

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

In the Belgian legislative elections of 10 June 2007 the Flemish and Francophone Christian Democrats and Francophone and Flemish Liberals of Wallonie and Bruxelles received enough seats in the Chambre des représentants (81 of 150) to form a coalition government. However, the two parties were opposed on the question of reform of the Belgian federal institutions demanded by the Flemish, who want more autonomy within the confederation that is Belgium. The different francophone parties were opposed to this.

This desire for greater autonomy has many sources. First, Flanders has a much stronger economy than Walloon (the Flemish pay 67-68% of income taxes and account for 85% of all exports (National Public Radio, 11-8-07). This means that they must make very large financial transfers to the French-speaking areas in order to keep them afloat (the French-speaking part of Belgium has an unemployment rate of 20%). There are also cultural and linguistic factors. From the very beginning French was the language of the elites including the Flemish themselves as well as the Walloons. In Flanders Dutch was spoken by the peasants and the Flemish proletariat. Most Flemish writers wrote in French. So many Flemish from the poorer social classes saw themselves as scorned and came to resent the hostility of the francophone bourgeoisie whom they saw as arrogant and imperialistic (*Marianne*, 17-23 November 2007: 68-73; article by Elie Barnavi). The Flemish feel particularly threatened in Bruxelles, which historically is part of Flanders, but where 85% of the inhabitants speak French. In the end, bilingualism was never established as official policy and the Flemish and Walloons tend not to learn each other's language.

When the Christian Democrats and Francophone Liberals failed to form a government, Yves Leterme, the leader of the Christian Democrats, was asked by King Albert II to try to negotiate a settlement with the French parties that would allow a new government to be formed (Leterme subsequently got into hot water when he was asked to sing the Belgian National Anthem (*la Brabançonne*) on the national holiday and started to sing the *Marseillaise* instead). Guy de Verhofstadt, the leader of the Flemish Liberal Party who had been Prime Minister in the previous government, continued to carry out the day-to-day governance of Belgium while waiting for Leterme to form a new government.

Nearly four months later (29 September 2007) Leterme had still not succeeded in his mission, largely because the francophone parties felt that they had been asked to make too many concessions to the Flemish concerning greater autonomy and redistribution of tax revenues. Another issue was the future status of Bruxelles, one of the most productive regions of Europe, where 71% of the workers are Flemish, but there is 21% unemployment and 30% for those under 25 (*Le Monde* 10-9-07). Most of the income taxes of those employed there go to other, predominantly Flemish regions. The two francophone parties (Parti libéral and Centre démocrate humaniste [CDH]) want to extend the Bruxelles region, something the Flemish adamantly oppose, especially the NVA (Nouvelle Alliance flamande) and the Vlaams Belang, both nationalist parties; with the latter openly xenophobic.

Although Yves Leterme agreed to try again at Albert II's request on 23 August 2007, he once again failed to form a government and resigned a second time on 1 December 2007. Once again greater autonomy for Flanders was the stumbling block. A further problem was the role played by Bart De Wever, the president of the NVA, the nationalist party he founded

in 2001. Although the NVA only holds five seats, on 26 November 2001 De Wever was able to block the process by which a federal coalition called "*L'Orange bleue*" was to be formed. De Wever decided that a note sent to him by Leterme on constitutional reform was too vague. The NVA had been a critical part of Leterme's coalition in the June elections. In fact, Leterme's Christian Democrats, a traditional party, and De Wever's NVA, the hard-nosed new nationalist party, formed a cartel which enabled them to become the most important political block in Flemish politics and Leterme the leading candidate for Prime Minister. For their part, the Francophones were afraid that fiscal autonomy for the regions, the regionalization of taxes on companies, new employment policies, and changes to family subsidies would lead to the splitting in two of Belgium (*Le Monde* 11-27-07).

On 10 December King Albert II charged the head of the Flemish Liberal Party, Guy Verhofstadt, the outgoing Prime Minister, with heading up an interim government responsible for "affaires urgentes." Verhofstadt will also begin negotiations to arrive at a reform of the institutions of the federal state of Belgium.

In many ways the stalemate reflects the situation in Bruxelles, where a Flemish proposal for the detachment of the electoral district of Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvoorde from Bruxelles-Capitale in order to make the 150,000 Francophones living there vote in Flanders, where they would be a minority, was passed by a parliamentary commission on 7 November 2007. The vote does not have the force of a law, but may be a harbinger of things to come. If it were to become law, the Francophones would lose many of the rights guaranteed them by the laws of federation. Half the Francophones in the area see the vote as a prelude to secession while in Flanders one out of two polled accept the idea of the disappearance of Belgium (*Le Monde* 11-11-07).

It is a great irony that many blame a television program called "Bye-Bye Belgium" for the events of the past six months. "Bye-Bye Belgium" was a false television news broadcast reminiscent of Orson Welles's radio adaptation of Herbert George Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), which caused a panic in the United States when it was broadcast in 1938. "Bye-Bye Belgium" was aired on 13 December 2006 and announced that Belgium was being disbanded as a country after a unilateral vote of the Flemish. Officials at RTBF, the Francophone Belgian Radio and Television Network, refused to reshoot the broadcast on the anniversary of the hoax, saying that to do so would be inopportune in the current political climate. Instead, two documentaries were shown, one on the "making of" the original show, the other on the current political crisis. According to Jean-Pierre Stroobants, the main political correspondent for *Le Monde* in Belgium (*Le Monde* 12-15-07) (the scenario for the broadcast was written by Philippe Dutilleul), the current crisis seems almost to have been inspired by the hoax. For example, the documentary on recent events shows Bart De Wever, and members of two other extremist and xenophobic Flemish parties, including Vlaams Belang, the Le Pen-like nationalist party (it is the largest regional party and receives 25% of the vote), discussing the demise of Belgium. In the pseudo-documentary language police patrolled the linguistic boundaries of Belgium and the trolleys of Bruxelles stopped service at the gates of the Flemish communes.

The current documentary shows the francophone elected members of the parliamentary commission stand up and walk out when the Flemish members voted to detach the BHV *arrondissement* from the other French-speaking areas of Bruxelles. One of the extreme-right Flemish members of the commission waved "Bye-Bye" to them. It also turns out that the false documentary can be purchased on DVD from the television station itself.

What is happening in Belgium as of this writing (21 December 2007) is no laughing matter because it calls into question the very notion of Belgium as the crossroad of languages and cultures, the laboratory of the European Union, and the values it purports to promote. Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Finance in the last Belgian government, Didier Reynders, has made the essential point that "La tradition belge c'était qu'une majorité n'utilise jamais complètement la majorité dont elle dispose et respecte un équilibre reposant sur la protection de la minorité" (*Le Monde*, 11-11-07). This means that there will have to be

compromise if Belgium is to survive, but not only from the Flemish. The Francophones of Belgium will probably have to agree to some institutional and constitutional reforms, and the French-speaking Walloons and Bruxellois will have to work together if “le miracle belge” is to endure.

I hope that all of you will read our May special issue devoted to Belgium in order to learn the background and history, as well as the culture of this extraordinarily complex federation that we naively call Belgium. This is the best way we have to honor our hosts at our annual meeting in Liège.

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