

Parliamentary Elections in Belgium

13th June 2010

ANALYSIS

1 month before
the poll

A crisis that drags on in increasing bitterness

Early parliamentary elections will take place in Belgium on 13th June next, that is to say one year before the end of the present term in office. This election follows the dissolution of Belgian parliament on 6th May last after the collapse on 22nd April of the government coalition led by Prime Minister Yves Leterme (Flemish Christian Democratic Party, CD&V) which included, apart from the CD&V, the Socialist Party (PS), the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), the Reform Movement (MR) and the Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH). Open VLD indeed chose to leave the government after deciding that the time given to negotiations with regard to the electoral constituency of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde had been exceeded. Its leader Alexander De Croo condemned a «*breach of confidence*». Open VLD's partners in government and political analysts believe that this attitude was governed by electoral considerations. It is supposed that it chose to provoke early general elections because they were increasingly ill at ease within the government coalition and by hardening their stance they were trying to stay their decline in the polls.

The Prime Minister could have replaced Open VLD by the Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A) but Caroline

Gennez, the SP.A chair refused to do this. «*The answer is no! This government is totally adrift and it is impossible to save it,*» she declared comparing the coalition to «*a car that had suffered irreparable damage.*»

The Prime Minister deplored the «*reciprocal intransigence on the part of both the French and Dutch speakers.*» Alexander De Croo said that the organisation of early general elections was necessary so that «*the citizens could have their say.*» The chair of the Socialist Party Elio di Rupo qualified the start of an institutional crisis during the present socio-economic situation as «*scandalous*». The chair of the Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH) Joëlle Milquet, Deputy Prime Minister and Employment Minister criticised «*the lack of any sense of general interest*» on the part of Open VLD.

During the final session in the Chamber of Representatives, an MP from the Flemish far right, Vlaams Belang (VB) ended his speech declaring «*Long live Flanders and Belgium go to hell!*» - he then sang the official regional Flemish anthem, the Vlaamse Leeuw (Flemish Lion).

In June 2007 Yves Leterme was triumphantly elected

with – an absolute record - lead of 800,000 votes in Flanders. No less than nine months were necessary for the Flemish Christian Democrat to be appointed Prime Minister (20th March 2008). At that time he said «*five minutes of political courage*» were necessary to achieve the abolition of the special linguistic rights enjoyed by the French speakers in the Flemish suburb of Brussels. Less than four months later on 14th July 2008 Yves Leterme was forced to resign after failing to have constitutional reform adopted. King Albert II then refused his resignation. On 19th December 2008 he finally left office as Prime Minister when he was suspected of having put pressure on Belgian justice for it to accept a restructuring of the Fortis bank, Belgium's main financial institution. The head of government was replaced on 28th December 2008 by Herman van Rompuy (CD&V). In July 2009 Yves Leterme was appointed Foreign Minister then he replaced Herman Van Rompuy who was appointed President of the European Council on 19th November. He governed until 22nd April 2010 when he was forced to resign again after the collapse of the government coalition he was leading. «*I have a clear conscience,*» he declared as he left office, «*I*

accept responsibility that until now the strategies that have been employed have led to nothing.»

As he resigned the Prime Minister announced that he would not lead the CD&V list during the election on 13th June. *«I put forward Marianne Thyssen to be the uncontested leader of the party during the weeks and months to come – not only as chair of the party but also as N°1 in the elections that are going to take place,»* he indicated. Marianne Thyssen, chair of CD&V since 2008 may become the first woman to govern Belgium if the party wins in Flanders. *«I can tell you that in the Flemish Christian Democratic Party we do not support the end of Belgium but a significant, in-depth reform, we are not a party that pleads for chaos,»* she stressed.

A threat does however weigh over these elections. Indeed in 2003 the Constitutional Court delivered a decision that stipulated that the possibility for French speakers in Flanders to vote for French speaking lists outside of Flanders infringed the a priori intangible linguistic border principle. The judges asked for this issue to be settled before the next general elections (that took place on 10th June 2007). As a result this decision questions any national election resulting in it being declared illegal.

Prime Minister Yves Leterme said on 7th May that early elections on 13th June next were legal but unconstitutional: *«We have to admit that these elections and the law that governs them are unconstitutional, because no solution has been found for the electoral constituency of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde. The elections will therefore be legal but unconstitutional.»* Some mayors of the Flemish communities in the Brussels suburbs have already warned that they will boycott the elections. The constituency of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde elects 22 of the 150 MPs who sit in the Chamber of Representatives, the lower Chamber of Parliament.

The constituency of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde, symbol of disunion.

Lying across the province of Flemish Brabant (Hal-Vilvorde) and the region of Brussels-Capital, the constituency of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde) has 125,000 French-speaking inhabitants who enjoy certain electoral (the

right to vote for French-speaking Brussels candidates in the parliamentary and European elections) and judicial (the right to use French in courts of justice) privileges (granted temporarily). Therefore the Flemish candidates in the parliamentary elections in Flemish Brabant cannot win votes in this part of their province which effectively is an unjust situation.

The Dutch-speakers want the entire Flemish area be run in one language only. The French-speakers on the other hand say that any French-speaker must be able to speak in his/her language where he/she lives. *«A community is based on the principle of territory,»* analyses former Prime Minister (1992-1999) Jean-Luc Dehaene (CD&V). *«The different handling of the constituency of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde and the other constituencies is not justified. The status quo is not possible,»* declared the French speaking President of the Constitutional Court Paul Martens on 25th November last.

The Dutch-speakers want to split the constituency into two: Brussels on the one hand and Hal-Vilvorde on the other. The French-speakers are demanding an exchange of certain guarantees – which the Dutch-speakers are refusing – the maintenance of special electoral rights for the 65,000 people living in the communities close to Brussels and also the right to manage schools and libraries in Flanders themselves.

The Belgian Political System

The Belgian political system is based on a pillar system. Political parties emerged as a result of internal divisions within society, religious divisions (Church/State) primarily and then regional divisions (Walloons/Flemish) and finally social divisions (work/capital, workers/management). The political parties born of these divisions comprise true entities within the kingdom each managing a multitude of organisations (schools, insurance companies etc ...) which take responsibility for the members of the party and their families almost from birth to death. In exchange for their political loyalty the members of these various organisations find work, housing and other various social advantages. For their part the leaders of the different political movements share out fairly the positions available in the civil services. *«Whereas in France the dividing line comes between two socio-economic trends in Belgium*

we are faced with an interlacing of several lines of division,» says Pascal Delwit, political analyst at the Free University in Brussels.

This system worked perfectly for decades before collapsing in the 1970's. In the 80's two new political movements emerged: the ecologists (Ecolo and Agalev in Flanders) and the far right nationalists (Volksunie, Vlaams Blok which became Vlaams Belang, Democratic Front of French speaking inhabitants of Brussels, Walloon Assembly and National Front). These new parties have enjoyed increasing popularity. The Socialist and Christian Democrat Parties which rallied the majority of the electorate for many years now only win votes from a third of the Belgians.

The kingdom of Belgium was founded in 1830 after a merger between the former Austrian Netherlands and the principality of Liège. At that time although a majority of the population spoke Dutch the nobility and the bourgeoisie spoke French. The Dutch speakers are mostly Protestant (Calvinist) and the French speakers, Catholics. The domination by the French speakers lasted over a century before Wallonia began to decline and Flanders started to flourish economically in the 1960's. Tension between the communities led to several constitutional reforms (1970, 1980, 1988-1989, 1993 and 2001) which over the years have transformed Belgium into a complex federal State. Indeed the country has three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital) and three linguistic communities (French, Dutch and German speaking) which cannot overlap. Hence the Flemish community brings together the Dutch speakers of Flanders and Brussels, the Walloon community rallies the French speakers of Wallonia and Brussels and the German speaking community comprises the German speakers living on the German border, i.e. around 70,000 people.

In 1933 the first Article of the Fundamental Law stipulated that Belgium had ceased to be a single unit State. New federal competences were transferred over to the regions which were already responsible for education, culture, social policy, housing, environment and the economy (external trade, agriculture) and the Regional Parliaments became institutions that were elected by direct universal suffrage. Finally the reform in 2001

provided the regions with fiscal autonomy. 70% of the Federal State's budget is distributed amongst the regions.

As a result of these developments Belgium no longer has any national political parties, which only enhances both linguistic and institutional differences. The political arena comprises French speakers in Wallonia, Dutch speakers in Flanders; the French and Dutch speakers now only mix in the region of Brussels-Capital. In Belgium therefore the electoral results are never calculated nationally but always regionally. The German speaking community has asked for the creation of a new region on the model of Brussels-Capital arguing that it is the only community in Belgium that does not have any constitutive autonomy thereby claiming a guarantee of representation of at least two MPs in the Federal Parliament.

The Flemish and the Walloons no longer share any national institutions apart from the royal family, the flag, justice and the army. They watch different TV channels, go to different schools and vote for different parties.

Parliament is bicameral. The Chamber of Representatives comprises 150 MPs; the Senate comprises 71 members 40 of whom are elected by direct universal suffrage within three constituencies: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde (25 by the Dutch speaking college and 15 by the French speaking college), 21 are elected by the Parliaments of the Communities (Flemish Council and the Council of the French Community) and 10 are appointed by co-optation. The Senate also comprises ex officio senators: children of the King aged 18 and over and who have been sworn in as Senators. The dissolution of the Chamber of Representatives automatically leads to the dissolution of the Senate, therefore the Belgians will be voting on 13th June to renew both Chambers of Parliament.

The general elections take place every four years according to a system of integral proportional representation corresponding to the highest average (the Hondt system) within 11 electoral districts. The electorate can vote for all the members on a list, for one or several candidates on a list, for one or several replacement candidates on a list and even for candidates and replacement candidates.

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Each political party has to win a minimum of 5% of the vote in an electoral district to win a seat in Parliament. Since 2002 each party has to present lists comprising, to the nearest candidate, as many women as men. In addition to this the two leading candidates on each list cannot be of the same sex. IN addition to this since 2007 it has been forbidden to stand both for the Chamber of Representatives and for the Senate. The treatment of the small parties by the media is also a subject of dispute within the kingdom since appearances on TV channels are proportional to the results achieved by the parties in the last elections

It is obligatory to vote in Belgium and abstainers risk a warning (if they abstain for the first time) or a fine of 27.50 to 55 € set by the police judge. This sum may rise to 137.50 € if the offence is repeated.

11 political parties are represented in the Chamber of Representatives:

- the Flemish Christian Democratic Party (CD&V), led by Marianne Thyssen lies to the centre of the political scale. In June 2007 the party allied itself with the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a nationalist party that was born after the dissolution on 19th September of the Flemish regionalist party Volksunie, chaired by Bart de Wever. The two parties separated in September 2008. Together they have 30 MPs;

- the Reform Movement (MR) is led by Didier Reynders, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Institutional Reform; it has 23 MPs;

- the Vlaams Belang (VB), a Flemish far right organisation chaired by Bruno Valkeniers; it has 17 MPs;

- the Liberals and Flemish Democrats (Open VLD), is led by Alexander de Croo; 18 seats;

- the Socialist Party (PS), led by the Burgermeister of Mons, Elio di Rupo, with 20 seats;

- the Socialist-Spirit Party (SP.A-Spirit), led by Caroline Gennez, it has 14 seats;

- the Humanist Democrat Centre (CDH), is led by former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Employment and Equal Opportunities responsible for the Migration and Asylum Policy Joëlle Milquet, with 10 MPs;

- Ecolo, (Confederate Ecologists for the Organisation of Original Struggle) co-led by Jean-Michel Javaux and Sarah Turine with 8 seats;

- the Jean-Marie Dedecker list, a nationalist party led by the former trainer of the Belgian national judo team (1981-2000) who is also an MEP, with 5 MPs;

- Groen! chair by Wouter Van Besien, with 4 seats;

- the French National Front (FN), a Walloon far right movement founded by Daniel Féret has 1 seat;

Can Belgium survive?

«Belgium was created in 1830 and at the time was provided with an official language, French, but it is now dominated by a Dutch speaking majority. After having fought for equal rights the latter won the fight for federalism which is seen in Flanders as the means to undertake autonomous policies and at the same time take control federally of economic policies that favour the Dutch speaking part of the country. Long time the leading power, the cradle of the country's industrial development until 1960's, Wallonia also accepted and even demanded federalism - because it seemed probable that this would guarantee its recovery and that it would have autonomous institutions. It was also done to distinguish itself from a French speaking elite in Brussels which even today is accused of having let Wallonia down, of having left it to its demise and for having tolerated the «Flemish-ization» of the national institutions (...). An extended political crisis, for example if Belgium became ungovernable, may lead us to conclude that it would be

better to separate,» wrote political expert Vincent de Coorebyter in November 2007.

For the last seven years the Dutch-speakers have been fighting for a State reform which according to the French-speakers would bring the future of Belgium into question whilst the French-speakers are fighting to maintain the present federal model. After the parliamentary election the Dutch-speakers will certainly ask for the transfer of additional power from the State over to the regions and a redistribution of federal competences to the benefit of the latter. Recently the French-speakers have said they are ready to debate on condition that national social security is not included.

Also over the last seven years numerous nationalist parties have been founded: the New Flemish Alliance and the Jean-Marie Dedecker List which demand the creation of a confederate Belgium in which the Belgian state would gradually be deprived of all of its powers; there is also the Vlaams Belang which supports the independence of Flanders and calls for the immediate dissolution of Belgium as a country. The traditional parties have also become more extreme. *«On the Flemish side only one party is still prepared to dialogue with the French-speakers, the Christian Democratic Party. The others have lost all patience,»* stressed outgoing Prime Minister Yves Leterme.

As for the Dutch-speakers the CD&V and Open VLD have already announced that they will not take part in a government coalition if the French-speakers do not commit in favour of institutional reform. The French-speakers do not present a united front on this.

«Contrary to the previous crises this time round it is impossible to plan the next stage. Since the start of the first compromises between the Flemish and Walloons in the 1960's each time there has been a kind of modus vivendi which meant that after the drama there would be agreement. This time however we have entered a stage after which we cannot guarantee that even the institutions will be run on a federal level. In short no one in Flanders wants a strong Belgium. But there are different degrees in this ranging from the hard and fast autonomists to the supporters of a confederate State. Amongst the French-speakers however there is clearly nostalgia about «old» Belgium and Belgian identity,» analyses Benoît Rihoux, political scientist at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve.

During the regional elections that took place on 7th June 2009, the Socialist Party (PS) managed to retain its lead position in Wallonia with 32.77%, ahead of the Reform Movement (MR) which suffered a setback winning 23.41% of the vote. Ecolo made significant progress (18.54% of vote). In Brussels the PS came first within the French linguistic college with 33.35% of the vote just ahead of the MR which won 32.49% of the vote. Within the Dutch college Open VLD won 23.07% ahead of the SP.A, 19.46%, Vlaams Belang and the CD&V which won 17.51% and 14.85% respectively.

In Flanders the political landscape is dispersed and has grown more radical with the nationalist parties confirming their position. The CD&V dominated the elections with 23.5% of the vote. Open VLD suffered a dramatic defeat achieving its worst result ever: 14.8% of the vote. The SP.A also recorded a decline with 15.2% of the vote just ahead of the New Flemish Alliance, 13.06% of the vote. Vlaams Belang won 15.3% of the vote, (-8.7 points in comparison with the regional elections on 13th June 2004).

The parliamentary elections on 13th June next, which do not interest the Belgians greatly, are due to be another time for argument between the Dutch and French speakers. In no way do they represent a guarantee of settlement and do not seem to be able to provide new opportunities for dialogue between the two sides. Also beyond the country's domestic problems which come at a bad time, Belgium is due to succeed Sweden as head of the Council of the European Union on 1st July. *«If the formation of a new government drags on it will not endanger the Belgian Presidency of the EU. We can act in lieu of the Belgian government as and when events occur,»* said Yves Leterme.

According to a poll by Dedicated Research, published on 5th May the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) is due to win in Flanders with 22.9% ahead of the CD&V which is due to win 18.9% of the vote, Open VLD, 14.8%, SP.A, 14.2%, Vlaams Belang 12.5% and the Jean-Marie Decker List 3.9%. In Wallonia the PS is due to win 32.5%, followed by MR (21.1%), CDH (18.2%), Ecolo (17.6%) and the Front National (2.9%). In Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde the MR is due to win with 22.9% of the vote against 11.5% for the PS, 8.6% for Ecolo and 7.3% for CDH.

Reminder of the parliamentary election results of 10th June 2007 in Belgium

Chamber of Representatives

Turnout: 91% (it is obligatory to vote in Belgium)

Political Parties	N° of votes won	% of votes won	N° of seats won
Flemish Democratic Christian –New Flemish Alliance (CD&V-N-VA)	1 234 950	18.51	30
Reform Movement (MR)	835 073	12.52	23
Vlaams Belang (VB)	799 844	11.99	17
Flemish Liberal and Democrats (Open VLD)	789 445	11.83	18
Socialist Party (PS)	724 787	10.86	20
Socialist Party-Spirit (SP.A-Spirit)	684 390	10.26	14
Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH)	404 077	6.06	10
Ecolo	340 378	5.10	8
Jean-Marie Dedecker List	268,648	4.03	5
Green!	265 828	3.98	4
Front national (FN)	131 385	1.97	1

Source : Federal Portal of Belgium (<http://elections2007.belgium.be/fr/index.html>)

Senate

Turnout: 91.08% (it is obligatory to vote in Belgium)

Political Parties	N° of votes won	% of votes won	N° of seats won
Flemish Democratic Christian –New Flemish Alliance (CD&V-N-VA)	1 287 389	19.42	9
Reform Movement (MR)	815 755	12.31	6
Vlaams Belang (VB)	787 782	11.89	5
Flemish Liberal and Democrats (Open VLD)	821 980	12.40	5
Socialist Party (PS)	678 812	10.24	4
Socialist Party-Spirit (SP.A-Spirit)	665 342	10.04	4
Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH)	390 852	5.90	2
Ecolo	385 466	5.82	2
Jean-Marie Dedecker List	223 992	3.38	1
Green!	241 151	3.64	1
Front national (FN)	150 461	2.27	1

Source : Portail fédéral de la Belgique (<http://elections2007.belgium.be/fr/index.html>)

D-7
7 days before
the poll

07

A round up one week before the election

On 13th June the Belgians are being called to ballot for the early parliamentary elections that appear to be turning into a real referendum on the country's future.

The election follows the decision of the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD) to leave the government led by Prime Minister Yves Leterme (Flemish Christian Democratic Party, CD&V). Open VLD believed that the time given to negotiations over the electoral district of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde had run out. Covering the border between the province of Brabant-Hal-Vilvorde and Brussels Capital, the district of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde is home to 125,000 French speakers who enjoy certain (temporary) electoral (right to vote in Brussels for French speaking candidates in the parliamentary and European elections) and legal (right to use French to defend themselves in the courts of justice) privileges.

2,801 candidates from 132 lists are standing in the election for the Chamber of Representatives, the lower Chamber in Parliament and 620 candidates representing 21 lists are standing in the senatorial elections. Belgians living abroad had until 17th May to register on the electoral rolls. 43% chose to vote on the day of the parliamentary election at their embassy or consulate 35% will vote by post.

Some burgermeisters from the district of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde are refusing to organise the election and will boycott it. Others such as those in Vilvorde, Merchtem, Steenokkerzel and Galmaarden will organise it but have chosen not to put any posters up for the French speaking parties. The Flemish Home Minister, Geert Bourgeois said he fully understood the Flemish burgermeisters who are refusing to organise the elections and said they would not be sanctioned.

The "small" parties were surprised by the organisation of these early elections and have had very little time to rally the number of signatures necessary to run. Around twenty will be present however, more in Wallonia than in Flanders. The Labour Party of Belgium-Partij van de Arbeid van België (PTB-PVDA) is the only one to have lists in all of the country's constituencies. It is the only one to put forward French speakers in Flanders and Flemish speakers in Wallonia thereby showing its determination to see Belgium become a federal constituency.

A debate bringing together all of the Belgian parties was due to be organised on 30th May and broadcast on

two state TV channels: the RTBF and the VRT. However the organisers did not manage to agree on the place to give to the far right. Indeed the Vlaams Belang (VB) is never invited to the RTBF but it always takes part in VRT programmes. The debate was due to be pre-recorded to avoid any xenophobic slips on the part of the Vlaams Belang. It is also reported that the French speaking parties would not debate with the far right. But the Reform Movement leader (MR), Didier Reyniers refused this compromise. This debate was to be the first since 1981 and a chance for Belgians to compare the programmes of all of the parties since the country has not had a national party for the last 30 years.

The reform of the State features at the heart of the campaign. The Federal State manages social security but also public finances and the funding of the regions (90%), justice, defence and foreign affairs. It is also in charge of a major part of public health and transport (except for regional transport and roads), the immigration policy and research. The regions for their part are responsible for culture, education, languages, civil engineering and also in part, employment. The Flemish parties support a confederation that would limit the competences of the Federal State and in which the regions would have economic power. The French parties are reticent but have understood over the last few years that they could not permanently impede negotiations. They say they are ready to speak with their Flemish counterparts on several conditions, notably with regard to the upkeep of national social security.

"The New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) has emerged at a

time when there is need for a reform of the State, and is the only party that can really force this agreement," declared Jean-Benoît Pilet, a political scientist from the Free University of Brussels. Its leader, Bart de Wever believes, *"federalism is just a euphemism for a country that is slowly collapsing."* The N-VA supports a confederate model that transfers socio-economic policy over to federated entities, which also features in the programmes put forward by the CD&V and Open VLD. *"The Flemish must refuse to form a federal government before being guaranteed Copernican reform,"* repeats Bart de Wever. He says he is also prepared to accept the appointment of a French speaking Prime Minister if a real reform of the State is guaranteed.

Bart de Wever has said that he is not standing for this post himself. *"I am interested in the creation of new structures, not in the position of Head of Government,"* he said.

The N-VA wants to do away with the funding law which governs relations between the Federal State and the regions. *"Brussels has to co-managed and have the competence of a town not that of a country. Brussels is over financed and is not effective."* The party wants to turn the capital into a European town, without its own status and co-managed by the two communities. It is fighting to split the social security system, which is unacceptable for the French speakers and which the other Flemish speaking parties also do not agree with.

"If the N-VA is below 20% on 13th June we shall make an agreement without it but if it is the main winner then it will become inevitable," stresses Jean-Benoît Pilet. It has to be said that Bart de Wever has already won his wager by making the NV-A the central player in Belgian political life. An anti-establishment candidate he has succeeded in federating those disappointed by politics and the moderates who want to see progress on institutional issues. He has therefore managed to widen his base of independents without losing his traditional electorate. In addition to this and contrary to the Vlaams Belang leader (VB) he is not suspected of xenophobia and stands as a respectable man with whom it is possible to debate. *"Without Bart de Wever, the N-VA would*

practically no longer exist," says Dave Sinardet, political scientist from the University of Anvers.

Former N-VA ally, the CD&V led by Yves Leterme is questioning the N-VA's real goals which he suspects of separatism. The CD&V also supports an in-depth reform of the State. *"The person who wants Belgium to progress has to understand that the status quo is not good for our country,"* declared Yves Leterme. The outgoing Head of State believes it a victory that the French speaking parties now accept *"in words at least"* a reform of the State. *"We want Flanders to have greater power in order to manage things better on a regional and federal level,"* he repeats. The CD&V is undertaking a campaign under the banner of *"Nooit opgeven"* (Never give up).

Open VLD also supports a confederate model and hopes that the regions will have greater competence and more financial responsibilities. *"It is not logical that a region has no responsibility for example with regard to the pensions of its civil servants,"* declared their leader Alexander De Croo. *"The reform of the State is a final point, not a stage to split the country as some Flemish parties would like to do. We do not want this. I want Belgium to continue to exist because it gives us prosperity but to do that the country has to work. For the time being we are in stalemate,"* he added. Mr De Croo would like to *"transform the old factory of Belgium into three dynamic SME's that work for the same holding."*

Alexander De Croo wants the next government to be formed rapidly after the elections. *"In order not to make the same mistakes as in 2007, a prior agreement on community issues is required before the establishment of the government,"* he said. Open VLD rejects accusations that blame it for the fall of the government. *"Those really responsible for the collapse of the government are the parties at the table who made no effort to respect their commitments. We have been trying for three years in every possible manner to solve the problem of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde, it is clear than another year was going to solve nothing,"* indicates Mr de Croo.

Elio di Rupio's socialists say they are ready to *"make a step towards the north of the country"* and wants to ask his Flemish colleagues *"to make a step towards*

us". "We are ready for greater competence in the regions according to an idea of homogeneity and efficiency. We were not far from an agreement and the Flemish liberal leader failed completely. He put fuel into the N-VA and it took off," accuses the French-speaking socialist. "Naively I believe that Bart de Wever wants agreement, we have to know if he can sell it to his base," said Johan Vande Lanotte, former chair of the Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A) who also said that he was not running for Prime Minister.

"The guarantee of respect," this is the slogan chosen by the Reform Movement (MR) in this campaign. "I believe that we shall have a strong Belgium once again in the years to come if we accept political reform," declared its leader Didier Reynders. There are three reforms necessary to achieve this: a change over to a majority form of election, the grouping of elections (national and regional) and finally the establishment of a federal constituency. "This will prevent the nationalists campaigning in Flanders and who never have to explain what they want to Liege and Charleroi," declared Didier Reynders. The MR supports a transfer of competence from the State to the regions but on condition that a strong federal power is maintained. He says he does not know what a confederate model is. "If Bart de Wever has a separatist project in mind, it is his problem. But it will be without me," declared Didier Reynders who said he was ready to negotiate with the N-VA leader if the latter accepted the creation of a federal constituency.

The outgoing Development Minister Charles Michel (MR) sees the solution to the problem set by Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde in the enlargement of Brussels. In his opinion Bart de Wever is "a naive dreamer and lacks realism," but he is also "very dangerous". "The Flemish must see that separatism is synonymous to suicide for Flanders on an economic and political level," he stressed. This is also the opinion of Paul de Grauwe, Professor of Economy at the University of Louvain who maintains that "the Flemish parties are deluding themselves if they think that by gaining greater autonomy they will have fantastic economic effects. The cost of the transaction may even be rather high," he stressed.

Charles Michel said he supported alternation between the Flemish and Walloons in the post of Prime Minister.

"Linguistic alternation of the Head of State would be a good solution, respectful of both communities. It is not normal that since Edmond Leburton (1973-1974) there has not been one Belgian Prime Minister from Wallonia," he said. Increasingly the Flemish believe that a French speaking Head of Government may contribute to reforming the State.

The Greens are the only political force to stand together in the elections on 13th June. "Withdrawal into an identity shell has never been part of the ecologists' DNA" said Jean-Michel Javaux, co-chair of Ecolo with Sarah Turine. Groen in Flanders and Ecolo in Wallonia have been working together for nearly 30 years and together have delivered 156 joint proposals in the Chamber of Representatives.

Although the reform of the State is at the heart of the electoral campaign the Belgians cannot really forget their socio-economic problems. Belgium is undergoing a serious crisis; the country's public debt totals 333 billion € and will soon lie at 100% of the GDP; the budgetary deficit is due to total 20 billion € in 2010 and unemployment is increasing in Flanders where 6.7% of the working population is affected (it is declining in Wallonia where it still totals 13.7%). The latter region also has more foreign investments than the north notably because of the development plan of which it is the beneficiary.

The Socialist Party has made employment and investments its priority. It wants greater control over prices, the establishment of a Marshall Plan for SME's, regulations on speculative funds and increased work towards the fight against tax fraud. The PS also wants to raise retirement pensions by 15% to reach 1,150 € per month for anyone who has worked full time (the amount is 1,004 € at present). "We shall raise a tax immediately on those whose fortune totals 1,250 million € exterior to their home and any commercial activity," indicated the Socialist leader. For its part the Flemish Socialist leader led by Caroline Gennez supports the establishment of a tax on major fortunes.

The CD&V is putting forward a New Deal that is based on four pillars: reform of the State, rigorous economic management, a healthy budget and an effective government. It also wants to extend working time and

"use the social security as a means for socio-economic recovery".

The Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH) led by Deputy Prime Minister and Employment and Equal Opportunities Minister, responsible for Migration and Asylum Policy, Joëlle Milquet supports the establishment of a national pact for employment and economic activity based on sustainable growth. The CDH wants to support green, white (professions providing help to people), intelligent (in sectors of innovation and research) employment. It is fighting for a modification of the tax system, exemption from tax on revenues of up to 950 € per month and an increase of fiscal pressure with regard to pollutant behaviour likewise on capital. The MR wants to decrease labour costs, for example by reducing costs of the first three work places in a company (abolition of employers' contributions). Charles Michel is also pleading in favour of a rise in retirement pensions that he wants to bring up to 60% to 70% of the total of the last salary (in comparison with 40% at present) and for an increase on the minimum taxable income. *"Putting value on work rather than on unemployment this is what makes us different from the Socialist Party,"* stressed Didier Reynders. In his opinion *"more than ever there is a choice between two parties, the Socialist Party and the Reform Movement. I say two because Ecolo and the Humanist Democratic Centre chose the Socialist Party over the last few years."*

Open VLD is criticising the cheap promises made by the parties. *"In Greece and Spain we can see how disastrous the artistic policy of the socialists has been. People should know what politicians intend to do with their taxes,"* says their leader Alexander de Croo. *"Do we choose politicians who refuse to put the government on a diet and who continue to look for money in the pockets of those who work without counting, who have bought a house and who have little savings or do we choose the project of the future put forward by the Flemish Liberals and Democrats who are offering to revive a declining government?"* he added. He then said *"in the absence of State reform there will be no solution to economic and social problems."* Alexander de Croo criticised the complicity which the Socialist and Christian Democrats have demonstrated. *"Both men had to hold back in order not to kiss each other in the end,"* he

declared commenting the debate in which Johan Vande Lanotte and Yves Leterme faced each other.

Groen wants to introduce a wealth tax that should bring in 7.5 billion €. The Greens say that this measure would increase the taxes of only 15% of the wealthiest tax payers. The party chaired by Wouter Van Besien is pleading in favour of a change over from costs that weigh heavily on labour to an environmental tax and says that this plan would create 125,000 jobs most of which would be the result of a reduction in costs. The ecologist party is promising a return to national budgetary balance in 2015.

Finally the N-VA wants to decrease taxes on the lowest salaries by around 2 billion €, a measure that might bring in 14 to 15 billion € by 2015 since it will lead to the creation of thousands of jobs.

The President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso declared that he was confident in Belgium's ability to ensure the Presidency of the European Union as from 1st July next. *"The European project is not determined by electoral dates of such and such a country. And also in Belgium we have had the opportunity of having a major consensus on Europe. There is maybe a different political pace domestically in Belgium but this cannot damage the demands made by the Presidency because if there is diplomacy, one administration and one political class that knows Europe well it is that of Belgium. I am totally confident,"* he said. *"There cannot be any doubt about the Belgians ability to assume their responsibilities,"* indicated the outgoing Prime Minister Yves Leterme.

Nearly three quarters of the Belgians (79%) say they are ready to go to vote on 13th June. 10% say they will vote blank in Wallonia and Brussels, a much higher figure than the percentages traditionally recorded and which bear witness to the confusion of a great number of Belgians.

A recent poll by Professor Mark Hooghe showed that the end of obligatory voting, desired by 48% of Belgians according to the polls, would not change the struggle within the political classes. Some political parties would benefit more than others, notably the CDH and Ecolo in Wallonia and Open VLD and N-VA in Flanders. However Elio di Rupo's Socialist Party and the Vlaams

Belang would be the main losers of such a measure. One of the main stakes in the election on 13th June is to see whether the moderate Flemish parties will be able to prevent the N-VA from entering government.

The latest poll by TNS-Dimarsco credits the N-VA with 25.2% of the vote followed by the CD&V 19%, Open

VLD 13.9%, Vlaams Belang 11.5%, Groen 8.2% and the nationalist party led by Jean-Marie Dedecker 6.2% within the Dutch speaking electoral college. Within the French speaking college the PS is due to come out ahead with 33% followed by MR 20.4%, Ecolo 17.6% and the CDH 17%.

Victory for the Flemish Separatists in the Belgian Parliamentary Elections

RESULTS

The New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) led by Bart de Wever won the general elections in Belgium on 13th June. The N-VA won 18.65% of the vote and 28 seats in the Chamber of Representatives; it won 20.64% of the vote and 9 seats in the Senate. This is an unprecedented result. The best score achieved today by a separatist party was that won by the Volksunie (VU) in 1971 with 11.1% of the vote.

The N-VA's excellent result is to the detriment of the Flemish Democratic Christian Party (CD&V) led by outgoing Prime Minister Yves Leterme who won 11.64% of the vote (17 MPs) and 10.53% of the vote (9 Senators), and the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD) led by Alexander de Croo, which won 8.82% of the vote (13 MPs) and 8.18% of the vote (3 Senators). The Flemish Socialist Party (SPA) led by Caroline Gennez won 9.80% of the votes (13 MPs) and 9.88% (4 Senators) whilst the ecologists of Groen won 4.54% of the vote (5 MPs) and 3.87% (1 Senator); the far right Vlaams Belang (VB) 8.36% of the vote (11 MPs) and 8.08% of the vote (3 Senators). Finally Jean-Marie Dedecker List won 2.45% of the vote and 1 MP (2.10% of the vote and no seats in the Senate). If the votes of the N-VA, Vlaams Belang and the DeDecker List are added together the parties promoting the independence of Flanders represent 44.1% of the Flemish electorate.

Elio di Rupio's Socialist Party (PS) is the winner of the general elections in Wallonia where it won 11.43 % of the vote and 25 seats in the Chamber of Representatives and 12.24% of the vote and 7 seats in the Senate. It has become the leading French-speaking force. The Reform Movement (MR) led by Didier Reynders declined with 8.92% of the vote (18 MPs) and 8.81% of the vote (5 Senators), Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH) led by Joëlle Milquet won 5.31% of the vote (11 MPs) and 4.95% of the vote (2 Senators) ahead of the Greens of Ecolo who

won 4.55% of the vote (8 MPs) and 5.28% of the vote (2 Senators).

Turnout in Belgium, where it is obligatory to vote, was however not very high. It totalled 89.22% for the Chamber of Representative's election and 89.21% for the Senate.

"These are extraordinary results. The Flemish have voted for change, we shall not disappoint them. The State must be reformed," declared N-VA leader, Bart de Wever on the announcement of the results. He called for a reform of the institutions to give greater autonomy to Flanders in both social and economic areas – simultaneously he tried to reassure those who find his programme worrying. *"It is not the end of the country, it is a development, Belgium will split into two full democracies. We have to adapt to a reality that already exists,"* he said saying that Flanders' independence was not his immediate claim.

Socialist leader Elio di Rupio acknowledged that the Flemish electorate had sent out a *"strong message"* in support of greater regional autonomy. *"A great majority of the Flemish population clearly wants our country to develop on an institutional level. Attention has to be paid to this message. The Socialist Party has always been ready for a reform of the State,"* he stressed calling on French-speakers to *"make a step towards the representatives of the north and to have the courage to come to an agreement,"* concluding he said *"It is up to the Flemish parties to decide which men and women they want to put at the*

negotiation table. We shall soon see if there is any desire to reach a compromise. If it is not the case the situation will then be a different one."

"*It is a political tidal wave,*" declared Steve Stevaert, member of the Flemish Socialist Party. The triumph of the Flemish nationalists creates "*a situation that will be a problem for the country,*" believes MR chair, Didier Reynnders.

Viewing the results of the parliamentary elections two personalities stand out and should play key-roles in the near future: the leaders of N-VA, victorious in Flanders and the French-speaking Socialist Party. The result should lead Bart de Wever to take on federal responsibilities and stand for the position of Prime Minister but he has said on several occasions that he was not interested in this function. He also said that he was prepared to leave the place to Elio di Rupio. Paradoxically the latter may therefore become the first Walloon head of Government since Edmond Leburton (1973-1974). "*It is a sign of acknowledgement sent out to the French speakers who have not had a Prime Minister since 1974. It is also a way of showing that he (Bart de Wever) only has eyes for Flanders,*" analyses Marc Uyttendaele, professor at the Free University of Brussels; "*In any case it is clear that the climate is not right to achieve the split in the country he would like. In fact he is terrified by the idea of having to assume his position. He is a tribune, an agitator. He is the antithesis of the political leader. He is not a Statesman. It is very difficult to pass from the political music-hall to the austerity of ministerial office ..."*

Aged 39 Bart de Wever is an historian. He was elected MP to the Flemish Parliament in 2004 (re-elected in 2007) and became a federal MP on 10th June 2007. The most popular politician in Flanders he is promoting confederalism which he sees as a step towards the full independence of Flanders: "*we want to go step by step, not with a revolution, we do not want a grand separation evening. My goal is for Belgium to disappear without anyone noticing it, that it evaporates. With Flanders and Wallonia we already have two states that function each with its own Parliament and government. In Brussels the Prime Minister only now chairs over a diplomatic conference. The process must be allowed to move towards its com-*

pletion."

Born in 1951 Elio di Rupio has a doctorate in science. Elected as a town councillor in 1982 he then became a MP in 1987 and then Senator in 1991. The following year he was appointed Education Minister for the French Community then he took over audiovisual issues. In 1994, Elio Di Rupo became Deputy Prime Minister of the federal government and Communication and Public Businesses Minister. He then was responsible for the Economy, Telecommunications and Foreign Trade. In 1999, he became Minister-President of Wallonia a position he left rapidly after being elected head of the PS. Burgermeister of Mons he became Minister President of Wallonia in 2005, a post he gave up again in June 2007 in order to remain at the head of the PS.

Far from solving the crisis the election result may create an even greater divide within the Belgian political classes and worsen the confidence crisis between the Dutch and the French speakers. The first task for the future government will be to settle the issue of the electoral district of Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde which sits across the province of Flemish Brabant (Hal-Vilvorde) and the region of Brussels-Capital which the Dutch speakers would like to split in two: Brussels and Hal-Vilvorde. Moreover the country is now divided politically between Flanders that is firmly set on the right and Wallonia where the socialists predominate. Finally if Belgium, which will take over the Presidency of the Council of the European from Spain on 1st July, takes on its job without any major problem, the instability and deep crisis it has been experiencing for the last several years may damage the country's image.

General Elections Results 13th June 2010 in Belgium

Chamber of Representatives

Turnout: 89.22% (it is obligatory to vote in Belgium)

Political Parties	N° of votes won	% of votes won	N° of seats won
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	962 982	18.65	28
Flemish Democratic Christian Party (CD&V)	600 818	11.64	17
Reform Movement (MR)	460 796	8.92	18
Vlaams Belang (VB)	431 577	8.36	11
Flemish Liberal and Democrats (Open VLD)	455 622	8.82	13
Socialist Party (PS)	590 112	11.43	25
Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A)	505 897	9.80	13
Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH)	274 374	5.31	10
Ecolo	235 050	4.55	8
Jean-Marie Dedecker List	126 475	2.45	1
Groen!	234 440	4.54	5
Others	285 394	5.53	0

Source : Internet Site Federal Portal of Belgium http://elections2010.belgium.be/fr/cha/results/results_tab_CKR00000.html

Senate

Turnout: 89.21% (it is obligatory to vote in Belgium)

Political Parties	N° of votes won	% of votes won	N° of seats won
New Flemish Alliance (N-VA)	1 268 894	19.61	9
Flemish Democratic Christian Party (CD&V)	646 371	9.99	4
Reform Movement (MR)	599 618	9.27	4
Vlaams Belang (VB)	491 519	7.60	3
Flemish Liberal and Democrats (Open VLD)	533 171	8.24	4
Socialist Party (PS)	880 828	13.62	7
Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A)	613 091	9.48	4
Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH)	331 870	5.13	2
Ecolo	353 111	5.46	2
Jean-Marie Dedecker List	130 777	2.02	0
Groen!	251 605	3.89	1
Others	368 449	5.69	0

Source : Internet Site Federal Portal of Belgium http://elections2010.belgium.be/fr/sen/results/results_tab_SER00000.html

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