

Political institutions and the construction of a common public sphere

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Institutions and the political culture

For several reasons referendums do not sit well with Belgium's political culture, that is characterized by long traditions of political patronage and top down democracy. They might explain the current wave of distrust in politics: politicians can't deliver the goods anymore as real power and decision making have been evacuated largely out of the political realm. However, tradition is not a valid argument to bluntly reject Nenad Stojanovic' proposal as such. Any improvement of the political system deserves careful consideration. But changing a political tradition and in this case even reversing it, is difficult and time consuming and has an unpredictable outcome.

But not the means but the ends are what really matter. So why is it worthwhile considering the Stojanovic proposal? It's not merely about organizing referendums. It's certainly not about 'saving' the troubled Belgian state as an entity by trying to sustain it through a new practice, in this case a practice of referendums. The proposal is important and can be inspiring because it raises fundamental questions on democracy and its viability and how these are connected to the idea of a common cause. As all citizens are stakeholders in the society they live in, they need an institutional framework through which they can articulate their common cause and validate their interests. The challenge then is how to organize public debate and political decision making in order to enhance democratic agency.

Therefore institutions are important. And of course, institutions never are neutral. They shape the political practice by determining the mechanisms, limits and conditions of political agency. In doing so, they create a political habitus, which in its turn engenders a framework of thinking and attributing value, there is nothing illegitimate or darkly conspirational about that, although institutions can have unintended effects in the long run. It's all about efficiency: what goals do institutions have to serve and what is the best way to achieve those goals? Furthermore, how can they be altered in order to enhance their effectiveness or to avoid unwanted effects? These questions are important for Belgium as the country's institutions seem to be constantly under stress.

Institutions in Belgian history

The so-called banal process of nation building is part and parcel of Belgium's institutional history. The country is a clear example of how a centuries-long historical experience within common political, social, cultural and religious institutions created the Belgian nation. However, a nation is seldom homogenous. Nationhood does not exclude internal differentiation or even strife, rivalry or contention. New historical phenomena can stress already existing internal divisions and create tensions that in the end might endanger national coherence. Already in the early decades of Belgium's existence as an independent state king

Leopold I worried about its future because of the intensity of the political and ideological struggle between Catholics and liberals.

Another new phenomenon of the 19th century was the country's language problem. Linguistic diversity already existed a long time, but it gained societal importance because in the 19th century language as such became important – and thus became 'a problem'. First, Belgium developed into a modern, industrializing society, which needed new educational and communication systems in which language was a primary tool. Secondly, language became a symbol of social inequality as power was exercised in French, while Dutch – at first no more than a collection of dialects – was the language of the poor and the powerless. Language differences became politically relevant as a social marker. Thirdly, language became an element in territorial identification, as the southern part of the country, Wallonia, generally adopted French as its vehicular language, while the northern provinces, Flanders, stuck to the vernacular Dutch. This territorial differentiation was emphasized by a sharp difference in economic development: the Walloon provinces of Liege and Hainaut industrialized rapidly, whereas Flanders remained mainly agricultural. As a result, Wallonia – i.e. the industrial, commercial and financial elites of Liege and Hainaut – accumulated wealth, while most of the Flemish population lived in poverty. After 1945, the Walloon mining and steel industry declined and the situation reversed dramatically: Flanders became and by far still is the richer of the two.

Different historical developments entail a different political behavior. Already in 1884, when only the rich and the middle classes had voting rights, all members of the lower chamber of parliament elected in Flanders were Catholics. Although it substantially changed the social fabric of politics, the extension of suffrage to all male Belgians – women can only vote since 1948 – did not change this pattern. The Catholic and later the Christian-democratic party was by far the more popular in Flanders, in Wallonia the social-democrats dominated politics. As social and economic diversity coincided with linguistic difference, it seemed tempting to both sides to link them in an ethnic logic.

Democracy deepened the linguistic divide in Belgium, because in Flanders it gave a political voice to the Dutch speaking poor. The long process of democratization gradually reduced the weight and the power of the traditional French speaking political and social elite. Universal suffrage made it possible for the Dutch speaking population to express itself politically and to create its own elites. At first linguistic laws secured the official status of Dutch, followed soon by a process of decentralization and devolution, which turned Belgium into a federal state by the end of the 20th century.

Institutions and identity building

The new regions and communities that make up Belgium today created their own institutions and political practices, which engendered specific identitarian dynamics. As a result, most Belgians developed a layered national identity. In this so-called 'lasagna identity', they mix simultaneous and contingent senses of belonging to various territorial levels, in which a Belgian identity is more or less balanced by feelings of connectedness to a region, a community or a language group. Moreover, as a result of a long tradition of localism, an emotional attachment to the lower levels – the province, the city, the village or even the neighborhood – seem to be the more important, although they are seldom articulated politically.

However, the possibilities to express this mixed identity politically are limited, as every electoral candidate must by law choose a 'language group' to which he or she belongs. Hence, there are no more Belgian, 'national' or officially bilingual politicians any more, nor can a citizen vote for such a politician. As a result, there are no more parties that operate on a federal level.

How this discrepancy between mixed identitarian feelings – which are well described in academic surveys – and the limited institutional possibilities of expressing them politically is to be evaluated, is largely a matter of principle. Flemish nationalists see it as a temporary phase in the development of a sturdy and even exclusive Flemish national identity, by which the Belgian layer in the lasagna will ultimately evaporate. To some new political movements in the officially bilingual capital of Brussels however the electoral law is a hindrance, as in their view traditional linguistic conflicts do not matter very much anymore. For them Brussels is an essentially multicultural and thus multilingual society which has far more complex problems to address urgently. It remains to be seen how relevant these new movements really are, but their analysis is worthwhile considering.

Nevertheless, the discrepancy illustrates the way institutions influence and even determine the political process. The absence of national parties restricts political discourse to the members of one language group, to which the other language group can only be an out-group. On a party political and electoral level, relations between the two linguistic groups can only be a matter between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and thus are destined to be dealt with in a confrontational way.

In each language group this topic of intra-Belgian relations thus becomes a valence issue. This makes it is easy and even tempting for politicians to take a radical stance on it, because it can be rewarding. They can depict a Flemish c.q. francophone view as the national interest of their own community, as this is the only one they really represent, even though the Constitution states that members of the federal parliament represents the whole of the Belgian nation. Politicians never have to face, let alone fear an electoral sanctioning by the other linguistic group. Hence, for them the Belgian national interest can only be a function of the perceived regional interest, making federal loyalty always conditional. ‘What is in it for us?’ And, of course: ‘I want my money back.’

As rhetoric reveals ways of thinking, it is easy to understand why politicians nowadays tend to compare political debate on the federal level to ‘a diplomatic conference’, as if the Dutch and the French speaking communities already acted as independent states. Indeed, this is the format in which language groups deal with each other. It treats the federal level no more as a political body in its own right, but only as a forum for political negotiation between the language groups.

This rhetorical logic tends to confirm and strengthen itself by interpreting every disagreement on the federal level as an ethno-linguistic conflict, thus often obscuring its true ideological nature. Moreover, the format leads politicians to view differences between the language groups as more essential than their similarities. Therefore, in this logic Belgium’s ‘diplomatic conference’ does not deal with the interests and aspirations of its ten million citizens, it only has to accommodate – for the time being? – what is rhetorically often referred to as ‘two democracies’, which are supposed to be the genuine political expression of ‘two public opinions’.

This rhetoric is deceptive, because it confuses reasons with results and therefore harbors two problematic assumptions. The first one is that there is such a thing as ‘a’ public opinion that is supposed ideally to be homogenous. The second one assumes that there is a historical logic in which at a certain point in time Belgium indeed was only ‘one’ democracy, but has now to be split institutionally because the supporting public opinion has split. This integrated Belgian public opinion allegedly ceased to exist because the two linguistic communities, as is often said, don’t read each other’s newspapers any more nor watch each other’s television programs. They supposedly lost interest in each other because in many ways they were too different.

There can be little doubt that Dutch and French speaking Belgians indeed dispose of their own separate systems of mass communication. This does not contribute much, to say the least, to national coherence, as a nation nowadays is primarily a communicational

community. Certainly, Flemish and francophone Belgians know very little about each other and do not have a comprehensive set of cultural references, topics of conversation or easy to understand *non-dits* in common.

However, this is not new. In earlier times, the two groups did not read each other's newspapers either. But this did not matter, as society's structures were far more hierarchal than they are today. The only opinions that were taken serious politically were those of a small political, social, bureaucratic and intellectual elite, with a limited number of Flemings who had accepted French as the leading language and spoke it fluently. This elite does not exist anymore, mainly as the result of the democratization of society.

The question now is whether a distinct Flemish or francophone public opinion really exists. If the consumption of communication media is to be a measure of homogeneity, the answer is obviously negative. Because of cultural proliferation and the presence of a wide variety of lifestyles, combined with the development of new communication technologies, a vast assortment of specialized media, reflecting a multitude of social, cultural, local and even generational interests, values and preferences, cater for a plethora of groups and niches in society, which seem to have little in common with each other. It has academically been confirmed that this is even the case with mass media in Flanders, as between the audiences of the Flemish public broadcasting company VRT and its commercial competitor VTM 'a stabilized cultural divide' exists.

The supposedly solid public opinion of Flemish or francophone Belgians can thus only be very limited in scope and depth and at worst only reflects a narrow consensus among the political elites within both language groups. The issue here is what is really meant by public opinion and the shared political views and values therein. As the rhetorical argument of the 'two democracies' makes a wide-ranging cultural claim, it certainly can't be based on very much. Of course it's easy to point that the French speaking Belgians do like to go out and watch the odd French movie, while the Flemish audience does not even bother to take notice of it, this doesn't exclude that they all share the same enthusiasm for American movies, that make up the vast majority of their picture viewing habits, as does most of the rest of the world with them. The same goes for most of the entertainment and popular culture they prefer.

Not only all Belgians are fond of an international, mostly Anglo-Saxon commercial culture, they also share a distinct Belgian heritage, whether they are aware of it or not. International comparative surveys point out that Flemings at least share more values with their French speaking compatriots than with the inhabitants of the Netherlands, with whom they share their language, as the Belgian francophones have more values in common with the Flemings than with the French.

The use of institutional reform

All this does not contradict or minimize the reality of distinct identitarian feelings within Belgium's language groups. It only learns that identity is a vastly more complex phenomenon than explicit or *de facto* nationalistic rhetoric usually assumes. Having said this, the point is not really what the content of a public opinion is. The issue is how the politically relevant aspects of it can be expressed in all its diversity and complexity. That is why political institutions are important. All that is needed is a basic consensus on this goal and on how it can be achieved. And it can probably safely be presumed that preference should be given to the democratic way.

Democracy is not invented to accommodate only one, homogenous public opinion in which everyone agrees on everything. Probably a society with such a public opinion does not exist. On the contrary democracy serves to organize ideological diversity and resolve political conflict in a peaceful, equitable and rational way. To that purpose it does not need a homogenous public opinion but an 'empty' and accessible public sphere, shaped by

institutions, wherein diverging views and opinions can be debated and decisions can be made effectively.

But again, institutions are not neutral. Or put in another way: institutions must be constantly under review for their effectiveness and efficiency, in order to check and control the effects they generate. That explains why the original Belgian state for very obvious and good reasons eventually became a federation. But here the political structure has an already mentioned flaw: its inability to accommodate the full variety of identitarian feelings. As a bold hypothesis it might even argued that this flaw narrowed political perceptions, strategies and tactics to such a point that it caused the political stalemate the Belgian federal government experiences since 2007.

Here Nenad Stojanovic' proposal is important. It learns that Belgium should look for institutional change that has an effect similar to that of the Swiss referendum tradition: the creation of a public sphere in which different opinions can be debated and gives voice to political views that are blocked now by the electoral system. A proposal to that end has already been made: the creation of a federal voting district.

Some high-ranking Christian-democrats have already rejected it in principle as being quixotic, on the argument that 'reality' cannot – or should not? – be changed by institutions. Surely, institutions can do that. The question really is: what reality are those politicians referring to? Do they think of their own perception of it which, as is argued, is narrowed as a result of earlier institutional reform, or do they refer to the reality that is expressed in academic surveys and opinions polls? As is well known, every idea needs an argument and a reality check.