



CECI N'EST PAS UN PAYS. BELGIUM HEADS FOR A MINIMAL FEDERAL STATE

After the 13th June election the motto on the Belgian coat of arms rings all too ironical: "Union makes for strength". No less ominous are the words of the Flemish writer Geert van Istendael: "Europe will either be Belgian or it just won't be". This prophecy of Belgium as the laboratory of Europe has been repeated and believed so much that it is coming true, though it looks like the reverse of the author's intention if one thinks of the return to nationalism afoot throughout the continent.

Belgium is a surreal country, bizarrely evanescent, in which reality and fiction tend to merge. But that is no new discovery and not entirely due to being the homeland of René Magritte. In what other country do trains collide because engine-drivers can't understand the stationmaster's language? Belgium is a country with three ethno-linguistic communities – there are German-speakers too – but it is not trilingual or even bilingual; and it surely says something too, when multilingualism does no more than create a patchwork of non-communicating communities. This time Van Istendael hits the nail on the head: "what holds Belgium together is the fact that the Walloons like the French less than the Flemings do, and the Flemings like the Dutch less than the Walloons do".

The election has taken the lid off the Belgian fiction and brought the country to a point of no return in its condition of political, social and geographic division. In Flanders the winning party was the nationalist New Fleming Alliance (N.Va) under Bart De Wever (28.3%) whose election campaign was all of Belgium "evaporating" perforce if there were another attempt to reform the State and it were to fail. In French-speaking Wallonia, on the other hand, Di Rupo's Socialist Party (PS) won with 36.6% after a campaign quite the reverse of austerity-preaching: they promised to stick to current levels of public spending and new investments in the social state, spelling reassurance on a socio-economic plane and where institutions are concerned. We Wever siphoned votes from all parties except the Greens, putting a damper on both the Vlaams Belang

– the xenophobic separatists of the extreme right – and Jean-Marie Dedecker’s populist List which achieved but one seat in the Chamber.

Many were worsted in this election. Foremost, the Flemish Christian-Democrats (Cd&V) under Marianne Thyssen and former premier Yves Leterme who hit an all-time low. Then the liberals - Didier Reynders’ French-speaking brand (MR) and, faring even worse, the Flemish Open Vld whose president Alexandre De Croo was the one who brought the government down in April. Evidently the Flemish electorate thinks De Wever more likely than De Croo to push through State reform over the heads of the Francophones.

What kind of government can emerge from such an outcome? Before all else one must remember that in order to govern one needs both an outright majority in the Chamber (76 MPs out of 150) and a majority in each of the two linguistic groups (45 Flemish MPs out of 88, and 32 French-speakers out of 62). More to the point, to reform the State the government will have to tamper with the constitution and to get that approved they will need a two-thirds majority in the Chamber (100 out of 150). With such restraints, the only formula capable on paper of achieving a broad majority is the so-called *coalition calque* which mirrors the regional majorities at a federal level, viz. the Brussels-Walloon Olivier or Olive-tree containing the Cdh, PS and Ecolo, and the Flemish coalition (Cd&V, Sp.a, N.Va), which is to say an alliance among Christian-Democrats of both ilks, socialists ditto, Green Walloons and maybe Flemish too, plus Flemish nationalists.

Constitutional procedure requires that the premiership go to the winner of the election, but even here things are less than obvious. If “winner” means the party that polled most votes, it would fall to the N.Va which has got 27 seats in the Chamber, one more than the socialist Walloons. But if the winner is the political family with most votes, the socialists would be in the lead: one sums the PS and the Flemish counterpart Sp.a and reaches a total of 39 seats. De Wever has already stated he has no overriding objection to Di Rupo, who may thus become the first French-speaking premier of Belgium since the Seventies. Di Rupo knows there will be a high price to pay for heading the government, and seems minded to set conditions in his turn.

Everything depends on how far De Wever really wishes to reach agreement with the Francophones, holding the stronger cards as he does. His first statement talked of an “outstretched hand” and the need for “general

consensus" as to reforming the State. In an interview with *Libre Belgique* he said he was not out to split the country and was prepared to negotiate a real settlement regardless of separatist drives. The fact remains: this country is split in two territorially and politically, with a nationalist separatist right wing amounting to 44% of Flanders if one sums the N.Va, Vlaams Belang and the Dedecker List, leaving Wallonia in the hands of the socialists.

The nationalist argument is simple. To maintain Flanders in its present prosperity they need a greater say in tax and social policy, enabling them to manage their interests directly, given that these differ from those of Wallonia or Brussels. The cost of Belgian federalism is higher than the benefits accruing to Flanders from it. Again, the added value of having a united Belgium is too low: the country is too small and the public debt too big – the third highest in Europe. Two issues are central, therefore: transferring resources from North to South (solidarity) and State reform. To make things worse, the markets are poised like a sword of Damocles, ready to fall on Belgium if she loses political and economic control. But there are at least two other burning questions: the bilingual constituency of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde, which the nationalists are for dismembering on rigid territorial grounds, and the Francophones for preserving so as to safeguard the French-speaking residents' "individual" rights; then there is the region of Brussels which the nationalists would like to demote to some kind of "federal district", against the wishes of the French-speaking population. The Leterme government fell because it couldn't solve the first of these issues. De Wever is likely to demand a solution to it as his pre-condition for embarking on reform negotiations.

Europe itself in its Lisbon form takes regional claims to be an internal State matter, as Mario Telò reminds us from *Le Soir*, taking issue with a *Le Monde* article that blamed Europe for staying neutral on the Belgian dispute when, it argued, some major European principles are at stake: multilingualism, peaceful coexistence of communities and transferring of resources from richer to poorer regions. The EU could only intervene in the all-Belgian dispute if human rights or minority rights were being threatened. But it is no accident that N.Va left xenophobic propaganda to the Vlaams Belang and concentrated on claiming autonomy.

The attitude of the Flemish nationalists towards the EU is also indicative. Unlike most European populist parties, they are in favour of Europe; they

envisage a dual “evolution” for Flanders with corresponding “devolution” of power: federal powers being transferred from top to bottom and from centre to periphery, and bottom-top transference of jurisdiction from the federal State to the EU. They look forward to a Europe of regions in which the unitary Belgian federal State would become extinct.

The difference from Padania, for example, where the Lega Nord claim independence from Italy, is that the Flemish region is a “nation” with a homogeneous ethno-linguistic background and historical memories in common – more like French Quebec than our Padania. Of course, we are talking of artificial identities. Like Wallonia, the Flemish identity is a by-product of Belgian identity, resulting from a reaction to the way modern Belgium has been built up since its independence in 1830. But these are not completely “dreamed up” identities; before “evaporation” they call for the stepping-stone of a confederation or “minimal federal state” (Jean-Yves Camus). The paradox that Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul from Notre Europe highlights in *Le Soir* is that if Flanders goes independent one day, it will continue to help Wallonia via European structural funds. There is still a fundamental doubt which the *Economist* has brought up: if Belgium is finding it difficult to keep fiscal unity, what hope will Europe ever have of creating the same thing practically from scratch?

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