

Living Together in Belgium?

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« The thesis, here, is that a repeated practice of direct democracy strengthens the sentiment of the Swiss [Belgians] that they belong to the same “people” or to the same “nation”.». We only have to change one word to Nenad Stojanovic’s interesting analysis to at the same time contest it and inject it with an element of confusion. And this confusion comes from the use of the word ‘Belgian’, of which I daily notice, being an avid reader of the Dutch-speaking daily press – and at least of its political pages – that it seems to have disappeared from the vocabulary of many analysts in Flanders. ‘Belgian’, it seems, has become a denomination reserved for top athletes, who are French-speaking and merit to be talked about in the paper because they have realized a stunning performance. In other words: it is not frequently used. Otherwise, when reading the press of the north of the country, one is either Fleming or Walloon, ‘Bruxellois’ being a qualification that has to be used very carefully because it would evidence the existence of a real third region, which refers to symbolical-historical debates of the kind it is useless to go into here.

So, direct democracy, the popular initiative referendum as foundation of a new Belgian ‘living together’? During a large part of my career as a political journalist, a famous politician, referred to as ‘the Plumber’, ‘Panzer’ or ‘the bull of Vilvoorde’, was very prominent on the Belgian political scene. During the smart ‘off the record’ information sessions that he regularly organized for the press – separately for the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking press – this federal prime minister, a man who likes to pretend to be brutal, only reacted to this question by lifting his shoulders. When one of my colleagues had asked him the question, he replied: ‘A referendum? Bahhhh, if you want to see the country split up even more quickly, you should probably do that!’...

This is how this peculiar nation works. The only ones who have political power are of course the parties, who can claim to be representative and democratic as the compulsory vote offers them legitimacy at every election. According to them, a mode of direct expression for the ‘public opinion’ – by which I mean, the real opinion of the general public – holds the double danger of pitting the two large communities against each other and of giving way to the less noble sentiments of some.

This question can be raised in all countries and certainly in Switzerland.

Nenad Stojanovic uses – at random? – the example of a possible Belgian referendum on the future of the pension system. Let’s say that on such a topic, a coalition between Vlaams Belang, NVA, Lijst Dedecker, the radical wing of CD&V, the ‘governance’ wing of Open VLD and the ‘realist’ wing of sp.a would quickly determine the Flemish vote. While in the South, a political-trade union coalition of PS, CDH, FGVB, CSC, largely supported by Ecolo and benefitting of the silence of the liberals who will not want to be marginalized, would go in the other direction. Every other referendum – and, by the way, would it concern topics of federal or of regional politics – would seem to me to hold the dangers mentioned by Jean-Luc Dehaene, given that the Flemish and francophone/Walloon public opinions evolve, on numerous points, in radically different directions.

Therefore, Belgians face a bizarre paradox : the parties that, along the years, suggested that federalism, and today confederalism, were the only remedies to the tensions between the communities and that have largely supported this political, cultural, mental and maybe even economic distancing between the communities state that the worst of dangers would be to permit the opinion to express itself directly on every subject. The argument even holds if the topic under consideration would be connected to the federal or federal system, which often seems to be the main structure for this country. In this respect Belgium does remain a very

strange democracy. On an international level, it is a pioneer with regard to euthanasia, gay marriage and the international prohibition of land mines. Simultaneously, however, it seems impossible in this country that the majority in some municipalities expresses itself in its own language, or elects its own mayor, without any interference from the minister for the interior.

Another possible problem with this proposal to apply direct democracy to the Belgian case is that it is not really clear what could be the goal of this proposal. I mean : is there still a « living together » that could be saved ? One of my colleagues, José-Alain Fralon, who use to be the reporter for *Le Monde* in Brussels, for a long time has defended the idea of a country that was really united and unified. However, to me this idea always seemed a bit romantic and sentimental. One he has told me that he would like to write a book with as title : « It is sad when a country dies ». Finally, however, the book was published with as a title « Belgium – the end », which is just as clear, but indeed less poetic. With the example of this excellent reporter, who used to live part of the time in Brussels and part of the time in Paris, I want to show that there is not much that can be done to save the « idea » of Belgium. In this regard, it does not matter what happens on the political front, or what kind of new political incidents there are, and it does not even matter what is the name of the prime minister of the country. Whether this is Verhofstadt or Van Rompuy, as long as it is not Leterme, it does not matter.

In general, I tend to agree with José-Alain Fralon. I do not think I am disappointed or nostalgic. But nevertheless I am a bit sad because a very specific identity tends to disappear. That identity was the result of a living together, maybe not voluntarily, but always as a very real condition. My fear is that this identity is disappearing because of selfishness, a form of cultural closure, and a negative feeling toward the other.

Like many other observers, I wonder whether the French speaking inhabitants of Belgium, whether they live in Brussels or in the Walloon region are really opposed toward this trend. My fear is that strong identities often lead to conflict and violence. I believe that a peaceful, open and tolerant identity is always to be preferred and works in the advantage of everyone. And what I observe especially is that both in Brussels and in the Walloon region, one can notice an undescribed mixture of rancour and lack of knowledge, of contentment with oneself and of a lazy holding on the good life. The ultimate illusion in this regard is that, maybe one day in Paris, a political leader will hold the arms open toward the Belgian people. I call this an illusion because it is clearly grounded on a lack of knowledge. As for me personally, the idea of living (again) in France, does seems very seducing. But I have given up the hope that I will ever be able to do so, except as a foreigner to the French Republic.