded in setting up a collaboration movement worth

³ See M. VAN GINDERACHTER, *Het Rode Vaderland. De vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen voor WO I*, Tielt; Gent: Lannoo-Amsab-ISG, 2005, pp. 348-355.

speaking of, not even when the latter Dutchified Gent University in December 1915 and thus complied with one of the core demands of the Flemish Movement. The majority of the Flemish Movement remained true to the Belgian fatherland, and this was also the case for the Flemish minded at the IJzer front. However, a radicalised Flemish-minded Front Movement arose which flirted with high treason, but this involved a small minority and the idea of high treason also played a part in only a small minority within that minority.

Nevertheless, part of the French-speaking elite was to seize the Flemish-minded collaboration and the radicalisation of the Front Movement to thwart any concession to the Flemish Movement. On the triumphant restoration of the Belgian government in 1918 the Dutchified university in Gent was Frenchified again. The French-speaking elite totally misjudged the frame of mind of the Flemish population, who had indeed spat out German-minded collaboration, but because of the war experience started making major demands from the Belgian fatherland. These comprised in particular the recognition of Dutch as a legal and de facto national language in its own right. The French-speaking elite thought that they saw rejection of the Flemish Movement in the Belgian patriotism of the population and therefore deemed that preservation of French-speaking supremacy was guaranteed. This appeared to be a fundamental error. History teaches that wars are key moments to strengthen or break the formation of a nation. The experience of war interferes in everybody's life, causes insecurity and mortal danger, and in those circumstances people fall back on large protective structures such as the nation. The Belgian patriotism that really flared up during the war could have been the starting point for shaping a new Belgian nation state.

But, in historical reality and because of the circumstances described, the war on the contrary caused a rift in the Belgian nation state. Since the demands of the Flemish Movement and the complaints of the majority of the Flemish population were not met, an anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism acquired the potential to grow. Because of the Dutch language's long and frustrating battle for equality in law and in fact, a major part of the Flemish elite lost its faith in the Belgian fatherland since the political battle was all about equality. People could only believe in a Belgian fatherland if the latter recognised the language and culture of the Flemish population as being equal to the French and Walloon population.

Why was it so difficult for the French-speaking Belgian elites to comply with that demand? In the first place, because they were convinced that the Belgian fatherland would be destroyed if French was given up as the uniform language. In the second place, because they did not want to give up the French-speaking minority in Flanders – small, but politically and symbolically extremely important. It was to take until 1932 before there was the political will to finally do the unavoidable, viz. to recognise the Flemings' equality in law and in fact by means of a series of language laws. The latter started from the principle of language-homogeneous regions on the one hand and on the other from the principle that the language of the region is at the same time the language of the administration, education, jurisdiction etc. Therefore the language laws of the 1930s created a territorialisation of the language fault line with an in principle monolingual Dutch Flanders, a monolingual French Wallonia and the capital of Brussels as a bilingual area.

The possibility of a bilingualism imposed from above was not taken into consideration, since especially for the French-speaking region it was not a matter for discussion. When, during discussion of the 1932 language law on administrative matters, Flemish negotiators suggested imposing bilingualism for top-level civil servants, it was resolutely rejected by the French-speaking negotiators, so that the system of the language roles and the appointment of deputies from the other language system came into force. A top Flemish negotiator predicted that this would mean the end of Belgium⁴. This happened in the year 1932.

The French-language resistance to bilingualism, which would come from two sides, can be explained by the above-mentioned socio-psychological problem of making efforts for a language that was considered to be inferior as such and by reasons of self-interest. The bilingual Flemings would take up top positions en masse at the expense of monolingual Walloons. It was no coincidence that the French-speaking socialists as well as the Christian-democratic trade union firmly resisted the idea of bilingual top positions. In any case, the aforementioned impossibility of having two languages co-exist

⁴ See L. WILS, *Burgemeester Van Cauwelaert 1922-1932. Schepper van een Nederlandstalig Vlaanderen*, Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 2005, pp. 148-167.

on a free basis was to be demonstrated in Brussels where bilingualism was not regulated by means of a legal context and where Dutch was being more and more suppressed. This was in fact also true for the Dutch in communes along the language border. The next major round of language laws was therefore concerned with Brussels and the language border, but it only came about in the 1960s, *inter alia* because a new world war had intervened.

What can we learn from that third stage of the language conflict, the stage in which the first major language laws came about which led to language-homogeneous regions and language-homogeneous administrative positions? Was this really the beginning of the end of a unitarian Belgium, as one of the Flemish-minded negotiators thought? The language laws of the 1930s can indeed be considered to be the beginning of the end of unitarian Belgium, since the language-homogeneous regions opened the door to language-homogeneous politics and consequently to political parties and therefore to federalism. Incidentally, that process started immediately. In 1936 the Catholic Party federalised and in the BWP [Belgian Workers party] there were great rumblings, and in 1938 the French and Dutch Culture Councils were established. World War II was to interrupt this early process of federalisation and cause a new boost of Belgian patriotism and unitarity, also because of the collaboration of the radical Flemish Movement. After the war, federalism was completely discredited, but this was only a postponement. In 1968 the CVP/PSC [Christian Party] split again and in the next decade all Belgian parties divided. In 1978, as a result of the first Belgian state reform, Culture Councils developed again and parliament was divided into language groups. Twenty years and four state reforms later, Belgium officially became a federal state in 1993 on the basis of a *sui generis* federal model with communities and regions which reconciled the divergent complaints of Flemings and Walloons and also positioned Brussels, where citizens belonged to one of the two communities on the basis of their language. Whereby, however, Brussels also received regional competences and after some time its own directly elected parliament as well. This is not the place to analyse the complicated state reforms. However, it can be concluded that less than 20 years after the official establishment of federal Belgium and after even some more state reforms, confederalism or the end of Belgium is predicted aloud, *inter alia* because Flemings and Walloons just cannot agree on what should happen to Brussels and its periphery in the future.

The question is whether this is an inevitable process. This leads to a difficult problem on the level of the historical explanation. There is the risk that the course of history is going to be confused with its explanation. Matters took their course as they did, so it was probably inevitable or, in other words, the explanation is the course as such. This is a classic thinking error. History is a process in which at any moment alternatives are possible. History is contingent, defined by circumstances and therefore open. Does this not mean that anything is possible at any moment? Not at all. It is precisely the circumstances that render a particular development more plausible than another. In theory, in 1830 Belgium could also have been founded as a Dutch-language state, but circumstances made it completely impossible, for states are formed by the leading elites. This is recurrent in history. Therefore the course of history is partly predictable, but on the other hand circumstances change continually so that history is never completely predictable.

In the matter in hand, circumstances changed very fundamentally. The sociological minority which the Flemings were in the 19th century, living in a 'poor Flanders', a real economic development area, has changed fundamentally. Nowadays circumstances are completely different. The Flemings are 'les nouveaux riches' and have increasingly fewer complexes. Flanders is a rich region on a rich continent. Europe has become a symbol of peace, so that the inhabitants no longer have to fear their neighbours. National defence is becoming less relevant, just like the national currency disappeared. In short, both internally and externally, circumstances have changed a great deal and in answering the question of what will happen to Belgium in the future this should be taken into account. Thus, at first sight, the development of the European Union seems to promote centrifugal forces in Belgium; for numerous issues the Belgian state level is no longer required. But, on second sight, the European Union can also give second wind to the Belgian state and society model. Belgium is sometimes presented as the laboratory of the EU, which is also involved in a multinational state reform process. The core of the debate is the validity of national identity and the possibility or impossibility of a post-national future.

The history of Belgium already teaches us that language and the way in which language has political implications is a problem for Europe which should not be underestimated. Increasingly, English is becoming the lingua franca in the world and also in Europe. It may be wondered whether this offers the perspective for a future Belgium in which English will be a common medium for communication in well-defined fields, such as federal politics. Or is there a perspective hidden in the more mental shifts, which may effect an increase in the willingness of French speakers to learn Dutch? Maybe space will thus be created for bilingualism imposed by the authorities for anybody whose ambition is a social position anywhere in the country.

Is it a fallacy to think that language politics can offer a solution anyway? Is language the entire nation, as Herder thought, and is there therefore an unbridgeable gap between Dutch speakers and French speakers which is why they no longer form a polis, why they have become two democracies? There are strong arguments in favour of the assertion that this has actually happened. A party landscape with only parties per language group for instance, or a strictly separate media landscape.

But is this a law according to Herder, as nationalists claim, or was this defined by circumstances and are there therefore still possibilities for Belgium to celebrate its 200th anniversary in the pink of health? The future will tell.

From Armed Peace to Permanent Crisis. Cracks in the Belgian Consultative Model¹

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Jan Albert Goris, better known by his pen name, Marnix Gijsen, spent many years in the US as minister plenipotentiary. In 1946 he wrote in his 'Belgium: Land and People': 'At first sight, so many centrifugal forces appear to be at work in Belgium that her existence as a political unit seems paradoxical.' It is an opinion that been expressed many more times in the media, especially abroad, since the lengthy crisis of 2007-2008. A number of international newspapers have already predicted the country's demise. Belgian politics have always been thoroughly conflictual, but evidently the old pacification mechanisms are no longer working as they should.

Belgium's political system is by definition notably divided. There are, of course, the traditional differences between labour and capital, and the associated socio-economic conflicts. And as in many traditionally overwhelmingly Catholic countries a conflict also developed between the Catholic Church and those who sought to reduce that church's impact on public life. A third fault line is of course linguistic-political, with a sometimes sharp division between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers. Despite the presence in the Belgian political system of these three fundamental antagonisms, we have to state that the country has never descended into extreme violent unrest. That in itself is relatively exceptional; other divided societies, such as Lebanon, Cyprus or Northern Ireland, have indeed suffered this type of conflict.

In the 1960s and '70s people sometimes talked of 'The Belgian Paradox': despite all the reasons for conflict, the Belgian political system seemed to manage to function relatively well. True, there was no question of any real reconciliation between the opposing groups, but a complex form of compromise politics led at any rate to what is called an 'armed peace'. These pacification politics were based on a number of clear principles. To start with, the rule that the majority decides, the gold standard in just about all Anglo-Saxon countries, did not apply here. Confronted with sensitive matters, the political elite preferred 'government by mutual agreement', whereby the minority could always explicitly or implicitly exercise a right of veto. That applied to both ideological and linguistic minorities. A far-reaching form of decentralisation is also part of the rules of the game. In delicate issues such as education or culture, the option chosen was to leave many decisions to the political groupings (called 'pillars' in Belgium), or to the socio-economic interest groups or the language communities, rather than reserving them for one central authority. The few goods that were at the government's disposal (government jobs, subsidies, positions on government bodies, etc.) were shared out among all the interest groups according to carefully worked-out rules. In this way all the members of the political elite also had sufficient incentives to keep the system in being. The game was played by these rules for decades and they ensured that conflicts did not develop into uncontrollable confrontations. The differences did not disappear, they lay dormant under the surface. But at least the pacification mechanisms did manage to prevent a complete implosion of the political system.

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The fundamental question now is whether these trusted pacification rules have lost their meaning. It does indeed look as if the old mechanisms are now a good deal less self-evident. So, is the Belgian pacification model finished? To answer that we must first look back and see why this model was able to function so successfully in the past.

1. Conditions of success

A first important condition was the existence of strong political parties and interest groups. Historically, compromises were always reached by the leaders of the different political groupings. Although these senior figures came from radically different ideological backgrounds there was a consensus among that elite on the way in which the political system should be kept going. Once the pact had been made, the party leaders made sure that the rank and file accepted the compromise without too many complaints. The leaders wielded a great deal of authority and party members often remained faithful to their organisation from the cradle to the grave. These docile followers also made it possible for the elite to actually make a pact with the other camps and then have that pact implemented.

Secondly, there was a constant interaction between the three fundamental fault lines in Belgium through which they too, to some extent, neutralised each other. Whenever one of the sources of conflict came to the fore and monopolized the political agenda, the other differences moved into the background. So there was a constant process of tension and détente, of heating up and cooling down, of mobilisation and demobilisation. Acute economic problems, for example, could ensure that differences over language disappeared into the background for a while and vice versa.

A remarkable balance of power grafted itself onto this. The Christian Democrats formed a majority in Flanders, the free-thinking Socialists a majority in Wallonia; the former had a vulnerable minority in Wallonia, the latter in Flanders. It was a healthy stalemate because it tempered the aggression of, in particular, the Walloon Socialists and the Flemish Christian Democrats, the protagonists in virtually all Belgian conflicts. The powerful Christian Democrat pillar in Flanders had to put up with the Socialists and Liberals getting their share of the subsidy cake, but in return the same thing happened on the Frenchspeaking side. At the national level, Dutch-speakers agreed not to play on their numerical preponderance and in exchange French-speakers were prepared to give Brussels the status of a bilingual capital region even though French-speakers were in the majority there.

Finally, there was the strong economic growth during the period 1958-1972. Government budgets increased strongly during 'the long Sixties' and it was therefore relatively easy to buy off each other's claims. The 1958 school pact, for example, which reconciled the defenders of the state school system and the Catholic education network, actually boiled down in practice to both school networks getting more government subsidies. Initial agreements on constitutional reform also led to both language communities getting more funding. In this period of constantly increasing government resources it was possible to engage all the groups in society with the pacification model.

2. The system under pressure

During the last decade of the twentieth century, however, the trusted pacification model came under more and more pressure. The problem-solving capacity of the Belgian political system gradually diminished. That can be explained by the fact that the conditions that governed the pacification model slowly became more negative.

In particular, there was a process of de-pillarisation. The traditional Christian, Socialist and Liberal pillars which had controlled public life in Belgium for decades gradually lost their hold over Belgian society. On a personal level, ties between citizens and their social organisations became looser. Unpredictability took the place of electoral and organisational loyalty and obedience. At the social level, too, the pillars began to crumble. A good many

interest groups refused to be bound exclusively to one political grouping. In addition many new groupings developed which also laid claim to a place at the negotiating table but which no longer fitted into the traditional pillar system. As a result it became more and more difficult for the political elites to ensure compliance with the agreements they made. It was still perfectly possible to conclude agreements, but they became meaningless if you could no longer successfully impose them on a docile rank and file.

On top of this, the traditional political geography of Belgium changed in this period. It evolved from a relatively well-organised entity with three fault lines to a relatively complicated entity made up of large and small conflicts. The popular unrest that erupted in 1996, when it emerged that the police and judiciary had made a number of errors in their handling of the Dutroux case, was characteristic of this. The 'white campaign' that developed then, and brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets in a protest march, did not fit at all into the traditional fault-lines model. The political elite had no suitable instruments to deal with this discontent. And we also have to take into consideration a general shift in political decision-making. Politics is no longer just a matter of professional politicians meeting in Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat. The media, the judiciary and the European institutions are becoming increasingly important in political decision-making, and they care little about the traditional prescriptions of pillarisation. Which makes their actions harder to reconcile with the famous Belgian pacification model.

The subtle equilibrium of power, too, fell by the wayside. The Christian Democrats, in particular, lost ground electorally in Flanders, whilst on the Walloon side the (conservative) Liberals gradually grew stronger. As a result mutual deterrence also disappeared to some extent. Christian Democrats could no longer claim to be the unique and only representatives of Flanders, but they had to engage with electoral rivals within the Flemish community. Little by little the Liberal grouping became stronger on both sides of the language border, but this did not really lead to any clear new balance.

And finally, again in the Nineties, a strict programme of national budgetary reform was implemented, particularly by the then Prime Minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene (a Flemish Christian Democrat). Dehaene made sure that the budgetary deficit was largely eliminated, so that Belgium met all the criteria for membership of the eurozone. However, this cost-cutting process meant in practice that there was much less government manna to hand out. The various parties and pressure groups, then, had far fewer incentives to remain loyal to the system. With fewer goodies to distribute, concluding great historic pacts also loses some of its attraction.

3. The wider horizon

Obviously, many of these developments were not confined to Belgian politics. Often they are general social developments that can be found in other European societies too. But the Belgian political system was particularly vulnerable to these developments. Precisely because the underlying tensions are such a powerful presence in Belgian politics and can in theory erupt at any moment, the pacification model is very heavily biased in favour of stability. Political elites do not necessarily look for the optimal solution, but for one that can bring stability and predictability because they fear what might happen should the system be totally derailed.

However, all Western political systems are confronted with the task of learning to live with an unfamiliar and relatively unpredictable society. There are various reasons for that. To begin with, there is the process of globalisation and enlargement of scale – what happens abroad is becoming more and more important to our own political system. Certainly within the European Union the transnational decision-making level has become dominant, so that the Belgian political elite no longer has the power to push through whatever decisions it wants by itself. There is a trend, then, towards what is called 'multi-level government': political decisions are taken at different levels, and coordinating all those different levels

makes decision-making extremely complex. Precisely because the Belgian level is already relatively fragile, it is difficult for the Belgian political system to adapt to this.

The general social trend towards individualisation also puts pressure on the stability that is so keenly desired. Individual citizens are no longer disposed to follow the instructions of the political elite. This increases the degree of unpredictability – political conflicts are no longer played out along the traditional fault lines, instead they can occur in the most unexpected places. Who could have predicted that a tragic but relatively banal robbery and murder in Brussels' Central Station (in 2006) would lead to protest on a huge scale? The course of these protests is equally unpredictable. These kinds of emotionally driven campaigns blow up suddenly and disappear again just as suddenly. This means that the political system barely has time to react to such flare-ups. The most that can be achieved is some intensive form of crisis communication, but it is hard to reconcile the rapid succession of events with the laborious and above all slow search for a compromise which is typical of pacification democracy.

4. The derailment in 2007-2008

The search for political stability has clearly become much more complex, but still Belgian politics enjoyed a period of relative peace at the start of the 21st century. There were no major incidents and, in addition, the successive Verhofstadt governments (1999-2007) succeeded in staving off demands for further federalisation of some powers. In 1999 the first Verhofstadt government was still unique – for the first time in half a century the Christian Democrats disappeared from the majority and the Socialists and Liberals formed a 'purple' coalition. The first Verhofstadt government worked on a number of issues which could, in principle, have revived the philosophical differences – the liberalization of euthanasia and the introduction of homosexual marriage were pushed through rapidly, making Belgium an international pioneer in that field. But even here the pacification model was not completely abandoned; during the parliamentary process the arguments of the Christian Democrat opposition were also taken into account. But in general it was apparent that the philosophical fault line no longer had a mobilising effect. In contrast to the situation in the United States, homosexual marriage is absolutely not an issue with Belgian public opinion. The current law on euthanasia is also accepted or even supported by the majority of the population.

The 2007 elections, however, put an abrupt end to this relative peace. Despitethmonths of negotiation, no community pact emerged. A great deal has already been written about the causes of this failure, and obviously personal and strategic elements also play a part in it. But if we look at it with a measure of objectivity, we have to ask why the traditional Belgian pacification model does not seem to work in this case. But at the same time some degree of caution is advisable. Although journalists keep breathlessly announcing that this really is a 'historic crisis', we need to remember that in the past, too, it has sometimes taken years for a 'major compromise' to be worked out.

There are indications, however, that decision-making in community matters has become more difficult. The party elites are clearly less able to control their followers. During the negotiating process it really seemed on occasion as if a compromise would be reached, but time after time the negotiators were curbed by their own grass roots (who were often very limited in numbers, but extremely noisy). This lack of leadership was partly the result of a pre-election cartel formed between the Flemish Christian Democrats and the Flemish nationalist party, the N-VA or New Flemish Alliance. The more radical rhetoric of the N-VA sometimes seduced the Christian Democrat representatives as well, so that they no longer heeded their chief negotiators. The party elites' ability to lead was also sometimes thwarted by the presence of the mass media in greater numbers than ever before. Traditionally the great historic pacts of Belgian politics were born in secluded meeting places, preferably in some charming castle in one of the suburbs of Brussels. The press were kept at a safe distance; at most one might hear something at the entrance to the castle grounds when the

top politicians left the negotiating table. This time, however, the ubiquitous mobile phone ensured an endless string of leaks. Even while the negotiations were in progress information was constantly being passed to the press. This then led to further sensational headlines and the associated urge on the part of some politicians to use them to boost their image. Although the chief negotiators repeatedly called for the media leaks to stop, they never really gained control of the process.

The subtle game of checks and balances hardly works any more either. Amongst the Christian Democrats, in particular, the mental breach between Dutch- and French-speakers is almost complete. For example, the Flemish Christian Democrats no longer feel called upon to defend the interests of the Christian education network in the French Community. Flemish politicians, too, concentrate more and more on their own level of government, i.e. the Flemish Community. That means that they are no longer so concerned about the fate of Dutch-speakers in Brussels (some 150,000 people in total, at most 1.5 percent of the whole Belgian population). So the moderating influence of all these balances of power is disappearing. Theoretically this is interesting, because thirty years ago various authors were already predicting that a federal system in which the regional institutions exercised a great many powers autonomously was no more than a halfway house on the road to the break-up of the country's various language communities. The prediction at the time was that the political elites would concentrate more and more on their own communities, and so attach less and less importance to the principle of federal loyalty. To some extent this prediction has proved true, partly because there are no longer any federal parties in Belgium (which is quite exceptional). There is now not a single party that represents the whole country. Each party is elected within its own community and must then ensure that it finds sufficient allies on the other side of the language border to form a federal majority. This is why a number of groups have advocated creating a 'federal constituency', so that politicians could once again win votes across the whole country, and therefore also in both language communities. A final point of difference, moreover, is that the federal budget is structurally insolvent. So there are no more gifts to be handed out. In the past, peace between the communities was often bought by channelling lavish subsidies. In Belgium this is referred to as 'waffle-iron politics', because as we all know a waffle-iron makes exactly the same impression on both sides of the dough. If the Flemings needed money for a new port, the French-speakers automatically got a similar amount for their economic needs. That sort of mechanism no longer works, so there is really no incentive any more to accept a compromise on issues in which one has no vital interest. The result of all these factors, then, is that it has become much more difficult to apply the traditional pacification mechanisms. The question is, however, whether there is an alternative. All the studies clearly show that the presence of Brussels is enormously important to the whole Belgian economy. Brussels is the economic centre, drawing in hundreds of thousands of commuters from both sides of the language border. Brussels cannot be split into a Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking part, so the two communities will have to keep on finding ways of managing that shared economic wealth together. Obviously the old prescriptions for the Belgian model do not work very well any more, but that is not to say that Belgium is likely to fall apart. As Belgians tend to put it, one can easily operate to separate Siamese twins. But if the twins are joined at the head, there is no way they can be separated without fatal consequences.

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