



Belgians change rainbow coalition for reds and blues

But the new Belgian government has not totally eliminated the community “poison.”

BY PHILIPPE ENGELS

An upset in the Kingdom of Belgium: increasingly accustomed to staring each other down, the Flemish and Francophones, who represent the two largest language communities in this small, complicated country, actually voted the same way! On the evening of the May 18 federal election, party leaders in both camps were celebrating, television commentators on both “sides” voiced very similar views and political observers all dismissed the possibility of the widely dreaded political asymmetry. Since then, the winners of the election — socialists and liberals, left and right — have been rushing to form a coalition government that mixes oil and water.

With the virtual annihilation of the Greens, what Belgians called the “rainbow” has faded from the sky over Brussels: the “rainbow” was the name given to the outgoing executive, composed of socialists, liberals and environmentalists that represented vastly differing political movements. It has been replaced by a purple coalition formed of reds and blues. This unusual formula has been put into practice only once before — from 1954 to 1958 — since Belgium became independent in 1830. As a result, Guy Verhofstadt will succeed himself as Prime Minister. This former fan of Margaret Thatcher and the Chicago School of neo-liberalism has settled down and reverted to a soft right-wing stance that borders on centrist.

A horror of asymmetry

So far, the aftermath of the election has been fairly quiet. During the scant 15 days of the campaign, which coincided with the war in Iraq, public debate focused on economic and social policy, mobility and, to a lesser degree, security. Institutional themes and “community problems” — this is the explicit label given to the fractious relations between the Flemish and the francophones, who represent 65% and 35% of the population respectively — attracted little attention.

Admittedly, there was no great confrontation, nor any major negotiations in evidence, like before the 1999 elections, when a new separatist fever presaged the possible end of Belgium. May 18 did not result in the infamous asymmetry, which would have seen a political philosophy without federal representation for both of its components (a Flemish and a francophone party). This would have been the case, for example, if the Christian Democrats and the Liberals had received wide support in the north (in Flanders, where Dutch is spoken), while the socialists and liberals continued to



PM Guy Verhofstadt:
a new coalition.

dominate the south and centre (in Wallonia and in Brussels, where French is spoken). This scenario, ultimately rejected by voters, would have led to the radicalization of isolated parties, which would have had to govern without the counterweight of a corresponding party in the other linguistic community. Another problem: finding a common denominator among political movements that are by nature dissimilar. Of course, proponents of federalism feel that an asymmetrical government would simply be a matter of logic: Flanders, which is more prosperous, is essentially rightist, while Wallonia, whose mining and metallurgical industry has only very recently been modernized, tends to lean left. In

practice, federal Belgium has never dared to venture down the road to asymmetry. Is this due to a lack of maturity? Or is it because the ambitions of the two parties appear contradictory? For the past 10 years, the Flemish have sought increased autonomy by every means at their disposal. The francophones, on the defensive because their economy is less healthy and because they depend in part on federal solidarity, are fiercely resistant. Under such conditions, it is difficult to make any reasonable progress.

The players

Socialists

PS - Parti socialiste (francophone) and SP.A - Socialistische Partij Anders (Flemish)

In terms of votes, the leading political family since the May 18 election. In power since 1988, a historic record for the “reds.”

Liberals

Mouvement réformateur-MR (Francophone) and VLD - Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Flemish)

Neck-and-neck with the socialists. The “blues” left the opposition in 1999 after a dry spell of more than 11 years. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt’s party.

Christian Democrats

Centre démocrate humaniste-CDH (francophone) and CD&V - Christen Democratisch en Vlaams (Flemish)

In opposition since 1999, where they had not been since 1958. Formerly the most solid political family, the kingpin in all coalitions. Going through an identity crisis.

Ecologists

Ecolo (francophone) and Agalev (Flemish)

Trounced in the May election, after a first controversial term in power (July 1999 to May 2003). Slipped back to “normal” levels according to European standards.

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Left and right go head to head

The results of the most recent election should please the proponents of political realignment, whose cherished dream it has been for a long time. For the second consecutive time, the defeated Christian parties will have to question their existence from the opposition benches they have so rarely occupied. They have long been a mainstay on the political scene but have fallen victim to the phenomenon of structural erosion. It remains to be seen if they even have a future any more. The Greens, who were also defeated, will try to get rid of the bitter taste of their first experience in power. In the past, they were primarily a thorn in the government's side. Do they have any real hope of asserting themselves as a party of power? As for the far right, it has made gains throughout the country, despite the relative successes of the outgoing government.

In the north, the nationalist, xenophobic Vlaams Blok has also made inroads in rural areas and mid-sized cities, with average support at about 18%. Among francophones, the Front National has been reborn from the ashes after a resounding defeat in 1999. With support at 5.3%, it is poorly managed, disorganized and not as threatening as the Blok flamand. Still, if it manages to find a credible, populist leader, the FN might give Belgians a nasty surprise.

None of this seems to bother the democratic winners of the election, the socialists and the liberals, who are never troubled by the task of governing. Partners today, rivals tomorrow, they could eradicate all opposition and form a powerful force to bring about a profound change in Belgium's political landscape. Belgian society is characterized by a number of rifts (philosophical, ideological, linguistic) and, until now, a fragmented political scene. But soon, two major "poles" or "blocs" could go head to head with the gloves off: left against right, like in France and Britain.

The euphoria of 1999

In the meantime, the Belgian federal "model" should still go through a few permutations. The previous phase of government reform — the fifth since 1970 — confirmed the transition to a more mature federalism. In 2001, the dreaded free-for-all ended well, with one of those gigantic compromises that is customary in the Kingdom of Albert II, but one that satisfied every political persuasion, a rare occurrence. Following economic policy, education and transportation, which had already been transferred by the central government to the Communities and the Regions, other areas of jurisdiction were regionalized: agriculture, foreign trade, co-operative development (which remains to be confirmed) and the organization of the Communes, the most decentralized level of power. As part of this reform, the Flemish and the francophones struck a devil of a deal. The Flemish demanded greater fiscal autonomy, especially for the unilateral reduction of income taxes (which the francophones cannot allow themselves). In return, the francophones

demanded federal financial support to refinance "their" education system, which was on the brink of bankruptcy. In short, it was a win-win situation, which undoubtedly encouraged the institutional give and take of 2001 and created a climate bordering on euphoria in some media circles. At almost the same time, Belgium had a fresh, new government, congratulated themselves on more cordial community relations, celebrated a royal marriage with great pomp and ... witnessed the resurrection of its hapless national soccer team, the Diabes rouges.

Dividing up Social Security?

But, as usual, the ink on the agreements scarcely had time to dry when new demands were heard. Flanders has confirmed its institutional agenda, which has been an open secret since the late 1990s. It concerns moving sensitive areas such as management of the railroad, the international airport and social security away from federal control. Rightly or wrongly,

the francophones view such demands as outright declarations of war, fearing a fool's game in which they would pay the price. They believe the reform of 2001 should be given some time before it is evaluated. There is every indication that new wrangling will take place after the regional and community elections of June 2004, whose imminence may plunge the country into some kind of permanent election campaign.

Institutional reform in Belgium is a highly politicized affair rather than the work of rational and patient independent experts. It takes the form of a power grab following a cleverly orchestrated and dramatized conflict.

Just about every case that ends up before the government has a taste of community to it. For example: although supported by all francophone parties, the granting of the vote to the large immigrant community (about 10% of the population) is currently in limbo because the Flemish Liberals of the VLD, the Prime Minister's party, oppose it. Ideally, only arguments of political philosophy should separate them. But this does not take into account the community "poison" that complicates life for all federal ministers.

The arrival of a new executive should not change anything in this toxic climate. On the contrary, the face-off between socialists and liberals could be fairly contentious. In the poor economic climate, it will take close political arbitration to balance social priorities on one side (refinancing social security, investing in public companies) and tax demands on the other (continued income tax cuts). Hesitation or carelessness by public authorities would be unforgivable. If the new government does not manage to get the national railway - the *Société nationale des chemins de fer (SNCF)* - out of its financial rut, if it does not eliminate the looming divergence on the funding of federal social security, political forces in Flanders will be in a good position to demand a split. And so it goes in Belgium. Slowly, the country is approaching the great divide. (6)

Federation Belgian style

Three territorial regions:

- Flemish region (mostly Dutch-speaking)
- Walloon region (mostly French-speaking)
- Brussels-Capital region (bilingual)

Three linguistic communities:

- French-speaking community (or the Walloon-Brussels community),
- Flemish community
- Germanophone community (essentially marginal)