

# Introduction

Bruno De Wever (Universiteit Gent)

---

*Historia magistra vitae est.* For centuries the past held a major position in political discussions about the desired future. Modern historical science has dismantled this 'historicism' and thus deposed the past as preceptor. Nowadays historians are aware that the past is 'a foreign country' as David Löwenthal stated in a work which has meanwhile become a classic<sup>1</sup>. The past evokes alienation rather than familiarity. Lessons from the past are often based on an extremely selective and sometimes erroneous reading of the past, generally on the basis of contemporary interests. But none of this has to mean that knowledge of the past no longer has any significance for the present or that history would no longer have any predictive significance. Although the past never repeats itself literally, the possibility that more or less comparable circumstances would probably lead to a more or less similar outcome should attribute some predictive value to history. Historians are generally very reticent to utter statements on the future. The present texts are no exception to this rule. But they all start from the premise that patterns can be found in history. Analysis of the course of the linguistic and community conflict in the last one and a half centuries shows which solutions worked and which ones failed. It shows the actors, their interests, political strategies and their outcome. It does not result in ready-made answers about how Belgium should proceed, but it does guard against oversimplifications and naivety.

An earlier version of some of the following texts was presented at the inaugural public event of the Re-Bel initiative on 30 April 2009. All of them were written before the Belgian federal elections of 13 June 2010.

**Herman Van Goethem** (Universiteit Antwerpen) outlines a history of the Flemish-Walloon collective identities and points to the influence regionalised institutions and elections have on the process of the estrangement and evaporation of the Belgian national feeling. Although unitarianism remained dominant until the 1960s, the process of estrangement had already started with the introduction of the General Multiple Voting Right in 1893.

**Vincent Dujardin** (Université catholique de Louvain) points out that the Belgian nation state was under pressure from the outset, also because of Flemish language demands that were not satisfactorily complied. But he doubts whether Flemish nationalism will ever be satisfied with less than the division of Belgium. The duality of Belgian federalism with its two large language communities, but with Brussels as the strong bond between them, makes the Belgian national economy unique. Its future will have implications for the functioning of the European Union.

**Jean Pirotte** and **Luc Courtois** (Université catholique de Louvain) see how Flemings go their own way. They are of the opinion that the Walloons and French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels should also resolutely take their own future in hand as two regions. A Walloon-Brussels federation is at odds with the socio-economic differences. A self-aware Walloon identity will have to be promoted. A return to a unitary Belgium or to forms of French-Dutch bilingualism is not realistic.

---

<sup>1</sup> D. LÖWENTHAL, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge, 1999 (9<sup>th</sup> ed.) (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1985).

**Bruno De Wever** (Universiteit Gent) demonstrates that the actual community conflict is the product of a historical development which might also have run another course. Here a great responsibility is borne by the administrative powers-that-be, who have to keep their finger on the pulse of society and in this respect should not be blinded by their own interests and 'condition humaine'.

**Marc Hooghe** and **Luc Huyse** (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) investigate why the pacification mechanisms of the Belgian political system, which so often appeared to be able to bridge political tensions, nowadays no longer seem to work for the community conflicts in Belgium.