

From Armed Peace to Permanent Crisis. Cracks in the Belgian Consultative Model¹

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Jan Albert Goris, better known by his pen name, Marnix Gijsen, spent many years in the US as minister plenipotentiary. In 1946 he wrote in his 'Belgium: Land and People': 'At first sight, so many centrifugal forces appear to be at work in Belgium that her existence as a political unit seems paradoxical.' It is an opinion that been expressed many more times in the media, especially abroad, since the lengthy crisis of 2007-2008. A number of international newspapers have already predicted the country's demise. Belgian politics have always been thoroughly conflictual, but evidently the old pacification mechanisms are no longer working as they should.

Belgium's political system is by definition notably divided. There are, of course, the traditional differences between labour and capital, and the associated socio-economic conflicts. And as in many traditionally overwhelmingly Catholic countries a conflict also developed between the Catholic Church and those who sought to reduce that church's impact on public life. A third fault line is of course linguistic-political, with a sometimes sharp division between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers. Despite the presence in the Belgian political system of these three fundamental antagonisms, we have to state that the country has never descended into extreme violent unrest. That in itself is relatively exceptional; other divided societies, such as Lebanon, Cyprus or Northern Ireland, have indeed suffered this type of conflict.

In the 1960s and '70s people sometimes talked of 'The Belgian Paradox': despite all the reasons for conflict, the Belgian political system seemed to manage to function relatively well. True, there was no question of any real reconciliation between the opposing groups, but a complex form of compromise politics led at any rate to what is called an 'armed peace'. These pacification politics were based on a number of clear principles. To start with, the rule that the majority decides, the gold standard in just about all Anglo-Saxon countries, did not apply here. Confronted with sensitive matters, the political elite preferred 'government by mutual agreement', whereby the minority could always explicitly or implicitly exercise a right of veto. That applied to both ideological and linguistic minorities. A far-reaching form of decentralisation is also part of the rules of the game. In delicate issues such as education or culture, the option chosen was to leave many decisions to the political groupings (called 'pillars' in Belgium), or to the socio-economic interest groups or the language communities, rather than reserving them for one central authority. The few goods that were at the government's disposal (government jobs, subsidies, positions on government bodies, etc.) were shared out among all the interest groups according to carefully worked-out rules. In this way all the members of the political elite also had sufficient incentives to keep the system in being. The game was played by these rules for decades and they ensured that conflicts did not develop into uncontrollable confrontations. The differences did not disappear, they lay dormant under the surface. But at least the pacification mechanisms did manage to prevent a complete implosion of the political system.

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The fundamental question now is whether these trusted pacification rules have lost their meaning. It does indeed look as if the old mechanisms are now a good deal less self-evident. So, is the Belgian pacification model finished? To answer that we must first look back and see why this model was able to function so successfully in the past.

1. Conditions of success

A first important condition was the existence of strong political parties and interest groups. Historically, compromises were always reached by the leaders of the different political groupings. Although these senior figures came from radically different ideological backgrounds there was a consensus among that elite on the way in which the political system should be kept going. Once the pact had been made, the party leaders made sure that the rank and file accepted the compromise without too many complaints. The leaders wielded a great deal of authority and party members often remained faithful to their organisation from the cradle to the grave. These docile followers also made it possible for the elite to actually make a pact with the other camps and then have that pact implemented.

Secondly, there was a constant interaction between the three fundamental fault lines in Belgium through which they too, to some extent, neutralised each other. Whenever one of the sources of conflict came to the fore and monopolized the political agenda, the other differences moved into the background. So there was a constant process of tension and détente, of heating up and cooling down, of mobilisation and demobilisation. Acute economic problems, for example, could ensure that differences over language disappeared into the background for a while and vice versa.

A remarkable balance of power grafted itself onto this. The Christian Democrats formed a majority in Flanders, the free-thinking Socialists a majority in Wallonia; the former had a vulnerable minority in Wallonia, the latter in Flanders. It was a healthy stalemate because it tempered the aggression of, in particular, the Walloon Socialists and the Flemish Christian Democrats, the protagonists in virtually all Belgian conflicts. The powerful Christian Democrat pillar in Flanders had to put up with the Socialists and Liberals getting their share of the subsidy cake, but in return the same thing happened on the Frenchspeaking side. At the national level, Dutch-speakers agreed not to play on their numerical preponderance and in exchange French-speakers were prepared to give Brussels the status of a bilingual capital region even though French-speakers were in the majority there.

Finally, there was the strong economic growth during the period 1958-1972. Government budgets increased strongly during 'the long Sixties' and it was therefore relatively easy to buy off each other's claims. The 1958 school pact, for example, which reconciled the defenders of the state school system and the Catholic education network, actually boiled down in practice to both school networks getting more government subsidies. Initial agreements on constitutional reform also led to both language communities getting more funding. In this period of constantly increasing government resources it was possible to engage all the groups in society with the pacification model.

2. The system under pressure

During the last decade of the twentieth century, however, the trusted pacification model came under more and more pressure. The problem-solving capacity of the Belgian political system gradually diminished. That can be explained by the fact that the conditions that governed the pacification model slowly became more negative.

In particular, there was a process of de-pillarisation. The traditional Christian, Socialist and Liberal pillars which had controlled public life in Belgium for decades gradually lost their hold over Belgian society. On a personal level, ties between citizens and their social organisations became looser. Unpredictability took the place of electoral and organisational loyalty and obedience. At the social level, too, the pillars began to crumble. A good many

interest groups refused to be bound exclusively to one political grouping. In addition many new groupings developed which also laid claim to a place at the negotiating table but which no longer fitted into the traditional pillar system. As a result it became more and more difficult for the political elites to ensure compliance with the agreements they made. It was still perfectly possible to conclude agreements, but they became meaningless if you could no longer successfully impose them on a docile rank and file.

On top of this, the traditional political geography of Belgium changed in this period. It evolved from a relatively well-organised entity with three fault lines to a relatively complicated entity made up of large and small conflicts. The popular unrest that erupted in 1996, when it emerged that the police and judiciary had made a number of errors in their handling of the Dutroux case, was characteristic of this. The 'white campaign' that developed then, and brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets in a protest march, did not fit at all into the traditional fault-lines model. The political elite had no suitable instruments to deal with this discontent. And we also have to take into consideration a general shift in political decision-making. Politics is no longer just a matter of professional politicians meeting in Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat. The media, the judiciary and the European institutions are becoming increasingly important in political decision-making, and they care little about the traditional prescriptions of pillarisation. Which makes their actions harder to reconcile with the famous Belgian pacification model.

The subtle equilibrium of power, too, fell by the wayside. The Christian Democrats, in particular, lost ground electorally in Flanders, whilst on the Walloon side the (conservative) Liberals gradually grew stronger. As a result mutual deterrence also disappeared to some extent. Christian Democrats could no longer claim to be the unique and only representatives of Flanders, but they had to engage with electoral rivals within the Flemish community. Little by little the Liberal grouping became stronger on both sides of the language border, but this did not really lead to any clear new balance.

And finally, again in the Nineties, a strict programme of national budgetary reform was implemented, particularly by the then Prime Minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene (a Flemish Christian Democrat). Dehaene made sure that the budgetary deficit was largely eliminated, so that Belgium met all the criteria for membership of the eurozone. However, this cost-cutting process meant in practice that there was much less government manna to hand out. The various parties and pressure groups, then, had far fewer incentives to remain loyal to the system. With fewer goodies to distribute, concluding great historic pacts also loses some of its attraction.

3. The wider horizon

Obviously, many of these developments were not confined to Belgian politics. Often they are general social developments that can be found in other European societies too. But the Belgian political system was particularly vulnerable to these developments. Precisely because the underlying tensions are such a powerful presence in Belgian politics and can in theory erupt at any moment, the pacification model is very heavily biased in favour of stability. Political elites do not necessarily look for the optimal solution, but for one that can bring stability and predictability because they fear what might happen should the system be totally derailed.

However, all Western political systems are confronted with the task of learning to live with an unfamiliar and relatively unpredictable society. There are various reasons for that. To begin with, there is the process of globalisation and enlargement of scale – what happens abroad is becoming more and more important to our own political system. Certainly within the European Union the transnational decision-making level has become dominant, so that the Belgian political elite no longer has the power to push through whatever decisions it wants by itself. There is a trend, then, towards what is called 'multi-level government': political decisions are taken at different levels, and coordinating all those different levels

makes decision-making extremely complex. Precisely because the Belgian level is already relatively fragile, it is difficult for the Belgian political system to adapt to this.

The general social trend towards individualisation also puts pressure on the stability that is so keenly desired. Individual citizens are no longer disposed to follow the instructions of the political elite. This increases the degree of unpredictability – political conflicts are no longer played out along the traditional fault lines, instead they can occur in the most unexpected places. Who could have predicted that a tragic but relatively banal robbery and murder in Brussels' Central Station (in 2006) would lead to protest on a huge scale? The course of these protests is equally unpredictable. These kinds of emotionally driven campaigns blow up suddenly and disappear again just as suddenly. This means that the political system barely has time to react to such flare-ups. The most that can be achieved is some intensive form of crisis communication, but it is hard to reconcile the rapid succession of events with the laborious and above all slow search for a compromise which is typical of pacification democracy.

4. The derailment in 2007-2008

The search for political stability has clearly become much more complex, but still Belgian politics enjoyed a period of relative peace at the start of the 21st century. There were no major incidents and, in addition, the successive Verhofstadt governments (1999-2007) succeeded in staving off demands for further federalisation of some powers. In 1999 the first Verhofstadt government was still unique – for the first time in half a century the Christian Democrats disappeared from the majority and the Socialists and Liberals formed a 'purple' coalition. The first Verhofstadt government worked on a number of issues which could, in principle, have revived the philosophical differences – the liberalization of euthanasia and the introduction of homosexual marriage were pushed through rapidly, making Belgium an international pioneer in that field. But even here the pacification model was not completely abandoned; during the parliamentary process the arguments of the Christian Democrat opposition were also taken into account. But in general it was apparent that the philosophical fault line no longer had a mobilising effect. In contrast to the situation in the United States, homosexual marriage is absolutely not an issue with Belgian public opinion. The current law on euthanasia is also accepted or even supported by the majority of the population.

The 2007 elections, however, put an abrupt end to this relative peace. Despitethmonths of negotiation, no community pact emerged. A great deal has already been written about the causes of this failure, and obviously personal and strategic elements also play a part in it. But if we look at it with a measure of objectivity, we have to ask why the traditional Belgian pacification model does not seem to work in this case. But at the same time some degree of caution is advisable. Although journalists keep breathlessly announcing that this really is a 'historic crisis', we need to remember that in the past, too, it has sometimes taken years for a 'major compromise' to be worked out.

There are indications, however, that decision-making in community matters has become more difficult. The party elites are clearly less able to control their followers. During the negotiating process it really seemed on occasion as if a compromise would be reached, but time after time the negotiators were curbed by their own grass roots (who were often very limited in numbers, but extremely noisy). This lack of leadership was partly the result of a pre-election cartel formed between the Flemish Christian Democrats and the Flemish nationalist party, the N-VA or New Flemish Alliance. The more radical rhetoric of the N-VA sometimes seduced the Christian Democrat representatives as well, so that they no longer heeded their chief negotiators. The party elites' ability to lead was also sometimes thwarted by the presence of the mass media in greater numbers than ever before. Traditionally the great historic pacts of Belgian politics were born in secluded meeting places, preferably in some charming castle in one of the suburbs of Brussels. The press were kept at a safe distance; at most one might hear something at the entrance to the castle grounds when the

top politicians left the negotiating table. This time, however, the ubiquitous mobile phone ensured an endless string of leaks. Even while the negotiations were in progress information was constantly being passed to the press. This then led to further sensational headlines and the associated urge on the part of some politicians to use them to boost their image. Although the chief negotiators repeatedly called for the media leaks to stop, they never really gained control of the process.

The subtle game of checks and balances hardly works any more either. Amongst the Christian Democrats, in particular, the mental breach between Dutch- and French-speakers is almost complete. For example, the Flemish Christian Democrats no longer feel called upon to defend the interests of the Christian education network in the French Community. Flemish politicians, too, concentrate more and more on their own level of government, i.e. the Flemish Community. That means that they are no longer so concerned about the fate of Dutch-speakers in Brussels (some 150,000 people in total, at most 1.5 percent of the whole Belgian population). So the moderating influence of all these balances of power is disappearing. Theoretically this is interesting, because thirty years ago various authors were already predicting that a federal system in which the regional institutions exercised a great many powers autonomously was no more than a halfway house on the road to the break-up of the country's various language communities. The prediction at the time was that the political elites would concentrate more and more on their own communities, and so attach less and less importance to the principle of federal loyalty. To some extent this prediction has proved true, partly because there are no longer any federal parties in Belgium (which is quite exceptional). There is now not a single party that represents the whole country. Each party is elected within its own community and must then ensure that it finds sufficient allies on the other side of the language border to form a federal majority. This is why a number of groups have advocated creating a 'federal constituency', so that politicians could once again win votes across the whole country, and therefore also in both language communities. A final point of difference, moreover, is that the federal budget is structurally insolvent. So there are no more gifts to be handed out. In the past, peace between the communities was often bought by channelling lavish subsidies. In Belgium this is referred to as 'waffle-iron politics', because as we all know a waffle-iron makes exactly the same impression on both sides of the dough. If the Flemings needed money for a new port, the French-speakers automatically got a similar amount for their economic needs. That sort of mechanism no longer works, so there is really no incentive any more to accept a compromise on issues in which one has no vital interest. The result of all these factors, then, is that it has become much more difficult to apply the traditional pacification mechanisms. The question is, however, whether there is an alternative. All the studies clearly show that the presence of Brussels is enormously important to the whole Belgian economy. Brussels is the economic centre, drawing in hundreds of thousands of commuters from both sides of the language border. Brussels cannot be split into a Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking part, so the two communities will have to keep on finding ways of managing that shared economic wealth together. Obviously the old prescriptions for the Belgian model do not work very well any more, but that is not to say that Belgium is likely to fall apart. As Belgians tend to put it, one can easily operate to separate Siamese twins. But if the twins are joined at the head, there is no way they can be separated without fatal consequences.