

Electoral Engineering or Prudent Leadership

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Part II : Towards a more efficient and legitimate working of Belgium's federal democracy ?

A difficult puzzle

The practical problem that the Belgian federation faces is an extreme variety of the core puzzle of consociational theory: keeping a deeply divided society together requires prudent leaders, who withstand the centrifugal forces within their own subculture and cooperate with the leaders of other subcultures (Lijphart, 1969: 213). Whether such prudent leadership is a matter of fate or can be engineered is a question that has never been resolved satisfactorily. The literature lists various contingencies that may be conducive to such prudent leadership (Pappalardo, 1981; Bogaards, 1998; Andeweg 2000: 521-529). One of the most important of these factors is the existence of more than two subcultures, each of which is well removed from an overall electoral or parliamentary majority. In Belgium, however, the German-speaking minority is too small (0.7 percent) to produce a multiple balance of power: the main line of conflict is between the Francophone and Flemish groups, with the Flemish speakers forming a majority of 60 percent of the population. In such a situation conflicts always oppose the same groups, and this repetitive nature gradually erodes any mutual goodwill that may exist. Even in such a difficult situation, prudent leadership need not be completely out of reach, however, as the example of postwar Austria makes clear (although the two Austrian *Lager* were more equally balanced in terms of numbers) (Powell 1970).

Alas, in Austria the conflict between the two *Lager* of Socialists and Catholics was about how the country should be run, and not about the extent to which it should be a country at all, as is the case in Belgium. These are the most difficult situations to resolve (Barry, 1975). The case that comes closest is that of Northern Ireland, with its Protestant majority of 53 percent preferring to stay within the United Kingdom, and the Catholic minority preferring to join the Irish Republic. It is no coincidence that the extent to which the consociational solution is working there can be credited to the UK

and Irish governments rather than to the leaders of the Northern Irish communities; it is a case of ‘coercive consociationalism’ in Brendan O’Leary’s terms (O’Leary, 1989). Such ‘enforcers’ (the Belgian King? The EU?) do not seem to be available in the Belgian case. So, the quest is for another mechanism to make the leaders act prudently.

Asking vegetarians to choose a meat dish

The Pavia group argues that the biggest obstacle in the way of prudent leadership is the split party system: Flemish parties competing for the Flemish vote and Francophone parties competing for the Francophone vote (Deschouwer & Van Parijs, 2009). In itself, however, this is nothing special: in consociational democracies the competition is rarely across subcultural boundaries, even where the electoral arena is not formally split. During the heyday of pillarization in the Netherlands, for example, the Protestant parties could not realistically hope to win Catholic or Socialist votes, etc. To put it simply: vegetarians do not consider the meat dishes on the menu.

What is special in the Belgian case is not that the party system is split, but that the competition within each of the communities is one-sided in opposite directions. To a foreign observer, the absence of a ‘Belgicist’ option on the Flemish ballot is striking, as is the absence of a separatist competitor in Wallonia. True, there have been ‘Belgicist’ attempts in Flanders, but the dismal electoral fortunes of the BUB party there merely show how one-sided the competition really is when it comes to constitutional issues. It really is a case of centrifugal competition.

The Pavia group’s proposal of a federal district (but also Laurent de Briey’s suggestion (de Briey, 2009) seeks to overcome this problem of one-sided competition in opposite directions by making Flemish parties also compete for Belgicist francophones, and by making Francophone parties also compete for separatist Flemish voters. The idea is that this will have a moderating effect, and that this form of electoral engineering will foster more prudent leadership. The essence of consociationalism is that the moderation takes place once the demands of each subculture are clearly articulated in the elections; by engineering moderation not after but in the elections the proposal does not fit consociational theory, but theoretical purity need not concern us here. The question is simply: will it work? Does the federal district provide sufficient incentives for voters to choose a party from the other community, or will Flemish voters exclusively vote for Flemish parties in the new

federal district? To continue with the analogy I used above: is it feasible to ask vegetarians to also order a meat dish for one of the meal's courses, so that the meat merchants are forced to compete for the vegetarian vote? Unfortunately, we have neither precedents nor theoretical arguments that allow us to answer that question either way.

Reducing the frequency of election campaigns

However, the probability that the introduction of a federal district will produce prudent leadership can be enhanced. The proposal seeks to prompt subcultural leaders to moderate their position. However, elites must not only be given incentives to compromise with their opponents; they must also be protected against a backlash from more radical competitors within their own subculture. The fact that intra-subcultural competition is nested within inter-subcultural competition (Tsebelis 1990) is often neglected in the literature on factors that facilitate consociational arrangements, but it is crucial: if moderation carries the risk of political suicide, it is not a rational strategy for any politician to choose. In order to strengthen its impact, the introduction of a federal district needs to be accompanied by measures that offer prudent leaders some form of protection against radical challengers. From this perspective, the existence of an almost permanent election campaign in Belgium is just as problematic as the split-party system. The same parties compete for the same voters in elections at all levels: federal and regional elections most importantly, but also local elections and we may add second-order elections such as provincial and European elections. All these levels have their own electoral cycles, and with the exception of local and provincial elections, they do not coincide: a year without an election is exceptional. As Deschouwer and Van Parijs astutely observe: 'This is driving all political parties into a nearly permanent state of electoral campaigning. As a result, the likelihood of an accommodating attitude on the part of politicians governing, or wanting to govern, at the federal level has been dramatically reduced' (Deschouwer & Van Parijs, 2009: 13). The situation resembles that of the United States where the House of Representatives is elected every two years with each election preceded by a primary election in most states. As a result, politicians are 'running scared' of public opinion and are more preoccupied with campaigning than with governing, which after all may require them to take unpopular measures once in a while (King, 1997).

Reducing the frequency of election campaigns offers politicians' temporary reprieve from the electoral risks of acting prudently. This reduction can be achieved by introducing longer parliamentary terms (from the current four (federal) and five (regional) years to the six years that are already used for Belgian local and provincial elections, for example. Synchronizing federal and regional elections produces an even greater reduction. For this purpose, the possibility to dissolve parliament and call early elections needs to be abolished: this is already the case in Norway, where governments can be replaced but where the parliamentary term is fixed. Interestingly, it is probably not too difficult to convince politicians of the desirability of these measures: few politicians are likely to refuse an opportunity of increased protection against would-be challengers! In combination with other measures such as the introduction of a federal district, prudent leadership may yet be engineered!

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