

Herman Van Rompuy Succeeds Yves Leterme

Since the 30th December 2008 a new Prime Minister has been running Belgium: the Flemish Christian Democrat Herman Van Rompuy (1947-). The man has a long experience of the wheels of the State. He entered politics at the age of 28, and was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Budget from 1993 to 1999. Before being called upon by the King to head the cabinet, he was comfortably installed as President of the Chamber of Deputies, a perch he was reluctant to leave. 'I'm not a candidate' was his response to the post of Head of Government and the responsibilities that go with it.

It must be said that his task is exceptionally hard. For some observers of political life it constitutes a veritable challenge. It comes down to this: the Prime Minister has to guide the country through an economic crisis which looks set to be the most serious since that of 1929. He already had to deal with one of the manifestations of this crisis: the consequences of the break-up of the banking and insurance group Fortis. On top of which, regional elections are due in June 2009 and could revive the tensions between the communities. Finally, and this is not the least of the government's problems, it will have to impose a compromise between the members of its own federal government and the representatives of the federated entities on a constitutional reform; while this has been accepted in principle by practically everyone in Belgium, there has been little agreement as to its extent. Cornerstone or stumbling-block of this highly sensitive community matter: the splitting of the electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, the only one in the country which is still bilingual.

Herman Van Rompuy presides over a slightly recast government, reuniting five parties: Christian Democrats of the CD&V and liberals of the Open VLD on the Flemish side, liberals of the MR, Democratic Humanists of the CDH and Socialists of the PS on the French-speaking side. Three political families divided by inter-community antagonisms, and parties which are often at daggers drawn with each other.

For all his image as a well-groomed Fleming, a



Yves Leterme and Herman Van Rompuy.

great lover of French literature, Herman Van Rompuy has nonetheless immediately established himself as the head of this difficult team. An intellectual whose interlocutors appreciate his ability to listen, he is praised for his synthesising mind which enables him rapidly to formulate the web of agreements to be negotiated. Add to that a reputation as a moderate, a federalist, and take into account his experience in financial matters. Isn't he exactly the right man for the job?

Paradoxically, the only people not to have joined this broad consensus on the new premier right away are certain members of his own party, who according to the press dislike his affiliation to the right wing of CD&V, or who see him as having betrayed the fallen star of the Flemish Christian Democrats, the outgoing Prime Minister Yves Leterme, with whom he maintains 'polite relations'.

While there was always scepticism regarding Mr Leterme's ability to push through a balanced constitutional reform, in the end it was 'Fortisgate' that brought him down. Seldom if ever has a Belgian political individual accumulated so many superlatives: a candidate with 800,000 preferential votes in the parliamentary elections of June 2007, he only took on the premiership after more than nine months of painful efforts to form a government, the longest in Belgian history, throughout which Guy Verhofstadt of the Open VLD held the office of Prime Minister for Current Affairs, and for a scant three months that of Interim Prime Minister, a formula hitherto unknown in Belgium.

Without doubt, the sheer scale of his electoral promises and the rigidity with which he sought to impose them on everyone in the early days, weighed on Yves Leterme, as did the pressures of the Flemish Nationalist party N-VA with which he formed a political coalition until the autumn of 2008. The decline in the general economic situation certainly did not help him, and the rescue of Fortis was a particularly delicate and sensitive matter for the many Belgians with savings.

As the regional elections of June 2009 draw near, observers are wary of tipping Herman Van Rompuy to win; but when asked by the press political scientist Pierre Vercauteren of the University of Mons gave it as his opinion that '*he possesses three qualities necessary for government action to succeed: leadership, creativity and the ability to compromise*'. And already it has only taken him two days to form his government.

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