

Political Culture in Belgium

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In his address on the occasion of the Constitution Day celebrations on 21 July 1987, King Boudewijn revealed that he had found it difficult to explain to foreigners that, even during the six months of Belgian presidency of the European Community, the Government had been under constant and considerable pressure concerning the position of a burgomaster of a village of hardly four thousand inhabitants. We can, of course, only guess at the impression produced by the king's analysis. I propose to seek the explanation for such apparent anomalies in what may be called the political culture of the country. This concept refers to the whole body of unwritten rules, procedures, attitudes and practices considered normal within a political system. For alongside the formal structures of political life, like parliament, government, the constitution, and various regulations, political culture seems a necessary complement to a right understanding of the ongoing conflicts. I shall deal mainly with events at the national level during the 1970s and 1980s.

THE DAILY LIFE OF AN MP

The Belgian citizen is represented by 175 senators and 212 members of the Second Chamber at a rate of one MP to 24,000 inhabitants, whereas in the Netherlands the proportion is one to 80,000. It might seem that the Belgian citizen is much closer to those elected, and might therefore have a firmer control over the authorities. In a way, this may well be the case. A Belgian MP devotes on average twenty hours each month to interviews in his constituency. Each year he receives about three thousand demands for intervention from (poten-

tial) electors. Obviously, the inquiries and personal contacts necessary for the solution of these problems occupy most of our MP's time. What kind of problems is he dealing with? Every conceivable and inconceivable one. All those areas in which a modern impersonal bureaucracy erects barriers between the individual and his aspirations are covered by the gentle and concerned care of the 'local' MP. A place in a home for the elderly, where a long waiting list demotivates all regular applicants; a posting to a better, nearby garrison for a young conscript soldier; rapid and advantageous sorting out of a pension; a nomination or a promotion in the civil service; the filling-in of tax forms: in all cases the MP lends a sympathetic ear; he often does so in a local bar, taking notes, drinking beer and generously offering to stand his round, shaking hands and promising to do his best. In the months before elections, this kind of 'social service' is somewhat more prominent, but in fact it goes on all the time. Politicians with a good social service performance receive many thousands of preference votes, which make them both interesting for and powerful within their party. In small towns, most votes are won by the candidate offering the best and most successful social service; his party allegiance is of much less importance.¹

This way of maintaining contacts between the electorate and MPs can be considered a positive benefit in that contacts are frequent and, indeed, often even personal. Politicians devote most of their time to these activities, and they clearly offer the best chances for electoral gains. They keep careful track of their contacts and know how to use them during their electoral campaigns. It is clear that a party in office offers better opportunities for the fulfilment of the elector's wishes than an opposition party. The other side of the coin, however, is that the Parliament building itself is generally empty. The electoral regulations favour candidates who look after their constituencies, providing new public buildings and roads, favouring companies and persons in that region, rather than those who see their task as legislating and controlling government in Brussels. In any case decision-making takes place not in Parliament, but in small committees of varying composition. If an ordinary MP comes to Brussels, it is on business with the civil service for his constituency, or for the final votes where he just follows the broad rule: yes, if the party is in government; no, if it is in opposition.

The Belgian Parliament, indeed, is less a place for discussing and amending the various political projects than is the Dutch one. In

Brussels, differing coalitions for differing items of legislation, such as frequently occur in The Hague, are quite unthinkable and would immediately lead to a 'vote of confidence', imposing a rigid discipline on the parties. Perhaps the larger dimensions and the theatrical style of the House add to the greater distance between the political blocs, who often shout and become abusive. Fighting, even bloodshed, is not unknown, and most recently occurred in 1987. None of these attitudes have ever been seen in the Binnenhof in The Hague, where every word is carefully weighed and usually read from a script. In Brussels the style of rhetoric recalls Latin models. The fact that for three and a half of the last six and a half years (1981 to mid 1987) the governments obtained 'exceptional prerogatives' contributed more than ever to the reduction of Parliament to an applause machine in which opposition is not heard – or not listened to – and in which the government parties are absolutely docile.²

So there are many reasons for an MP to consider social service in and for his constituency as his primary task. Gathering a high score of preferential votes may eventually strengthen his position within his party to the point where he may become a minister and obtain real personal power. The Belgian MP can thus be described as a typical power broker, using his political contacts to help ordinary people, making them dependent upon him because they will repeatedly need his help, in return they will offer their votes to their protector and feel fortunate to be close to a man of importance. Legislative work and government control are far from the preoccupations of the 387 Belgian MPs: since 1970 only 10 per cent of new legislation has been initiated by MPs. Add to this the large number of decrees issued by the government, and it becomes clear that Parliament plays a very different role in Belgium to that foreseen in the Constitution.³ Governments are no longer formed or fall in Parliament, the Houses simply have to enact the decisions reached in all kinds of conclaves, and can consider themselves fortunate if, by a stroke of luck, they are informed of those decisions before the press is.

PARTIES AND PIILARS

Political parties certainly have a much broader sphere of influence than any regulation formally allows them. Since the introduction in 1919 of universal male suffrage, three major parties have dominated

the scene: the Catholic, the Socialist and the Liberal. Until the early 1960s the Catholic party won about 40 per cent of the votes nationally and 60 per cent in Flanders; on the other hand, the Socialists were always in a good second place, with 30 to 37 per cent of the national electorate, but around 50 per cent in Wallonia. Only from 1949 to 1954 was a government formed by the Catholic party alone; all the others were coalitions in which the Liberals, with their 12 to 18 per cent of the electorate, held a strategic position.

The Belgian political system was based solidly on these ratios until the 1960s: it was impossible to legislate against the interests of an important minority, Catholic or Socialist, who held a majority (or close to one) in one half of the country. The Catholics made this clear in 1955 by launching the 'School War'; the Socialists in 1950 and 1960 by their fierce opposition to King Leopold and by a general strike. All these conflicts were resolved in the spirit of compromise which normally prevailed and which can be considered as typical of Belgian politics: all parties could claim the recognition of their fundamental policies in a package deal drawn up among a small group of negotiators. Pragmatic solutions, in which the logic is sometimes hard to find, and where the victory of all participants is bought at the expense of heavy claims on the state budget, are the formula of Belgian 'sofa politics'. This realism is based on the notion that all policy, whatever the composition of the government, must respect the fundamental aspirations of the three political movements, since each of them disposes of the means to immobilize the country, as the Liberals did in 1925 by their financial manoeuvring.

This equilibrium was broken in the 1960s: both the Catholic and the Socialist parties lost their regional majorities in one part of the country. The de-industrialization of Wallonia, and the rapid industrialization of Flanders with its accompanying secularization, undermined their traditional strongholds. Church attendance in Flanders fell from 55 per cent of the population in 1965 to 30 per cent in 1985. As the bishops lost part of their grip on the political choices of the flock, the Catholic party lost one third of its voters to the Liberals and to the nationalists. Such items as the splitting of the Catholic University of Louvain on linguistic lines made it absolutely clear that the new generation no longer listened to the patriarchal exhortations of the clerical hierarchy. At the same time, the traditional Belgian establishment had to look for new devices as the pressures on the old system became increasingly strong. Nationalist or regional

parties weakened the firm bases of the three leaders in the early 1970s they achieved peaks of nearly 20 per cent of the votes in Flanders and Wallonia and 40 per cent in Brussels

These shifts provoked a dramatic change in the political agenda. The three traditional parties reacted by taking up some of the demands for more regional autonomy in a moderated form, and started a series of constitutional reforms. The regional parties were lured into the government, just long enough to throw them into deep internal schisms because their electorate was not expecting them to compromise *a la belge*. The results were disastrous for them: the *Rassemblement Wallon* disappeared, the *Front des Francophones* fell to 10 per cent of the votes and only the Flemish nationalists could retain about 15 per cent of the electorate, although they too suffered a split. So in 1985 the three traditional parties again became masters of the game, admittedly with the two largest in a decidedly diminished form.

In fact the changes in electoral behaviour, and the corresponding shifts in the allocation of seats in Parliament and many other political or politicized institutions, had only a slight influence on the real power structures. In the mid 1980s, just as in the mid-1950s, the national executives of the main parties, often personified in their presidents, determine the fate of governments and policies. They choose the ministers and work out the coalition agreements. It has even occurred that two presidents of major parties (Van Miert and Verhofstadt) took part in negotiations about the formation of a government *before* they were elected to Parliament and thus without any legal mandate. The documents drawn up during coalition negotiations tend to become ever more extensive and binding: the party executives thus dictate the programme of the ministers whom they actually appoint or dismiss. In this respect, the term 'particracy' adequately expresses what is really taking place. A minister gains promotion by becoming a party president, thereafter he can reasonably expect to reach the post of vice-prime minister at least.

But it is still not possible to grasp the nature of practical exercise of power in Belgium unless we extend our scope from the parties to all the parallel institutions connected with them. In the Netherlands the term 'pillar' has become generally used to illustrate that four political 'families' together support the establishment through a series of organizations through which each of them distributes the benefits of the welfare state to their members. It is assumed now that a strong

'depillarization' has been taking place since the late 1960s, starting with the break-up of the Roman Catholic Party. In Belgium the same concept of pillarization offers an adequate characterization of the power structure in the twentieth century. Since the introduction of universal suffrage, the Catholic and the Socialist parties have felt the need to bind together their electorates by a wide range of organizations of a more or less prominent political or ideological character. Youth movements, women's guilds, trade unions, insurance companies, health insurance schemes, co-operatives, newspapers, banks, the (Catholic) farmers' union, hospitals, clubs for sports and cultural activities . . . a vast range of organizations has developed in the shadow of the parties. Typical of the current Belgian situation is that the links between all these organizations, and whichever of the three leading political 'families' sponsors them, are both very tight and publicly acknowledged.

It is generally known that banks like the Kredietbank, the Raiffeisenkas, the Volksdepositokas belong to the Catholic pillar, while the Prévoyance Sociale is Socialist. Compulsory membership of a health insurance scheme implies the choice of one of the three dominating political movements. Trade unions are openly associated with the same parties and thus cannot operate freely when 'their' party is in government. It is remarkable that in Belgium the pillars have scarcely lost any of their influence during the last decade, notwithstanding secularization and the decline of the two largest parties' votes. Most remarkable in this respect is the continuing success of the Catholic educational system which accounts for 75 per cent of all pupils in the age group of twelve to eighteen. Although the choice of Catholic schools is no longer considered a 'struggle for the soul of the child', as it was in the 1950s, and although many non-Catholics choose them for the presumed better quality of education without taking the ideology seriously, the Catholic school network remains one of the foundations of Catholic power in Belgium.

It is essential to understand that many pillar organizations, private and ideological as they are, are actually funded by the state and fulfil state functions. The large Flemish Catholic cultural organization, the Davidsfonds, and its Liberal counterpart the Willemsfonds, both manage libraries and use the public broadcasting system with the aid of state subsidies. Catholic schools and hospitals are paid by the state but controlled by private boards. Health insurance payments, unemployment benefits and redundancy payments are provided by the state through the agency of pillar organizations like insurance com-

panies, trade unions and their substructures. The High Court of Accounts (*Rekenhof*) has indeed commented that in this way the state dispenses employment and funds without retaining control over their management. It has even suggested the possibility that these private organizations may well use these advantages for other purposes. A judicial enquiry made public in September 1987 has indicated that this has indeed been the practice for several years on a wide scale: prominent politicians have been held responsible and have not issued denials.⁴ The close interdependency of political parties and these pillar organizations guarantees the continuation of these collective raids on the state exchequer: all parties take a part of the gains, and agree to keep the management of the welfare state in their own hands.

THE PATRONS AND THEIR COURTS

Belgium is not only blessed with a relatively high number of MPs, but also boasts no less than forty-nine ministers and secretaries of state belonging to the national or regional governments. Each of them has at his disposal a so-called cabinet. There are nearly 3,000 persons in ministerial cabinets, or on average sixty per minister or secretary of state. Of course, senior ministers have much larger staffs than the average. Cabinet members come and go with their minister, and are quite distinct from the established civil servants in the relevant department. One may consider cabinet members as personal advisers to the minister who enjoy his personal confidence and belong to his party. Some are recruited from the civil service, but they also come from the private sector. The secretary of State for Energy, for instance, is advised on a part-time basis by a manager of an electricity corporation, and the Minister of Defence by a car-manufacturing executive. Persons belonging to the civil service normally retain their original functions during their time in a cabinet; they can hope, however, to be rewarded by promotion after giving good service for some time. Cabinet members are strategically placed to seize interesting jobs; it is whispered that many of them have been successful in arranging their own appointments to university chairs or directorships-general and the like. Such stories are certainly more than unfounded gossip. In June 1987, for instance, nine appointments were made at the highest level of the administration; seven of the lucky candidates were members of ministerial cabinets.

Why do Belgian ministers need to be advised so extensively?

Certainly not because their departments are understaffed: whereas in 1960 they had 91,653 personnel, by 1982 this number had increased by almost 50 per cent to 135,527.⁵ Admittedly, the total number of civil servants increased even more, by 80 per cent, from 500,000 in 1960 to 900,000 in 1980,⁶ but the growth of the ministries remains impressive by any standards. Furthermore, the two highest levels of the civil service experienced the fastest growth in relative terms, with 24 and 28 per cent respectively, which would normally lead one to expect that the quality of service should have improved.

In my opinion, the answer is to be sought in Belgian political and administrative culture. Unlike Great Britain and the Netherlands, the Belgian civil service lacks a proper standard of values, an *esprit de corps* fed by high standards of professional competence. Instead, the Belgian civil service is highly politicized by recruitment and advancement based on party membership. This practice dates back to long before the Second World War, but exploded after 1945 with the creation of new ministries. The Socialist party, for instance, displays a continuing interest in the departments of Labour, Social Security, Education and Economic Affairs, where they have provided jobs for thousands of loyal party members.⁷ The phenomenon is so general that a young ambitious applicant knows he has to base his ambitions on membership of a party or a trade union; this may help to explain the very high degree of union membership (70 per cent). Not only are the boards of semi independent institutions like the universities, the public banks, and the broadcasting corporation composed of proportionally weighted numbers of party representatives; in their turn, these administrators monitor closely the appointment of a sufficient number of members of their own colour. All ranks and occupations are subject to political choice. In the course of the negotiations for a coalition government, precise agreements are made about the number of appointments which each participating party may claim in the various departments at appropriate ranks. A permanent committee of prominent cabinet members (most of them in fact 'chef de cabinet'), supervised by the prime minister, has for many years been dealing *weekly* with the distribution of appointments, in accordance with the agreed proportions and recommendations presented by the parties. Equally each party has developed its own clearing house to select the party candidate for each job.

Thus it has actually occurred that a qualified applicant for tenure as professor was summoned by the rector who bluntly explained to

him that his application could not be considered because he was 'yellow' and the post was designated for a 'red' person. The candidate was later appointed in another university. Large institutions have 'organigrams' where the functions are literally coloured in, from bottom to top: each vote counts. Professor Storme, himself a former senator for the Catholic party, recently complained that 50 per cent of the judges, appointed by political support, would not pass a selection procedure based on competence. He believes that the government, having successfully emasculated parliament, is now trying to break down the independence of the judicature by means of political appointments.⁸

Prominent politicians occasionally launch appeals denouncing the system of political appointments. They do not always sound convincing because all parties have been involved in the practice and there is no record in history of any power consciously giving up vital resources. It is known, indeed, that each political appointment or promotion means seventeen votes for the party or its broker. The President of the Socialist party, in opposition since 1981, recently launched an appeal against political appointments. By adding, however, that his own party had not obtained what it expected in the broadcasting company and the judiciary, where nearly all leading positions were to be occupied by members of the Catholic and Liberal parties, he made it clear that in fact he simply wanted guarantees of his proper share. More remarkable, however, is the statement of the Minister of Finance, Marc Eyskens, in July 1987, calling the placing of political friends in high public offices 'immoral and harmful to the efficiency of the public service and especially of the semi-public institutions': remarkably precise, just a few weeks after the spate of appointments mentioned above, on the part of a senior minister. Moreover we will see that he may have good reasons for his precise statement. Even more remarkable, however, was the quick reaction of other ministers, such as the Secretary of State for the Public Office, who bluntly declared that he had no objections at all to political appointments, and even considered them unavoidable. The minister responsible at the highest level had now removed the last vestige of shame about public secret number one in Belgium.⁹

The reasons for the extraordinarily large numbers of cabinet members are to be seen in the logic of the politicization of the civil service: a minister needs reliable experts for the occasion when he is placed at the head of a department predominantly run by staff from a

different political party, who can *therefore* be expected to lend him as little co-operation as possible. This deplorable mentality, sharply contrasting with the loyalty and expertise of Dutch and British civil servants, is a direct consequence of the appointment system which places political loyalty above competence. Cabinet posts are also needed to provide career opportunities for particularly active party members. It has even become customary to add a member of the coalition party to the cabinet of each minister, as a so-called spy. The term speaks volumes about the kind of strategic manoeuvres which take place within a cabinet. In some ways the cabinet takes over the most delicate parts of the work of the civil service, and this regularly provokes open conflict, for the established civil service is constantly frustrated by the courtiers around the minister. In addition, the cabinet has to clear all demands for services from within the party, collected, as we saw, by MPs. This kind of activity interrupts the regular procedures of administration to favour the friends of a friend of the minister. Again, the tension between cabinet and civil service appears to be extremely counter-productive. As a big boss in a position above any number of political clients, a minister needs many reliable people around him to do all the dirty jobs which add to his political success to the same extent that they undermine his work as the head of a department of state. In the course of 1987 a series of political scandals has exposed improprieties in the conduct of the members and even the chiefs of the cabinets for Justice and Defence.¹⁰ Indeed, a former premier, two vice-premiers and several ministers have actually been found guilty or convicted of corruption offences. But still the public hardly reacts at all.

THE IMBROGLIO

Since competence is not the first or only requirement for the Belgian civil service, and since it is inherent in the political system that links of personal and party loyalty prevail over administrative quality, one wonders about the effect on public life. In fact, the Belgian citizen plays his part in the game. He expects his politicians to arrange his little personal affairs, legally if possible, illegally if not. On the other hand, the Belgian citizen is much more tolerant than the Dutchman or the Englishman of the morality of his representatives and rulers: although he has a vague knowledge of irregularities of all kinds, he

will not ask for severe sanctions on that account, nor change his voting behaviour. And since the citizen regularly finds his way blocked by an unfriendly, extremely slow and incompetent state bureaucracy, he is glad enough to find a faster way through all the regulations thanks to the personal intervention of the local strong man. The weakness of the citizen, clearly greater in times of economic crisis, strengthens his dependency on political patronage, particularly when state resources can no longer be equally generous to everyone.

The mentality of the Belgian public service is typically illustrated in the most successful comedy programme created by Flemish television in recent years, 'The Colleagues'. This series showed with great humour the complete and senseless frustration and lethargy in some departments, where the power of the trade unions blocked every initiative while the management of political appointments occupied all minds. The series had to be extended and repeated: the public could not stop laughing at its own reflected image.

Is it really all that bad? I am afraid so, and, moreover, on a much wider scale than that of personal careers. Can a country go on systematically being governed by 3,000 cabinet members working against 135,527 civil servants, and working in fact against the rules of efficiency and equity? It is well known that the public debt is higher in Belgium than in any other country of the European Community. Although the Government makes a show of great efforts to reduce it, there have been years of expensive compromises *à la belge*, where all parties get what they want even if they do not need it, where expenditures are duplicated just to accommodate the other side (whether linguistic or ideological), and where nothing can be abolished because of the need to maintain delicate equilibriums. These collective raids on the exchequer, as Professor Huyse has called them, continue to cost 25 per cent of the budget in financing the debt. This currently amounts to twice the EEC average (550,000 francs per head, as against 246,000 in the Netherlands, 142,000 in France and 140,000 in Germany).

But even then political life in Belgium seems so absurd as to be almost a hallucination. Although senior ministers regularly spend all day, for weeks on end, finding solutions for budget problems (they have begun to be called the 'ministers in conclave'), the state budget for 1987, which should have been presented to Parliament by October 1986, was only introduced in March 1987 and adopted in July, at the same time as that for 1986! Professor Ieemins, the President of the

Senate, was obliged to make a solemn protest before the Government returned to legality, eighteen months late.¹¹ This was not an isolated incident. The High Court of Accounts commented in its annual report that the general accounts of the state were submitted four years late. It then appeared that considerable overspending had taken place, which made it necessary to vote additional credits in 1987 for expenditure incurred in 1982. The same Court has indicated numerous deficiencies in the control of expenditure, inefficiency and technical failures in such amounts that they obviously point to systemic deficiencies rather than to accidental errors or individual corruption. The most prominent problems are in the public works sector, for which no accounts could be produced by the Department for the *last ten years*. The documents actually submitted revealed large-scale negligence in the administration, leading to monstrous supplementary burdens for the state and a suspicion of advantages for the contractors. Repeated comments of the Court to the ministers were in many cases not answered or had no practical consequences. On 1 February 1986, the Court was awaiting answers from ministers to 1,673 letters dating back more than three months, of which 714 dated back more than thirteen months.¹²

The High Court had made similar comments in previous years, without any reaction from the MPs to whom reports were addressed. This reveals that more than technical incompetence is at issue – understandably when one considers the procedures and criteria for appointments. Nevertheless it is hard to imagine that all Belgian civil servants are incompetent or corrupt; the better ones must feel terrible frustration at the systematic overrulings of political favouritism. Since ministers do not take the criticism of the independent Court seriously, and since Parliament does not dismiss such ministers, we can only conclude that they all belong to the same *spoils-system*. It is not surprising that 39 per cent of MPs are recruited from the politicized civil service, and another 23 per cent from the equally politicized educational networks.¹³ On the other hand, civil servants who dare to denounce the shocking abuses around them in public are penalized with administrative sanctions, while journalists publishing the scandals are forced by justices to reveal the names of their informants.

It now becomes clear precisely why the Finance Minister in the interests of administrative efficiency opposed political appointments. It also becomes understandable why the measures worked out by ten

senior ministers in conclave with a handful of cabinet collaborators often fall far short of reality. In July 1986 the Government decided to cut 10 per cent of the education budget within two school years. In September the application of the measures already appeared to have led to a cut of 10 per cent within the first year. It is, incidentally, quite usual to decide about reforms two months before the start of the new school year in which they have to be put into operation. One year later the precise data necessary for the appropriate measures were still not available. The Government seems enmeshed in its own deficiencies.

REAL AND OTHER PROBLEMS

All these matters are the real problems of Belgian political life, but they are hardly ever discussed. Political debate in Belgium is generally rather dull: 95 per cent of printed media belongs to the Catholic and Liberal pillars, now in government, and is therefore docile towards its patrons. An independent quality press is badly lacking. Belgian Radio and Television (BRT) might be considered such a medium, and in my own opinion it performs extremely well, within the limits of the restricted means at its disposal. Is it therefore right that the government parties should systematically attack this institution and some journalists, personally and in a most venomous way, and should try every possible method of creating a competitive situation which would be commercial and thus acquiescent?

There is nevertheless no shortage of political rhetoric: the media and electoral campaigns create an image of benign political leaders acting for the best, like fairy godmothers. These media never tell the citizen about the system of double power held by the most influential political leaders; they do not explain how on the one hand, as the incarnation of the common weal, they forbid a schoolteacher to earn a little extra by giving evening classes, while on the other hand they pile up, besides their offices in local, regional and national councils, ever more well-paid positions on the boards of public or private banks, communications corporations, semi-public corporations for social housing, for health insurance, and public works, etc. Even when Liberal ministers plead for the the privatization of public enterprises, they always make the reservation that the public sector – the political parties and pillars – must retain a substantial share.

The news provided for the Belgian citizen is a kind of exhibition about symbolic problems: subsidies for a school with ten Flemish pupils in a predominantly French-speaking city, the refusal of the burgomaster in a small bilingual village to use the official Dutch language. As long as such pseudo-problems take the limelight, even on the international scene, the political system can keep quiet about the real, formidable administrative problems which have been created by the system of patronage and brokerage prevailing for decades at the expense of debts on the shoulders of future generations.

To understand Belgian political culture it is useful to be a medievalist or an anthropologist. Both disciplines offer insights into power structures based on personal relationships, dependency and protection, clientism and patronage. Power consists of being able to dispose of many clients; a politician mobilizing many thousands of preference votes has such a power base. His party will have to offer him some scope to build up the network for the continuation and extension of his base. High politics can be summarized as the arrangements made between the big bosses who have at their disposal such strongholds, and their friends, followers and clients. The boss must be generous to them, and does so by distributing state resources which he controls. 'Arrangements' can never touch the foundations of these power bases, so that rational and efficient solutions are hardly possible.

I do not know whether King Boudewijn explained to his foreign guests that the linguistic problems, so prominent in Belgian politics, are merely a smoke-screen for the defence of the empires of manifold bosses and pressure groups, all of whom have to be handled with care because the whole Belgian compromise rests on the complicity of all major parties and political concerns. For decades they have accumulated assets – parts of the resources of the state – to such a formidable extent that electoral losses of between 10 and 30 per cent do not really touch them. Their battlefield is no longer Parliament, but the boards of semi-public organizations beyond any democratic control. The three great political concerns divide among themselves the actual and future wealth of the nation, keeping out new political formations like nationalists, ecologists, and many others. New parties therefore lack the means to offer social services and protection to the citizens who, in the long run, understand that their interests are safest within the traditional concerns. A complex situation indeed, hard to explain to foreigners in a few words.