



Belgium at the centre of the conference on federalism 2005

Federalism in Belgium is a verb, not a noun.

BY GUY TEGENBOS

Why is the International Conference on Federalism 2005 so welcome in Belgium? And why are its participants being greeted so warmly? To answer those questions, we need to tell a story about surrealism and a pipe that is not a pipe, about suits that are not perfect but fit like a glove, about federalism that is a verb, about constant renovations, which will still be going on when the International Conference on Federalism* begins in Brussels on March 3, 2005, or which might – only just – have ended by that time. And about diversity and harmony, and the connection between both.

The Kingdom of Belgium is celebrating its 175th anniversary this year. In 1830, the country seceded from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which was formed 15 years earlier. With the approval of France, Great Britain and Germany – the superpowers – Belgium became a separate state, after a period during which the country had belonged, in whole or in part, to one European superpower one time, and to another the next.

A highlight of the 175th anniversary of this relatively young state is the major exposition “Made in Belgium”***. It gives an overview of the history and achievements, from prehistoric times until now, of the regions which are now called Belgium.

The exposition is built around 12 different themes, including music, painting, folklore, architecture and fashion, sports, science, food and drink. It shows all great monuments, products and names: Belgian fries, chocolate and beers; the world-famous ‘Gilles de Binche’ (a carnival character); historic persons like Ambiorix who fought the Romans, and Godfrey of Bouillon, leader of the crusaders; historic cities such as Bruges and Brussels; comic-book characters such as Tintin; Eddy Merckx, the “greatest cyclist ever”; Justin Henin and Kim Clijsters, the two tennis players who starred in the international women’s tennis scene recently; musicians like Jacques Brel and Toots Thielemans; painters such as Peter Paul Rubens and René Magritte.

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At the International Conference on Federalism 2002 in Switzerland: Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (right), Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (centre) and Vojislav Kostunica of Serbia (left).

“Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (This is not a pipe) – René Magritte

But you won’t find any politicians in the exposition. Not one. And it was only recently that a thirteenth item was added to the exposition: “The Belgian Model”: our own form of federalism. This is a remarkable thing indeed. Officially, the celebration bears the title 175-25: that is, 175 years of Belgium, 25 years of federalism. The country is not only celebrating its own birthday, but also that of its status as a federation.

Belgium’s brief experience so far as a federal country contrasts with the enthusiasm with which the country presented itself as a candidate for the third International Conference on Federalism, after those in Mont-Tremblant (Canada, 1999) and St. Gallen (Switzerland, 2002). The country’s short time as a federation also contrasts with its determination to achieve major results, reflected in the title that was given to the conference: *Turning Diversity into Harmony*.

It reminds us a little of René Magritte, our famous surrealist painter. His most famous work is a detailed painting of a beautiful pipe, entitled “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (This is not a pipe). We claim to be a federal state, but then again, we don’t. We are proud of it, and then again, we’re not.

Officially, Belgium was a state with a centralized administration for its first 150 years. Unofficially, it was only 140 years. The starting point for the federal organization of Belgium is often given as 1970 instead of the official date, 1980. Around 1970, every national political party broke in two, into a Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking party. Parties have always been dominant political actors in the political scenery of Belgium. More or less at the same time, the federal organization of Belgium was begun. In 1970, in the first constitutional revision, Belgium was divided into three communities (a French-speaking, a Dutch-speaking, and a German-speaking one) and into three Regions (the Walloon region, Flanders and Brussels). Each of these had its own territory and powers. It was only ten years later, in 1980, in the second constitutional revision, that Belgium was clearly recognized as a federal country. From then on, Article 1 proclaimed that "Belgium is a Federal State made up of communities and regions".

Whenever Belgian politicians are abroad, they speak highly about their federalism. They advocate it. But at home, they are less open about it. At home, they are always a bit dissatisfied with this federalism. They are constantly working on it. As a matter of fact, they are doing so right now, in negotiations that started earlier this year about fine-tuning the distribution of powers between the federation and the entities. The results will again be compromises, with no winner and no loser. And that situation may well lead to new adjustments within a few years.

Tailor-made. Belgium has no major ready-made clothing brands or clothing retail chains. But it does have excellent tailors, and outstanding clothing designers of international fame: Ann Demeulemeester, Dirk Bikkembergs, Walter Van Beirendonck, Olivier Strelli, Edouard Vermeulen (Natan), Gérald Wathélet. It is a bit like that with Belgian federalism. You cannot put it on display in a window without an explanatory note. On a tailor's dummy, under the spotlights, you always notice that one sleeve of the suit is longer than the other one, that one leg is somewhat wider, that the second button is not completely centred. We are not talking about federalism as described in handbooks. That is why Belgians are somewhat ashamed of it at times. It is different. And complicated.

But it fits them. What is more, it is cut out for them. It fits like a glove. It is tailor-made. And the fact that Belgium took the risk of being host for the conference means that it has cast off that unnecessary feeling of shame.

Method and verb. The introduction of federalism was not the solution for all problems in Belgium. In our country, federalism – and the constant adjustment of it – is a method to prevent and solve conflicts. For Belgium, federalism is not a permanent situation, it is a movement. "It's a permanent quest", said Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt. That is the reason why the conference is not entitled "Diversity and harmony", but rather "Turning diversity into harmony". Federalism in Belgium is not a noun, it is a verb. Whenever there is a disagreement on a

Two key websites:

* **International Conference on Federalism 2005**, Brussels: www.federalism2005.be

** **Expo Made in Belgium**: www.expo-madeinbelgium.be, Dexia Kunstcenter, Bellevue building, Schildknaapstraat 50, 1000 Brussels, near the Market Square, from March 8, 2005.

matter of policy on a federal level, it is gradually transferred to the communities or the regions. It always involves strenuous negotiations, especially about the distribution of money.

Step by step. Federalism in Belgium was not established overnight. There have been four constitutional revisions: in 1970, 1980, 1988, 1993, and in between numerous special laws have adjusted the authorities of the entities and the rules of the game. There has never been a master plan to introduce federalism. It was an incremental process. Solutions were found for problems step by step, and in the end, we found out what we had was federalism.

Bipolar. Belgium attached its own meaning to federalism, because it had to deal with specific problems. A few examples: To form a federal state with only two large constituent units, without federal political parties and without federal public opinion is not easy. To build a federal structure with one very small and two large language groups, which do not have the same international impact, one of which feels more familiar with South European traditions while the other is more focused on North European and Anglo-Saxon culture, is far from simple. All the more, since those language groups almost – but not entirely – coincide with the regions, and the regions have a totally different economic development. There is also a bilingual capital, which is situated in one language area, but is dominated by the other language. This requires custom-made solutions. Many authors even find it difficult to tell whether Belgium is a federal state or a confederal one.

Fierce and quiet. It is also typical that all matters concerning the relations between communities and regions are highly discordant politically. Political discussions on these matters are always fierce. Words such as "never" and "undebatable" and expressions such as "the end of solidarity" and "the end of Belgium" are often shouted. Conflicts on these matters may paralyze political activity and may lead to governmental crises. In such times of conflict, there is no such thing as Belgian public opinion, but instead Flemish and Walloon public opinions. One hardly ever notices this on the streets, or in the shops, however. The Flemish and Walloons do not attack each other. There has never been violence between those language groups. The complex Belgian governmental structure will always divert the potential conflicts between language groups onto the political level. Let the politicians squabble about them! And squabble they do, sometimes so fiercely and technically that the public loses interest.

Prime Minister. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt is convinced that, however unique and “untransplantable” this model may be, other countries can still learn from Belgium: “Managing cultural diversity is one of the central challenges of our time. The protection of cultural freedom and diversity has become a global issue. Examples thereof make headlines on a daily basis: Iraq, Sudan, the Balkans, Northern Ireland, Côte d’Ivoire, Afghanistan and many more. Struggles over cultural identity can quickly become one of the greatest sources of instability within states and between them.”

“In this world we can all learn from each other. Due to its location at the crossroads of different cultures, Belgium has a long history of dialogue between communities. This dialogue resulted in a unique federal system aimed at protecting the identity of our three linguistic communities by offering them a very large degree of political, cultural and economic autonomy. There is a permanent quest for the right balance between unity and diversity. Our institutional setup provides for many checks and balances and consultation structures. Of course, this does not rule out tensions, but as a whole, the system has proved efficient.”

He then went even further:

“One ‘fit-all’ federal model does not exist. Each situation requires a tailor-made approach, adapted to the needs of a particular cultural, historical and demographic environment. Changing a state’s systems is a gradual and complex process, which implies giving and taking in a spirit of compromise and sometimes highly technical solutions. I am convinced that combining experience and creativity will eventually bring solutions. The Third International Conference on Federalism aims at contributing to this process.”

Fundamental questions

The conference will examine a range of fundamental questions, which arise when we talk about this Belgian federalism. The technicality and fierceness of political

conflicts on governmental structure often raise questions about political legitimacy. There is a growing tendency towards an asymmetry in governmental structures. There are questions about the constituent units taking part in federal decision making. There are questions about the financial solidarity between the regions. Belgium has had positive and less positive experiences, and would very much like to hear about the prevalent opinions and experiences in other countries.

Belgian politicians, academics and journalists will be very attentive to these matters on March 3. In January, a new dialogue was started on the remodelling of the senate into a “senate of the federal states” and on the division of power and responsibilities between the federation and the constituent units.

Perhaps these negotiations will be finished by March 3, perhaps they will still be going on, perhaps they will have broken down or been postponed. So it is possible that the host country will offer not only academic discussions, but even the chance to observe the process “in the field”.

The negotiations aimed at finding the solution will be conducted by politicians at the federal as well as the constituent unit level and bring into practice the “participation of the states in the federal government” and “intergovernmental agreements and cooperative organs within federations” (from theme 3 of the conference).

Since the last elections, the federal and state governments do not have the same political coalitions any more, and this political asymmetry (from theme 1 of the conference) is new and makes conflict settlement more complex. It makes new forms of conflict settlement and compromise necessary. That’s another reason why this international conference is more than welcome in Belgium. Although Belgian politicians are probably the world’s best specialists in making compromises, there is no doubt they can learn a lot about conflict settlement from all other federal states. 