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The management of subcultural conflict:

The issue of education in Belgium (1950-1975)

G. Dierickx

Introduction

In the Belgian political arena the issue of education is at times a highly salient one which captures the attention and the emotions of the public at large. At other times it appears as almost dormant from the perspective if not of the political insiders, then at least of the less well informed outsiders.

Between 1879 and 1884 a first, rather violent struggle opposed catholics and anticlericals and resulted in the consolidation of two major school networks. An 'official' network was organized by the state and by the local authorities. The state schools claimed to be philosophically 'neutral', while their critics accused them of varying degrees of anticlericalism. At the other side of the philosophical fence, a network of 'free', private schools was organized, in its overwhelming majority, by catholic dioceses and congregations. At the same occasion both school networks got their own political patrons. The liberal and the socialist parties with their anticlerical traditions advocated the cause of the neutral schools, while the catholic party championed the cause of the 'free' catholic schools.

After the first school-war (1879-1884) the education issue went into relative latency. After the second world war and the liberation of Belgium there was little to suggest the imminence of a second school war. On the contrary, the Christian Democrat party, which had succeeded the prewar catholic party, appeared anxious to 'deconfessionalize' its program and to appeal to an electorate beyond the confinement of the catholic subculture. Instead of its traditional one-sided defence of the catholic schools it proposed to uphold a pluralist equilibrium between the major school systems.

The government would establish new state schools and support local and free schools more or less according to the proportion of parents selecting them for their children. The government would subject itself to the opinion of the parents and so would the new Christian Democrat party. All kinds of penalization for picking one school rather than another would have to disappear.

This new stand, so the leaders hoped, would allow their party to shed its clerical image. Yet it was a stand largely favorable to the catholic schools. They received a much smaller share of state funds than their school population would entitle them to under the new regime. For example, catholic high schools got no subsidies at all.

The issue in the private arena (1950-1954)

The new doctrine had no immediate practical effects. In the first years after the second world war, the parties and their leaders were concerned mainly with the rebuilding of the Belgian economic and political system. In 1950 a referendum was necessary to allow the return from exile of King Leopold III. Riding the wave of pro-Leopoldist sentiments the Christian Democrats won an absolute majority in the national elections. They had won their first battle in favor of the king in the referendum but lost a second one when street rioting forced the king into retirement. It was only after the disappointing settlement of this emotional issue that the education issue claimed the attention of the Christian Democrats and their opponents.

Having won an absolute majority in the national elections they had no longer a valid excuse to postpone the implementation of their educational program. An explosion of school attendance was imminent, partly because of the postwar baby boom, partly because of the democratization of education. All school systems were anxious to get their share, and if possible more than their share, of this expansion. They suffered from different handicaps, though. The state schools were legally restrained: their number was limited by law. The catholic schools were in deep financial trouble.

The new minister of Education, Pierre Harmel, unveiled his final proposals, on March 6, 1952, after patient and extensive consultations. He seems to have had great confidence in the intrinsic rationality and equity of his proposals to convince the opposition. In this he was proved wrong. The socialists and liberals rejected pluralism and certainly the pluralism that was central to his proposal. Almost immediately they pointed to two elements which were to remain the very core of the debate in later years.

The first element concerned the amount and the modalities of the subsidies to the catholic schools. The increase would be substantial and would allow them to operate almost free of charge. For many advocates of the state schools the fact that their schools charged no fees was the only asset in their rivalry with the free schools. The latter enjoyed a freedom of initiative, a lack of bureaucratic inertia and the momentum of a volunteers

organization which the official schools sorely lacked. Harmel intended to take away the only handicap of the catholic schools but the official schools would remain beset by theirs.

Even more contentious among insiders was the modality of these subsidies. A Christian-Democrat congress in 1951 had stated explicitly that the legislators should make no distinctions between subsidies for personnel costs, for operating costs, for equipment costs or for building costs. Subsidies should be given directly, though under clear conditions, to the school authorities, who would be allowed some degree of discretion in using them. This was exactly what Harmel proposed to do. This came down to some direct aid to the catholic school authorities. To this modality the anticlericals proved to be vehemently and consistently opposed.

The second element concerned Harmel's attempt to regulate the expansion of the competing school systems. Harmel proposed to set up joint commissions which would advise the minister of Education on when and where to establish new state schools and on when and where to grant subsidies to catholic and local schools. In this way the state school system would be set free from the old legal limitations on its expansion and the arbitrariness of the minister would be kept in check. According to the opposition, however, Harmel wished to consolidate the superiority of the catholic schools and to keep the state schools from catching up with them. Would not the joint committees prevent a non-catholic minister from furthering the cause of neutral education?

The outrage in the private arena did not lead to a major protest in the public arena. True, the elections of 1954 returned the socialists to power, in a coalition with the liberals. But there is little proof that this result had anything to do with a backlash against the policies of Harmel.

The political game goes public (1954-1958)

Leo Collard, the new minister of Education, almost immediately abolished the joint committees. No effort was made to replace them with another mechanism to regulate pluralism. As a result the minister got a free hand to start new state schools wherever he deemed it necessary. New free schools would be considered for subsidizing after waiting for two years; and even then the minister was free to decide whether the granting of financial aid was opportune.

Several months later it became known that the government intended to cut about 500 million Belgian francs from the subsidies to the free schools. Less noticed by the public but as hotly debated in the private arena was the

fact that the remaining subsidies would be split up in distinct categories. As a result teachers' wages would remain more or less the same, parents would have to pay somewhat more and school authorities would get nothing at all, not for building, not for equipment, not for operating costs. Clearly, the objective was to curtail the initiative of the catholic school authorities without alienating the catholic public at large.

Many observers have wondered why the socialist party chairman, Max Buset, took the risk of unchaining another school struggle. School struggles had been detrimental to the anticlerical parties ever before. They allowed the catholics to close their ranks on issues which were highly salient to them. Did he estimate that catholic mobilization efforts would be unsuccessful for the first time in history? The weak showing of the Christian Democrats in the royal question had spread around this belief.

But he might have had other considerations in mind. In the early fifties socialist thinking was influenced by a simplistic political theory: members of the working class belonged in the socialist party. If they did not join the party it was because their subjective class identification did not yet match their objective class membership. Their lack of political insight was to be explained by the guardianship in which they were being held by a politically active R. C. Church and by its educational system. Once this clerical hold over their political opinions would be broken, the workers would almost automatically discover their true political homestead. By curtailing the influence of catholic schools, Buset hoped to score a decisive breakthrough for socialism. This interpretation of Buset's long term strategy was widely accepted at the time, and not only by catholic observers.

At the end of 1954 the Christian Democrats had come to the conclusion, somewhat reluctantly, that no option was left to them but to appeal to the public. The action was initiated and led by a Committee for Freedom and Democracy which grouped the leaders of the catholic pillar under the chairmanship of Theo Lefèvre, the Christian Democrat party leader.

At first these leaders felt less than sure about the success of their mobilization enterprise. Yet their mobilization efforts had a success which has remained proverbial in Belgian political memories. In the first half of 1955 two national manifestations took place in Brussels, the first of about 100 000, the second of about 250 000 people. A petition with almost 2 200 000 signatures was handed over to the king. These were impressive feats.

Why did these mobilization efforts prove so successful? Of course the issue struck a responsive subcultural nerve with the catholic population at a time when the memories of the disorders after World War II (a.o. the royal question) were still vividly present. But it is important to stress the

leadership of the elites. Their campaign revealed their own commitment and a keen awareness of the limits of their followers' commitments. Their appeals were carefully tailored to the sensibilities of a broad following where purely confessional themes would not prevail. They stressed the interests of the teachers and the parents in catholic schools more than the interests of catholic school authorities. And the timing of their appeals was carefully adapted to the limits of the salience of this issue. When the law of minister Collard got its final approval in Parliament the turmoil in the streets died out almost instantly. Since action in the public arena would serve no further immediate purpose it seemed better to save their breath for the next national election of 1958. The mobilization efforts came to a provisional halt because it became ever more difficult to keep the attention of the general public focused on this single issue. And also because the mobilization had reached at least this goal: the leaders had been able to show their political muscle to themselves and to others. Henceforward the power balance was clear. On this basis negotiations would be possible and the political conflict could return to the private arena.

The settlement of the School Pact (1958)

Ever since 1950 the political game around the education issue can be aptly described in zero-sum terms. The opponents disagreed about what would be a fair equilibrium, accusing each other of seeking a dominating position. At stake were the terms, and maybe the principle of pluralism. In 1958 the same political strategists showed how and why such a zero-sum game can be brought to a conclusion.

In the national elections of 1958 the Christian Democrats regained control of the Senate but fell short of the majority in the Chamber by two seats. No government was possible without them but at the same time they would have to pick a coalition partner from among their former opponents. At first many Christian Democrats were tempted to call new elections; according to experience a second election would reinforce their majority. But eventually the leadership decided to settle for a coalition government. In the long run the party would never be able to obtain a larger majority. Consequently it seemed wiser not to press the counterattack too far and to consolidate the gains. After a few months of a minority government the liberals were persuaded to join a coalition government. The formation of the new coalition, however, was preceded by a momentous event: the leaders and experts of the three parties met to find an agreement on the education issue.

The three party conference of 1958 which led to the so called School Pact has been interpreted as the finest hour of a consociational elite, intent on avoiding the threat of further divisive subcultural strife and willing to find a nonpartisan, cooperative solution to a less than useful conflict. This interpretation does not stand up to scrutiny. The negotiations had more in common with peace talks between slightly exhausted nations than with consociationalism at work within an ideologically uncommitted national elite. By 1958 the subcultural emotions in the public arena had already petered out. The negotiators were largely the same as the committed strategists of 1955. And most significantly, the final settlement shows that the zero-sum game ended, if not with winners taking all, at least with some taking more than others. The Christian Democrats clearly won the largest share in the outcome of the game. Their party congress ratified the agreement unanimously while the socialist delegation had to face stiff opposition in its own ranks.

The School Pact of 1958 vindicated the pluralism proposed by the Christian Democrat program of 1945. The Christian Democrats abandoned the claim to some subsidies directly favorable to catholic school authorities (a.o. building subsidies) but they obtained large operating subsidies and almost everything favorable to teachers and parents. In return the state school system could hold on to the legal facilities obtained under Collard and received strong guarantees for the implementation of a building program. The parents would have a free choice between both systems.

Granting the fact that this settlement made some more satisfied than others, how can we explain that it was, first, accepted by all and, second, respected until the early seventies?

The first reason is that the Pact ended the old zero-sum game by starting a new game. In this new game the rivalry of the school systems would continue but it would be transformed into a competition for the favors of a consumers' public, i.e. for the patronage of the parents. The parents would be (financially and geographically) free to select either a catholic or a state school. It was up to the school systems to increase and to improve their supply. In their efforts they would both be aided generously by the minister of Finances. This perspective allowed the strategists of both sides to make their bets on the future. The frustrated advocates of state supremacy could hope that with the increased supply of state schools the marked balance would be tipped in their favor, at least in the long run. They were confident to tap the support of a silent majority. A different bet on the future of the educational market was made by the Christian Democrats. They were pretty certain that catholic schools would at least hold their

own. The silent majority on which the opponents counted would fail to materialize and pluralism was there to stay.

A second reason goes back to the fundamentals of Belgian political conflict. The basic, ever present conflict flows from the partisan importance of cleavage salience in the public arena. The salience of almost any philosophical issue is electorally advantageous to the Christian Democrats. Likewise the salience of a socio-economic issue brightens the prospects of the socialist party. Party strategists are well aware of this fact. Consequently they have a predilection for issues on which their party can play the game as the home team. Other issues they tend to avoid.

The Pact of 1958 meant that the socialists had to drop Buset's cherished, but slightly antiquated strategy. But, so they assumed, the settlement would dampen the salience of the philosophical cleavage. And they could hope that the socio-economic issues would at last get the attention they deserved. Who, in 1958, could foresee that the philosophical issue of education would give way, not to socio-economic but to sociolinguistic issues?

The Christian Democrats knew they were giving up a political trump-card in order to consolidate their gains. Their main consideration was that they did not really need to focus on strictly philosophical issues. Theirs was a party of the socio-economic center, shunning marxist collectivism as well as liberal laissez-faire, emphasizing social solidarity and responsible government. Did not other Christian Democrat parties in Western Europe hold their own without invoking narrowly confessional themes?

The exhaustion of the market game (1970-1974)

After the School Pact the education issue reentered a period of relative latency. The political debate was largely confined to a very private arena, set up especially for this purpose. In this 'Committee of the School Pact' party leaders and experts met in order to monitor the ongoing game in the education market. As a matter of fact the negotiators in this committee did more than just monitor the game. The stipulations of the Pact left more than a small opportunity to influence the supply positions of the school systems and to give support to one's favorite. On the whole, however, these partisan moves and countermoves remained well within the rules of the market game as institutionalized in 1958.

The stipulations of the School Pact were to last at least 12 years. From 1970 on the Pact could be reformed or even abolished if the political elites wished to do so. And indeed, around 1970 various proposals to change the

rules of the game began to appear, thus revealing several sources of discontent.

In 1970 the budget of National Education had grown to 25% of the national budget. Some observers were quick to blame the School Pact and its school pluralism for this soaring spending. Whatever may be the truth of these financial allegations, the most fundamental source of discontent appears to have been political. The old market game had become disappointing to many of the players in the private arena, especially to many leaders of the socialist party. In 1958 the opponents of pluralism had comforted themselves with the expectation of winning over a silent majority to the ranks of the neutral schools. Around 1970 it became clear that this silent-majority had failed to materialize. True, the state schools had known an impressive expansion. But so had the free schools. The market game had resulted in a reinforcement of pluralism. As a consequence the stauncher opponents of pluralism started to look for games in which their chances would look better.

Such an alternative was to be found in the proposal to foster the establishment of so-called 'pluralist schools'. In these schools, in contrast to state schools, open commitments (socialist, atheist, catholic) would be encouraged. Since these schools would meet the needs of catholics and non-catholics alike purely neutral or catholic schools would become superfluous. In its extreme form the proposal meant to replace 'external pluralism', i.e. a pluralism between schools, with 'internal pluralism', i.e. a pluralism within schools.

The idea was also welcomed by the smaller parties: the liberals (who dropped their official anticlericalism in 1961) and the linguistic parties. These parties of the philosophical center did not exist as such in 1958. Within the field of education, they were constrained to an uncomfortable position between the catholic and the anticlerical stands. The proposal of 'internal pluralism' would enable them to reconcile their catholic and anticlerical members and to safeguard the unity of their party. Unlike the socialists they did not intend to replace the existing school systems with a single new one. Their aim was to decentralize the organization of education. In such a game the state would be a distant patron to a numerous clientele of various schools. Between the schools themselves frictions would be of local, not of national salience. Thus the education issue would first be transformed into an allocative issue and later disappear altogether from the national political agenda.

Even within the Christian Democrat ranks the prospective of an unamended continuation of the market game and of external school pluralism created some worries. Of course the market game had proved satisfactory

on the whole. The catholic schools had been able to hold their own and even to improve their positions. They were now responsible for more than half of the school population. But it seemed somewhat dubious whether these efforts could be pursued for a long period of time. The catholic subculture was going through a stage of unsettling changes. As a result various parts of its organisational suprastructure appeared to be weakening. The catholic schools had an impressive enrollment but were more difficult to organize along clearly confessional guidelines than before. Lay personnel had become more numerous, more autonomous, and less homogeneously catholic than before. So did the pupils and their parents. Perhaps the truly catholic schools would be better off by turning over their consumer surplus to some sort of pluralist schools. The party which had to bear the burden of the market game was less powerful than in the glorious fifties. And some of its younger members, having a less sanguine perspective on the philosophical cleavage, began to resent the fact that this game forced them to champion onesidedly the cause of catholic schools. If some degree of internal pluralism would defuse the conflict this proposal would deserve some consideration. Overall, however the Christian Democrats had less motive than their political rivals to alter the rules of the game.

A new zero-sum game and a new School Pact (1973-1975)

In the early seventies the debate shifted from a debate within the market game to a debate about the market game. The participants in the private arena knew that a new zero-sum game was about to begin and that it might go public once again. The more direct *casus belli* was the financial plight of the catholic schools. In 1958 they had been granted no building subsidies whatever but this had not prevented them from launching extensive building programs and from contracting huge debts. When these debts became unbearable the school authorities and their political patrons turned to the government for relief. Since the granting of more aid would imply a reinforcement of external pluralism the issue of external versus internal pluralism could no longer be avoided.

Once again a committee of catholic leaders was set up. At first attempts were made to keep the issue within the boundaries of the private arena. But when contacts with non-catholic leaders resulted only in an agreement to disagree they decided to take the matter to the public arena. Of course, the mobilization of the subculture and the public at large was not expected to reach the extent of 1955. The issue was different: it concerned mainly the

interests of the school authorities and survival in the short run was not at stake. The catholic subculture was different: the level of emotional commitment was down and since the second Vatican Council the intellectual reflexion was more reserved about subcultural combativity. The structure of public opinion was different. The salience of philosophical issues was clearly dominated by the salience of ethno-linguistic issues. And yet the campaign that was cautiously launched was modestly successful. The catholic demands got their first broad exposure during the national elections of November 1971. Further success was assured when anticlerical organizations started to react to the catholic claims. The debate even reached a degree of emotionality reminding older observers of things past when it was hooked on to the simultaneous debate about abortion.

At the end of 1972 Edmond Leburton became the first socialist to form a government since 1954. However, the Christian Democrats were still the larger party. Among their conditions to join the coalition their stand on the issue of education was prominent. Because of their ability to barter these demands for their right to the premiership they were largely successful. In July 1973, a new School Pact was passed in the House and in the Senate.

The new Pact contained minor concessions to the socialists. The proposal to experiment cautiously with pluralist schools was kept alive. But the pluralist school would have a very slow start. And Christian Democrats tended to think (and to hope) that this brainchild of their opponents would turn out to be stillborn. Here again, as in 1958, a bet on the future was at the heart of the political game. But overall, the Pact upheld the reinforcement of external pluralism wanted by the Christian Democrats. The building programs of the free schools would be financially supported by the State. In other respects also the equality between the school systems would be approximated more closely.

Conclusion

The history of the issue of educational pluralism enables us to watch both the continuity and the flexibility of leadership strategy. The continuity shows in the fact that the leaders have staunchly stuck to very much the same basic positions from 1950 to 1975. The flexibility shows in the variety of their moves and countermoves. All the major moves can be interpreted as part of overarching strategies of players who took into account such important givens as political power, public opinion and the state of the school systems. Most importantly, these strategies intermesh into and are conditioned by a succession of games. These games have distinct rules and

a distinct lifecycle. At the beginning the players make a bet on the future, at the end the stakes are divided and a new game is set up.

We have one final point to make. The sophistication of these games is conducive to conflict-management. The players have been able to manage the conflict latent in this highly sensitive issue because of their strategies, not in spite of them. Some theorists might be tempted to trace such successful conflict-management in a divided society back to other factors, to some degree of non-partisan pacifism in the political culture of a small elite. According to this view the political game is being played by the protagonists of both subcultures up to the point where it threatens to blow up in a paroxysm of violence. At that point a more powerful political elite, guardians of the public interest, floating free above the attraction of the subcultures, takes over and imposes some kind of compromise on their activist followers.

Our contention is not that such consociational elites do never attempt to play a part in Belgian politics. But it is unnecessary to postulate a decisive role for such an elite in the education issue. Here the conciliatory moves are part of broader, partisan strategies. Conflict-management comes about because these strategies take the givens of the power relationships into account, because they are able to bet on the long term, because they are able to disaggregate and to reaggregate the issue. The case of the Belgian education issue suggests that a maximalist appreciation of the virtues of strategic sophistication might, at times, be more appropriate than a minimalist appreciation. It would be useful to discuss further the conditions favoring such strategic sophistication. One of them appears to be, not a lack of ideological commitment among the elites, but instead their commitment to a sophisticated, multidimensional ideology. Such ideologies inspire strategies which deal both with intra-issue conflict and with inter-issue (and inter-cleavage) conflict. This proves a major asset for conflict-management.

On the origins of the consociational democracy model

H. Daalder

Introduction

There is little doubt about the moment when the consociational democracy model was first launched in an international environment of professional political scientists. In the winter of 1966–1967 I was asked by the then Secretary-General of the International Political Science Association, Serge Hurtig, to organize a panel on *Recent Typologies of Political Regimes* for its September 1967 Brussels Congress. At the request of the University of California Press, I had just read the manuscript of *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* by Arend Lijphart – a young scholar I had only once met. The book presented in my view an excellent example of a particular *genre*: that of a theoretical country study. In Lijphart's own words, his book was 'an extended theoretical argument based on a single case of particular significance to pluralist theory', without an attempt 'to provide an exhaustive description of all facets of the political system'.¹ Since his gymnasium days in Holland, Lijphart had studied in the USA. He had done his graduate work in the Yale political science department which then comprised such luminaries as Gabriel A. Almond, Robert A. Dahl and Karl W. Deutsch. He subsequently taught at Elmira and Berkeley. He was therefore fully *au courant* of prevailing theories and models in American political science writing. Having read his manuscript, I asked Lijphart to prepare a paper for the Brussels panel, subjecting the then influential typology of comparative political systems of Gabriel Almond² to a critique. Lijphart complied with a lengthy paper, entitled 'Typologies of Democratic Regimes', which was published soon afterwards as the lead article in the first (April) issue of the new journal *Comparative Political Studies*.³ Not, long afterwards, in January 1969, *World Politics* published another full theoretical statement under the very title 'Consociational Democracy'.⁴ In the meantime, Lijphart had been appointed to the Chair of International Relations at Leiden University. On 1st February 1969 he addressed the Dutch *Kring voor Wetenschap der Politiek*