

What Can History Teach Us About the Current Impasse and Crisis in Belgium?

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1. The investigation of nationalist phenomena teaches us that nationalism is a process based on the creation of a collective national identity. Each individual has the feeling that he belongs to a particular collectivity. However, this feeling is declining or becoming blurred. Today I can quite easily feel that I am an Antwerper, a Fleming, a Belgian and a European – all at the same time. This is perfectly possible, but it also means that some layers of identity will be felt less intensely than others. This sense of identity is related to: 1° geographical boundaries, 2° the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and 3° the internal solidarity felt by ‘us’, a solidarity in which ‘them’, the others, cannot participate. Consider the current situation in today’s Europe of 27 nations, where the EU refuses to adopt an ‘open door’ policy to immigration from Africa. This is also a matter of ‘us’ and ‘them’. And so the real question – and it is both a political and an ethical question – is this: where exactly do we draw the boundaries?

2. The identity-forming process of the Flemings and the Walloons is much older than we sometimes think. These identities were already being defined and experienced at the end of the 19th century, even amongst the ordinary people. In more concrete terms, this means that within Belgium the concepts of ‘Flanders’ and ‘Wallonia’ were already a part of the political landscape. For example, when coal was discovered in the Kempen in the years around 1905, it was strongly argued that the new mines must be Flemish mines, financed by Flemish capital and operated by Flemish staff. There was to be no ‘colonisation’ by the Walloons. Similarly, during the 1930s there were furious parliamentary debates about the introduction of children’s allowance. Many Walloon politicians were against this proposal, because they did not want Wallonia to pay for the larger numbers of children in Flanders.

Nowadays, the concepts of Flanders and Wallonia are put forward in a crude and simplistic manner within the context of the Flemish-Wallonian transfer debate. These concepts only reflect a part of the true situation and fail, for example, to deal with the question of internal transfers within the individual regions. A clearer analysis of transfers at arrondissement level could teach us much in this respect.

However, such arguments are not really relevant within the context of the identity-forming process. The group tends to regard its internal solidarity as self-evident. Flemish politicians will therefore never be unduly concerned about transfers between, e.g., Antwerp and Limburg. The strengthening – and general acceptance – of the differences between the Flemish and Walloon identities has been particularly noticeable since the reform of the state structure in 1970. In Flanders, people are now very aware of this identity and experience it as an important element of their psychological make up. To such an extent that it is probably fair to say that Flemish public opinion on the whole is a Flemish nationalist opinion. In contrast, Wallonia and French-speaking Belgium still have a far greater sense of being ‘Belgian’, but they fail to realise that this feeling does not extend beyond the areas where French is spoken. In other words, it is confined to Wallonia and Brussels. Yet here, too, arguments are frequently based on the identity-creating concept of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

3. While it is possible to speak of a clear internal solidarity within Flanders and Wallonia, the concept of national solidarity is becoming much less evident. This is tied up with the fact that the Belgian national identity – as a constructed identity – no longer really exists. This was not always the case and at times there has been strong national sentiment in both Flanders and Wallonia, such as in the years around 1905 and certainly in the 1960s, when the three major national political parties were all unitary parties. We are inclined to forget, for example, that this unitarianism was particularly strong in the CVP during this period. However, this is no longer the case. The idea of a 'unitary' Belgium now belongs to the past and it will not be possible to resurrect it. History teaches us that a new national cohesion can only be achieved within a totalitarian context or within the context of a long period of war.

4. Consequently, a very clear regional identity has now been developed in both Flanders and Wallonia, to replace a Belgian national framework which no longer exists. Which institutional processes lay at the root of this failure of the unitary Belgian project?

Nationalism has a rational element and an emotional element. The rational element involves a struggle to obtain power, to allow the differences between 'us' and 'them' to be settled in 'our' favour. The emotional element is more closely related to the manner in which the collective internal identity is cultivated and experienced by the group.

Nationalism has a strong influence on the collective mechanisms of society. As inheritors of the Enlightenment, who believe in the autonomy of the individual, this is a phenomenon with which many of us are not familiar. In a democratic society, this collectivism usually finds its clearest expression during the electoral process.

This expression of the collective will through elections is really little more than a constructed form of interpretation, since it is impossible to define its precise 'content' in political terms. In the first instance, it is therefore a matter of perception, whereby politicians and the media give a certain interpretation to a certain result, which is then generally accepted by the public as being 'true'. This is certainly the case, for example, if the result of an election is deemed to be 'regionally sensitive'. This also happened after the election of June 2007.

In other words, in a democratic society elections are a way to give shape and form to the collective emotions of the people. It is this aspect which is particularly destructive for the Belgian national identity. It is no coincidence that the start of the 'disintegration' of Belgium can be dated to 1893, the year in which universal male suffrage was introduced for the first time. Time and again, radical election results – and the interpretation given to them – have pushed the different regions further and further apart. From the 1960s onwards, this has certainly been the rule rather than the exception. The low watermark of divisiveness was reached with the election of June 2007, but this merely confirmed a trend which had been growing since the 1970 state reforms. Such developments not only force the regions further apart, but also the political parties.

5. The elections have ultimately resulted in an institutional organisation which reflects and further strengthens this electoral reality. Admittedly, the first major institutional reforms of 1970 were carried out with the intention of preserving the unitary Belgian state. However, unitary politicians such as Gaston Eyskens have all made a fundamental mistake. They fail to realise the scope and power of the mechanisms which they have unleashed: for example, the right of the regions to pass decrees which have the same status as national law. They also seriously underestimated the extent to which state-funded cultural autonomy for the regions (after 1971) would undermine Belgian national sentiment and speed up the process of national division.

The following are the most important institutional elements which have contributed to the institutional weakening of the unitary Belgian state.

- 1° The political parties were split along regional lines, with no unifying national structure. It is crucial to realise this fact, if we wish to make a correct diagnosis of the Belgian problem. The widening gulf between the CD&V and the CDH is symptomatic of this malaise.

- 2° Partly as a result of the cultural autonomy introduced in 1970, the media has also divided into two distinct regional camps. A brief glance at the daily newspapers in Dutch and French could give you the impression that you are reading reports about two different countries. This is also fundamental to a correct understanding of the current crisis.
- 3° The combined effect of this regional split in the party political world and in the media has not only served to strengthen the separate identities of Flanders and Wallonia since 1970, but has also led to a fundamental change in the nation's political culture. Historical research has repeatedly emphasised the importance of an effective political culture. Above all, this means the existence of a common frame of reference for basic strategy and debate. However, such a common framework scarcely exists in present-day Belgium. It only lives on in the minds of a number of older politicians.
- 4° The partition of a unitary state seems to be much more difficult to achieve than was originally envisaged. There are conflicts of competency between the various levels of state, and financial powers are frequently ill-matched to the competencies which have been agreed.
- 5° Closely related to the previous point is the need for national compromise in negotiations conducted at national level. But this also seems harder to achieve than ever. Since 2007 the country has found itself in an institutional vacuum, leading to a new form of political *perpetuum mobile*.

6. What recommendations can be formed on the basis of this brief historical analysis?

- 1° The concept of Belgian nationality will not rise like a phoenix from the ashes. This process has been in irreversible decline since the end of the 19th century. Even the preservation of a status quo is unthinkable. People who believe in the permanence of our national institutions are sadly mistaken.
- 2° A great deal of patience will be needed to achieve national compromise and a new national consensus. This will be a long-term process.
- 3° Those who wish to reach a compromise must be fully aware, either as politicians or as media players, of the need for great care when dealing with the emotional sentiments of the masses on both sides of the language divide. In this respect, it may be advisable to reduce the number of political campaigns by allowing all the different types of election to take place at the same time.
- 4° Those who wish to hold the Belgian state together must take every opportunity to strengthen the Belgian national identity. This may be possible by seeking new institutional mechanisms which strengthen the role of 'the nation' in return for a further transfer of competencies to the regions, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. However, there will need to be a clear political consensus for any such policy – and this, as previously mentioned, will require a great deal of time, patience and care.
- 5° Even if it proves impossible to strengthen the Belgian state and Belgian sentiment at national level, or if it transpires that this is not a sufficient remedy by itself, there is still one factor which – in my opinion – will always act as a powerful incentive to reach a new large-scale, long-term compromise: namely, the recognition that a complete partition of the country is simply not an option.
- 6° It is possible that the Belgian project may not recover at national level but will continue to exist in a kind of vegetative state. This will result in a series of 'artificial' governments, such as Verhofstadt III, thrown together by circumstance and only capable of dealing with 'current business'. Such governments will find it difficult to pursue the creative new policies which are capable of providing answers to today's new political challenges, such as the financial crisis, the ageing of the population, the environment, the problems of a multi-cultural society, etc.

This being said, history once again shows us that periods of crisis can sometimes generate a new dynamic which is capable of overturning the normal laws of politics. If the national level is *de facto* obliged to confine itself to the handling of current business, then it is only reasonable to assume that the regions will seek to acquire more and more authority for themselves. The constitutionality of this process may be open to question, but we should not forget that the Constitutional Court has already

given its approval to the setting up of a Flemish sickness insurance system. Institutions do have the capacity to be innovative – and certainly in times of crisis.