

The Political Expression of Flemish Nationalism

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The founding of an autonomous Flemish nationalist political party is inextricably linked to the First World War. Both in the German-occupied territory and in the narrow strip of land to the west of the IJzer river in the coastal province of West-Vlaanderen, where the Belgian army had dug in, a split developed between radical Flemish Nationalists and Belgium (including moderate *flamingants*). When Germany invaded Belgium in 1914, it was only a small group of Flemings in Ghent who, inspired by a Dutch parson, took an anti-Belgian stance. The vast majority of Flemish nationalists were active within the three major political movements (Christian Democrats, Socialists and Liberals) and did not question the structures of state. Yet the Flemish Movement already had a long and arduous journey behind it.

When the new Kingdom of Belgium was founded in 1830, its leaders made no secret of their desire to create a monolingual (French-speaking) state. French accordingly became the language of administration throughout the new country, including in Flanders. The only concession was that a few devotees of culture and language were allowed to use 'Flemish' – a genuine unified Dutch standard language barely existed at that time. The Antwerp writer Hendrik Conscience even received official Belgian support for his historical novel *The Lion of Flanders* (*De Leeuw van Vlaanderen*), which described the Flemish victory over the French in the Battle of the Golden Spurs (*Guldensporenslag*) at Courtrai (Kortrijk) in 1302. By an irony of fate, later Flemish nationalists would use this book to highlight the lost glory of Flanders

It was precisely these devotees of language who laid the foundations of the Flemish Movement. Barely ten years after Belgium achieved its independence, a petition calling for the legal right to use Dutch alongside French as the language of law, education and administration – but only in the Flemish provinces – attracted more than 100,000 signatures. However, the bourgeoisie would have no truck with this. This situation changed only slowly when the suffrage was extended and a new generation of politicians who were closer to the ordinary people took the stage. The Flemish Movement attracted growing political support – especially within the Catholic party, though substantially less from the Socialists and Liberals. Violent mass protests by the emerging Socialist party led to the suffrage being extended further in 1893. It was no coincidence that a

Long live Belgium/Belgium burst.



few years later, in 1898, the Equality Law (*Gelijkheidswet*) was passed, theoretically according equal status to the Dutch and French languages. Although the new law had little practical effect, it did prompt the later Brussels federalist Lucien Outers to claim that: 'La Belgique Française de 1830 est morte à ce moment-là.'

This ushered in the painfully slow parliamentary process of adopting language laws, with the French-speakers frequently blocking progress towards language equality, unwilling to abandon the monolingual status of French-speaking Wallonia and the use of French by individuals in Flanders. And there was more: the French-speakers felt threatened, and there was talk of vague plans to push through an administrative division of Belgium. In 1912 the Walloon Socialist Jules Destrée penned his notorious Open Letter to the King (*Open Brief aan de Koning*): 'Sire, permit me to tell Your Majesty a great and terrible truth: there are no Belgians, only Walloons and Flemings.' A year earlier, three Flemish members of parliament (a Christian Democrat, a Socialist and a Liberal) had tabled a bill calling for the University of Ghent to be made partially Dutch-speaking. Despite a fiercely-fought campaign in Flanders, with meetings and petitions, however, the French-speakers stood firm on this point; in their eyes the Dutch language was unsuited for delivering higher education, an assertion which caused resentment among radical Flemings.

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Activism and Front Movement.

On the orders of the German Chancellor, from 1914 onwards the German Occupying Power pursued a *Flamenpolitik* ('Flemish policy'), in which privileges were bestowed on the Flemings in the hope that Belgium would fall apart. Flemish activists, whose aim was to break with Belgium, received German financial and material support. Although they did not enjoy great popular support, the Germans deployed a formidable propaganda weapon: from the new academic year beginning in 1916, Ghent University would become entirely Dutch-speaking. They went a step further, setting up a Council of Flanders (*Raad van Vlaanderen*) in which separatists formed the majority. On Berlin's initiative total administrative separation was announced; the break with Belgium was now complete.

More important for the future was the growing discontent among Flemish military men in the Belgian army behind the front regarding the inadequate implementation of the language laws. Well-educated Catholic soldiers, in particular, had formed cultural associations which levelled increasingly frequent criticism at the lack of Dutch language proficiency among the army's leadership and the officer corps. The response was a wave of fierce repression to eradicate that criticism. This led to such an escalation of the conflict that the Front Movement was forced underground. Naturally, the pro-Flemish behaviour of the Germans did not go unnoticed. Moderate Flemish leaders, who had developed a Flemish 'minimum programme' (*minimumprogramma*) in the neutral Netherlands, were astounded at the extent to which hearts and minds behind the front were becoming radicalised. It had also not escaped the notice of King Albert; in October 1916 he promised that after independence the Flemings would enjoy 'equality in law and in fact'. But French-speaking government ministers spoke a very different language. On 11 July 1917, the clandestine Front Movement published its 'Open Letter to the King' (*Open Brief aan de Koning*), in which for the first time the structure of the Belgian state was questioned: "We want a Flemish administration in Flanders." The response from the army high command was even more repression, with harsh punishments being handed down by the courts martial. A new open letter appeared in October 1917, 'Flanders' Dawn on

the IJzer' (*Vlaanderens Dageraad aan de IJzer*), which is generally regarded as forming the basic programme for party-political Flemish Nationalism. Central to its demands was that Flanders must be granted the right to govern itself (*zelfbestuur*). Moderates still visualised a federal Belgium, but extremists dreamed of either total independence or linking up with the Netherlands.

The Front Party

Following the defeat of Germany in 1918, the majority of activists fled to the Netherlands or Germany. Others received severe punishments and were also subjected to the fury of the Belgian people. But the front-line soldiers, including those with Flemish nationalist sympathies, had the aura of victors about them. In November 1918 King Albert, fearing a Soviet-style revolution, even introduced universal single suffrage (for men) without revising the Constitu-



The German Governor-General von Bissing hands over Ghent University to the Academic authorities on 21 October 1916. Dutch becomes the official language of the University until the end of the war in 1918. Then the Belgian government reinstalls French until 1930.

tion, thereby meeting the most important demand of the Socialists. However, the conversion of Ghent University into a Dutch-speaking institution was immediately reversed. Leaders of the secret Front Movement founded the Front Party, which won five seats at the elections, despite the fact the party had difficulty fielding enough competent candidates and despite its open sympathy for the activists. But the party was a hotchpotch of different views, with deep internal divisions between federalists and separatists. The slogan 'Self-governance' (*Zelfbestuur*) covered a whole host of concepts - something that was to become a constant in Flemish Nationalism.

As with the Flemish Socialists, the pro-Flemish wing within the Catholic party had strengthened considerably. Its members attempted to repair the breach between the Flemish Nationalists and Belgium, though without success. In practice King Albert and the majority of Francophones did very little to implement the promised 'equality in law and fact'. Moderate Flemish



Leuven, 1968. Pupils of catholic schools support the battle for the Dutchification of the University.

nationalists did succeed in forcing the adoption of important language laws, but King Albert instructed his government to reject as a matter of principle the conversion of Ghent University to a Dutch-speaking institution and the formation of Dutch-language army units. The moderate Catholic Flemish sympathisers were therefore unable to profit from the growing differences of opinion within the Front Party. Activists resident abroad posed a greater threat: via the Catholic Front Party members in West-Vlaanderen, they succeeded in stage-managing a rejection of parliamentary democracy and allowing right-wing authoritarian views to filter through, especially after Mussolini's seizure of power in Italy in 1922. The Front Party was torn apart. For a while the liberals, especially those in Antwerp, were able to put up some resistance, and in 1928 they even caused the country to be shaken to its roots when the imprisoned activist August Borms was elected to office at a by-election in which the Catholics and Socialists had fielded no candidates. However, this would prove

to be their swan song. Unlike many others, Antwerp's Front Party members supported the creation of a federal state. That did not go far enough for the radicals, however. In the following year the West Fleming Joris Van Severen, who had been defeated in the election, founded the Verdinaso party (*Verbond van Dietse Nationaal-Solidaristen*), with an explicitly authoritarian programme. In Antwerp itself, the liberal Front Party members increasingly lost ground. In 1933 Herman Vos, the leader of the parliamentary Front Party and himself an Antwerp man, tabled a bill aimed at creating a federal Belgium. However, when he was unable to secure a majority for his proposal even in his own party, Vos handed in his resignation and went over to the Socialists. The Front Party was dead and buried, especially the left wing of the Party, which preferred federalism to separatism.

The Flemish National Union

The 1932 elections turned into a rout for the Front Party. Its leader, the Brabant teacher Staf De Clercq, lost his seat, despite his continued popularity. This prompted the founding of a right-wing authoritarian movement based on the German model, the Flemish National Union (*Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond* (VNV). De Clercq quickly succeeded in bringing the disparate groupings together. Officially the VNV advocated what was called *Dietsland*, a Dutch-speaking community uniting Flanders and the Netherlands. Nonetheless, the parliamentary factions also contained moderate federalists, who had no option but to accept the orders of their Leader (*den Leider*). They saw only one possible way of ending the chaos. De Clercq and his chief propagandist, Reimond Tollenaere, developed the VNV into an openly fascist party. In 1936, to their own amazement, the VNV made an enormous leap forward, doubling its parliamentary seats to 16. The fact that most of the members did not support the creation of *Dietsland* and were nothing like as extreme as the party leadership did not prevent De Clercq from accepting German financial support and establishing closer links with Nazi Germany. Despite the fact that De Clercq was portrayed by his political opponents as a 'mini-Hitler', the VNV continued to do well at elections. However, the party was politically isolated. An initial partnership with pro-Flemish Catholics was shot down in flames by the workers' wing. De Clercq was undeterred; he pinned all his hopes on a new German occupation. When the Germans did invade Belgium on 10 May 1940, De Clercq offered to co-operate in arranging the capitulation of the Belgian army.

During the four-year occupation, VNV collaboration with the Nazis was total: at the political, military and police level. Following De Clercq's sudden death, he was succeeded by Hendrik Elias, who became increasingly convinced that he was being deceived by the hard Nazis of the SS. His policy was doomed to failure, but he could not or dared not break with the Germans completely. The consequence was that the VNV collapsed ignominiously and after the Liberation was hit hard by the harsh Belgian repression; a number of death sentences were carried out after the Second World War, unusually harsh prison sentences were imposed, property was confiscated and people were declared 'politically dead' (loss of the right to vote, prohibited from working in education, administration, etc). Flemish nationalism appeared to have been removed from the political arena entirely.

The People's Union (*De Volksunie*)

Only one small group of Flemish nationalists, who had largely or completely escaped the post-war repression, dared to publish a more or less clandestine weekly newspaper from the end of 1945, which inveighed fiercely against the repression. The publication survived a bomb attack and legal action. Other publications complaining of the disadvantaged position of the Flemings also appeared sporadically. The language laws were being completely ignored, and Belgian governments in which only a quarter of the ministers were Flemish were the rule rather than the exception. Yet there were great doubts about the re-establishment of a Flemish Nationalist party. There were two favoured options: joining forces with the Flemish Christian Democrats (the CVP) – which had offered mandates to former VNV members as a way of lifting itself out of opposition – or taking the risk of forming a new party of their own. A first attempt in 1948 failed, partly because the meeting was broken up by members of the resistance. Two years earlier, Belgian soldiers, helped by a number of Liberal politicians, had expertly dynamited the IJzer Tower, the symbol of the Flemish Nationalist movement. It was the Flemish Christian Democrats who managed to channel the resultant fury and organised an IJzer pilgrimage in the hope that it would improve their electoral chances. Meanwhile, the Belgian Royal Question was raging, with the Francophones in particular opposing the return of King Leopold III, who had been carried away by the Germans. The Christian Democrats (CVP), by contrast, lined up resolutely behind the King, as did most Flemish nationalists. The latter did not even turn out to vote in 1950, enabling the CVP to secure an absolute majority and force a referendum on the King's return to the throne. The ultimate outcome of the referendum caused deep dismay among the Flemish Nationalists and played a huge part in their decision to form their own party. Leopold had achieved a majority of almost 58 percent in the referendum, but in the industrial centres of Wallonia and in Brussels only a minority supported the King. When despite this Leopold returned to the throne violent protests and strikes broke out, resulting in three deaths in the Liège area. Partly because of overt threats of separatism in Wallonia, Leopold and the CVP ultimately caved in and the King handed over power to his son Baudouin. According to the Christian trade union leader in Flanders, this outcome had 'created more anti-Belgians than the two world wars'.

The driving force behind the move to found a new Flemish nationalist party was the Brussels lawyer Frans Van der Elst, who had gained a good deal of prestige as the defender of VNV leader Elias. On 21 November 1954, he and a small group of like-minded nationalists formed The People's Union (*De Volksunie* – VU), which described itself unequivocally as a Flemish Nationalist party with federalism and amnesty as the main elements in its programme. Without repudiating tradition, the VU adopted democratic principles, seeing the parliamentary route rather than a pointless anti-Belgian stance as the only way to create a federal Belgian state. The VU had learned from its loaded past, but it failed to make an electoral breakthrough in the early years, gaining just one seat – in Antwerp, not coincidentally the city where many former collaborators had been forced to start a new life. As the party had made amnesty for political offences one of its main themes, it was for a long time distrusted as a 'VNV in a new guise'. This changed only slowly when Wallonia, in difficulties economically after the General Strike of 1960/61, began to demand federalism explicitly

Bart De Wever (left) with
Johan Vande Lanotte, (Minister of
Economy in the new
Belgian government) in the
Belgian Senate, 2011.
Photo by Filip Claus.



for socioeconomic reasons. At the same time the Flemish Movement, with its two Marches on Brussels (*Marsen op Brussel*), was demanding the definitive fixing of the language frontier between Flanders and Wallonia. That demand was met in the early 1960s, but in the eyes of the VU the Flemings had paid too high a price for it, among other things with the introduction of 'language facilities' (for example, according Francophones living in Dutch-speaking municipalities the right to use French in official dealings). The 1965 elections brought a breakthrough: at a stroke the VU moved from five parliamentary seats to twelve. Flanders was on the crest of a wave economically, too, and the younger generation were impatient and eager to move forward. Research showed that at least a third of those who voted for the VU were not driven by Flemish nationalist motives, but were attracted to the party's modern, non-conformist image. It was Catholic students who in 1968 pressured the Flemish CVP to split Leuven's university into a Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking institution. This immediately led to the break-up of the unitary Catholic party, followed shortly afterwards by the Liberals and Socialists. The VU triumphed and opened its ranks to independent members (*verruimers*), mostly of a centre-left persuasion. It proved to be an auspicious move; in 1968 the party achieved 20 seats and became larger than the Liberals. But a small hard core of right-wing Flemish nationalists, for whom federalism was merely a means to an end, began to show their dissatisfaction with the way the VU projected



Philip De Winter, strong man of *Vlaams Belang*, 1990. Photo by Filip Claus.

itself as a 'policy party': which was willing to make compromises with the Francophones. In 1971, led by Karel Dillen, they resigned from the VU. The seeds of a deep split had been sown.

New Flemish Alliance becomes the largest Flemish party

Like the VU, the federalists in Wallonia and Brussels also recorded major successes. In 1970 the unitary Belgian state went to its grave. In order to halt the march of the VU, the dedicated federalist Wilfried Martens was elected chairman of the CVP. Martens was the chief architect of the 1977 'Egmont Pact' which, with support from the VU and the Socialist Party, transformed Belgium into a federal state. Many people in Flanders felt that the VU in particular had made too many concessions in the Brussels peripheral municipalities during the federalisation process; ultimately it would take until 1993 for Belgium to become a truly federal state.

The VU was punished at the ballot box for its willingness to compromise, and in 1979 Karel Dillen founded a new Flemish nationalist party, known initially as *Vlaams Blok* and later relabelled *Vlaams Belang* (VB). Dillen was resolutely in favour of Flemish independence and achieved a spectacular breakthrough in 1991 when his party played the immigration and security cards to the full.

The VB became substantially bigger than the VU. After Belgium was transformed into a federal state in 1993, many VU members faced an existential problem. Their most important aim had been achieved; now the internal right-left conflicts began to rear their heads, eventually leading to the party's demise in 2001. Many office-holders had already left the party by then. Those who remained fell into two small groups: the left-wing *Spirit* faction, which was absorbed by the socialists after running in a cartel at the elections, and the hard-core Nationalists, who founded the New Flemish Alliance (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA)), which gained just one seat. Like Vlaams Belang, N-VA called for separatism, an independent Flemish state. But the new party set its face against Vlaams Belang because of the latter's extreme right-wing ideas. As the Christian Democrat opposition fell into disarray, a cartel was negotiated with N-VA. The Flemish CVP changed its name to CD&V (Christian Democratic & Flemish), and called for a confederal Belgium. The cartel formula proved fortuitous: the Christian Democrats once more resumed their leadership at regional and federal level. Things went badly wrong in 2007, however, following the failure to push through a reform of the state, and after lengthy negotiations the N-VA broke up the cartel. In the end the CD&V was forced to go to the electorate empty-handed. Bart De Wever had become the charismatic chairman of N-VA. At the early elections called on 13 June 2010, he profited to the full from the ineptitude of the other Flemish parties and the stubbornness of the Francophone parties, who opposed any further state reform or the mandatory splitting of the bilingual electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde. To their own amazement, the N-VA became the biggest party in Flanders, with 27 seats. It was a historic moment, the first time ever that separatist nationalists had achieved such a result.

By doing so the radicals have placed their old dream firmly on the political agenda. Separatism is no longer a taboo subject in Belgium, even though many of those who voted for the N-VA have no desire to see the end of their country; while the French-speakers, for their part, are taking the idea of Flemish independence increasingly seriously.

The outcome was that after the elections of 13 June 2010 Belgium experienced the longest government crisis in its history. The differences between the French-speakers and the Flemish nationalists were irreconcilable. Though French-speakers did realise that the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde electoral district had to be split and that a sixth round of state reform was unavoidable. But they did not want to lose out financially either. King Albert was extremely creative in sending out new conciliators time and time again. After more than a year of negotiations the Flemish Christian Democrats took the decision to stop running after the N-VA. Then slowly but surely things started moving. On 11 October 2011 Elio Di Rupo, a French-speaking Socialist charged with forming a new government, presented a communitarian agreement. On 6 December 2011 the government, under the same Di Rupo, was sworn in. Belgium will undergo new and profound changes, with more power and money for its constituent states. The federal level will be further dismantled. The Flemish nationalists are on the sidelines for the time being, but from the Flemish Government, to which they do belong, they can make things pretty difficult for the Belgian federal government. Already there is talk of a seventh round of state reform within ten years. ■