

With a Re-Bel yell

Prepare for the revolution. As another round of elections looms in June and there's still no progress on the institutional reforms that have deadlocked the government for the last two years, a group of hot-headed thinkers are lining up at the barricades to express their concerns over the future of the nation.

Or rather, this being Belgium, they are making their views and feelings known through Re-Bel, or Relaunching Belgium, an initiative launched by a group of Belgian academics. Whereas a talking shop for academics wouldn't ordinarily raise eyebrows, it does here, because it's bi-lingual and eschews the country's most contentious and draining issue, language, by having all its debate in English. Quite exceptionally, Re-Bel is a forum for sensible discussion and honest debate across the linguistic divide.

Ever since education began to be progressively split along language lines in the 1960s, Belgian academia has found it difficult to find its voice in national debate. These days, the two sides are almost completely alienated from each other at all levels. The only remnant of any national academic talking shop is the Fondation Universitaire/ Universitaire Stichting with roots going back to the 1920s. Although largely defunct since the regions were created, it does provide the perfect conduit for Re-Bel – and the plush old boys club in Rue Egmont provides an adequately refined atmosphere for serene discussion.

"I came across this very sad story a few days ago," says Philippe Van Parijs, one of the engineers of the initiative. "About twelve years ago there was a group of Flemish lawyers, academics and economists who worked for months and months to produce a blueprint for a new Flemish social security system. They went into great detail and produced a whole series of little books on the issue. It served no purpose whatsoever. Because French-speakers didn't even know that this rich discussion was going on." And the other side is at it too.



In some ways, it's what landed us in the post-electoral mess the last time. **Re-thinking Belgium:** People and parties discuss, make promises, but each on their own side of the linguistic divide, disregarding what the others are saying. It's doomed by default. "This is meant to be a long-term initiative and a systematic opportunity for people to meet and think together," says Van Parijs.

So, what's on the menu? Discussion, ebooks, reports, workshops, online debate. The first public meeting at the end of this month is devoted to taking stock of the geographical and historical landscape – wrapped up with a talk from our very own editor Derek Blyth "to get an inside view from an outsider," says Paul De Grauwe of the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL).

Indeed, the ambitions are high and many a belgo-sceptic will be apprehensive. "We have lots of taboo subjects on both sides of the border: enlarging Brussels, regionalising social security, facility communes," says De Grauwe. "This is a place to broach those, to think about the other side's taboos." Anyone welcome.

Full programme and registration at www.rethinkingbelgium.eu.
• Peter Philp



Time to steer Brussels in the right direction: have your say at the Etats Généraux de Bruxelles

here, so that means a fifteen per cent increase in just ten years. And few of those newcomers will be well off or highly educated. Given that we can barely manage to cope with the present situation, this will be quite a challenge.

"For instance, we'll need fifty thousand extra homes for newcomers alone. There are already 30,000 people on the social housing waiting list today. How shall we house all these new people? Where can they be employed? Where will they be schooled?"

Troubles abound, but this Saturday Deneef and the

platform behind the Etats Généraux will present a grand scheme. "We propose an ambitious approach. We could say: on top of those 150,000 newcomers, we want 100,000 more! But this time those of our own choosing: international, young, highly educated people. Of course, people like that can afford to be choosy. So we must make Brussels attractive to them. If we don't, we'll soon find ourselves up to our neck in troubles. And just doing our best isn't good enough!"

• Veerle Devos & Kristof Dams