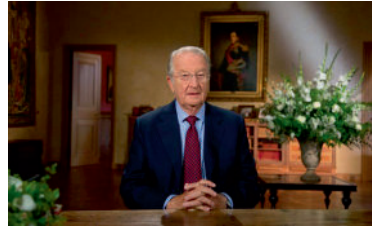


More of the Same?

The Changing of the Guard in the Monarchy



King Albert II announces his abdication on 3rd July 2013

202

[P E T R A D E K O N I N G]

Many television-viewers may not have noticed it, but for the royal palaces it is a radical innovation: when they give their television addresses, the Kings of Belgium and the Netherlands, Philippe and Willem-Alexander, no longer sit at their desk, as Philippe's father Albert and Willem-Alexander's mother Beatrix did. Philippe of Belgium stood, while the camera moved slowly around the room and even treated viewers to a glimpse of the garden. The Dutch Willem-Alexander sat in an armchair next to an open fire, his legs crossed casually.

But that was as far as the changes went. The flower arrangements and Christmas trees were still there, as was the classical music (Brahms for Beatrix, Telemann for Willem-Alexander) and the Belgian national anthem – which for Philippe's message on the national holiday was played slower and more solemnly than a year earlier when his father spoke.

With the slight nervousness that befits a beginner, they uttered speeches that could just as well have emerged from the mouths of Albert II of Belgium or Beatrix of Orange-Nassau. Touching on a 'meditation on our existence', solitude, unemployment, cooperation and confidence.

Willem-Alexander (47) was installed in Amsterdam on 30th April 2013 and Philippe (54) almost three months later in Brussels. If there is any sign that their arrival has brought the monarchy in the Low Countries to a turning point, it is still only very tentative.

From clumsy to vigorous

For a long time, neither Willem-Alexander nor Philippe was considered a perfect heir in their respective countries. They were seen as not especially intelligent and perhaps even unfit. Willem-Alexander, known as 'Prince Pils' in his student days, was always tense when near cameras. He studied Water Management so as to have something to occupy him until he became King. The shy but also impulsive Philippe mainly led trade missions, during which he occasionally made awkward political statements about his deeply divided country. He sometimes also gave the impression that he had a 'mission' that he would launch into as soon as he was King. He wanted to keep his country together at

Queen Beatrix signs the Act of Abdication in the Royal Palace in Amsterdam on 30th April 2013 © ANP



all costs. From time to time, doubts were openly expressed: could the monarchy survive under their leadership?

Philippe and Willem-Alexander are now seen as kings who are doing their best, and their popularity is increasing. They have metamorphosed from two ill-at-ease crown princes who were capable of shaking the foundations of the monarchy into kings whom most of the population consider to be hard workers. 'Philippe fulfils his task as if he were in the scouts,' says the historian Marc Van den Wijngaert, an expert on the Belgian royal family. 'One good deed every day. But all with the best of intentions. And you can see that he really believes in it. A lot of people find that quite endearing.'

When he made the traditional visits to get to know his country as King, Philippe started out in Flanders, where support for the French-speaking royal family is weakest and where the largest political party, the N-VA, aspires to divide the country. He sometimes found himself the target of street protests.

Willem-Alexander also toured the provinces to get to know his people, in care homes, neighbourhood centres and schools. He was not confronted with a politically divided country. He was just as warmly welcomed in Friesland – which even has its own language – as in Southern Holland. In the Netherlands, republican protest has for some time remained limited to a few individuals in the crowd holding a banner saying 'I am not a subject' or 'Liberate the King'.

Willem-Alexander's image had been tremendously improved some years before his succession by his marriage to the Argentine Maxima Zorreguieta, who soon became very popular in the Netherlands. In Philippe's case, his marriage to Countess Mathilde d'Udekem d'Acoz did not have the same effect. It did help him at first, but it soon became apparent that Mathilde had actually adopted the same tense nervousness as Philippe, and the story was that he was jealous of her initial popularity.

Mathilde was also compared to Maxima, who had learnt to speak good Dutch very quickly. Mathilde, who had grown up in bilingual Belgium, continued to speak Dutch quite poorly. She was parodied because she did not always come across as very intelligent or empathic either. As the Queen she garnered more favour as a result of her enthusiasm in the stands at the football World Cup in Brazil, though she lost some of it again when she mixed up two Belgian players.

In Flanders, with all its sensitivity regarding language, an error King Philippe made when speaking Dutch was immediately picked up: on the evening of his installation he had made a mistake when expressing his pride in his country, what he said was a literal translation from French.

In the Netherlands, on one occasion Maxima caused quite an upset when, as a princess, she declared in a speech that she had not been able to detect any characteristic Dutch identity. Did she mean that the Netherlands had no distinguishing features? No, she said afterwards. It had been 'a great compliment': she had meant that the Dutch were easily able to deal with the differences and individual identities of the country's regions. She had met Limburgers who were very proud of their own province and its own products, and she said she had experienced exactly the same thing in Friesland. 'And I thought it was so agreeable that in the midst of all this I have found the space to feel Dutch.'

All this fuss did nothing to change her great popularity, some of which rubbed off on Willem-Alexander. In the last few years, support for the Dutch royal family has undoubtedly also been boosted by the 2012 skiing accident involving Willem-Alexander's brother Friso, who spent a long period in a coma and eventually died.

By the time Willem-Alexander became King, his suitability for the job was no longer seriously disputed. Much less was expected of Philippe as King. In Belgian government circles it was considered that Willem-Alexander and Maxima need not necessarily come to Belgium for their first foreign visit after the coronation. These first trips made by royal couples always attract a great deal of attention and it was thought that Philippe and Mathilde would be compared unfavourably with the Dutch couple. So they went to Luxembourg first and their later visit to Belgium did not generate a huge amount of interest in the media.

The Belgian government also helped Philippe by giving him a clever and extremely experienced Chief of Staff, the former diplomat Frans van Daele. He resolved to help Philippe for a couple of years and then let a younger advisor take over. He immediately helped Philippe through the first, potentially very complicated year, which was marked by elections whose main winner was the Flemish nationalist N-VA party. The previous government, formed following the federal elections in 2010, had lasted 541 days.

Van Daele, a Fleming, knows the new generation of politicians in Flanders and understands how they think and what they want. When it came to forming a government, King Albert tended to let the old generation of Flemish statesmen do the rounds every time attempts made by the party leaders had become bogged down. Philippe made a more vigorous impression: if one party chairman did not succeed, then it was the turn of the next.

Maxima's tears

Politics in the Netherlands are far less complicated than in Belgium, and there is no party whose aim is to divide the country. So when it comes to forming a government, life was a lot easier for Queen Beatrix than for King Albert. But her successor is not exposed even to this mild political climate. In spring 2012 the Dutch parliament took the task of forming a government out of the head of state's hands. The government parties at the time, the Christian CDA and liberal VVD, did not want this change, but a majority, mainly of left-wing parties, voted it in.



King Philippe swears the oath in the Belgian Parliament on 21st July 2013



This means that Willem-Alexander is now much less vulnerable than Philippe, though one could also say that it has made his job less interesting. But he is not complaining. In a television interview he gave just before becoming King, Willem-Alexander said he would also accept it if all that remained to him were ceremonial duties. 'It wouldn't bother me at all. That's what I'm the King for. And if I have to sign anything, I'll do it.'

When governments are formed in Belgium's regions – Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels – the political parties arrange everything themselves. When it comes to Belgium as a whole, the parliamentary Speaker could take the initiative (instead of the King) and himself appoint *formateurs* (individuals charged with forming a new government) and *informateurs* (individuals who examine whether a proposed government formation might succeed). But he will be *either* a French-speaker *or* Flemish, which may make him less acceptable to others. The Belgian royal family is not Flemish at all, but nor is it linked to any French-speaking political party. So Philippe is probably not yet rid of the complicated task of forming Belgian governments.

In a poll by the RTL television channel, Willem-Alexander scored 96.1% for popularity. But very few demands have so far been made of the new Dutch King. At the Winter Olympics he had a beer together with the Russian President Vladimir Putin, and that was considered 'possibly not very wise'.

A completely different light was shed on that glass of beer when, at the end of July 2014, supposedly pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine shot down a plane and in the process killed 298 people, 196 of whom were Dutch nationals. This took place on a Thursday. The Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte spoke to the Russian President on the phone several times a day, because he exerts considerable influence over the separatists. He gave press conferences every day. But it was only on the following Monday that Willem-Alexander spoke to the people on television.

This was thought to be rather late, but not a serious error. On the day of national mourning, when the bodies arrived back from Ukraine, Willem-Alexander and Maxima attended, together with politicians and ambassadors. Interest in the royal couple focused mainly on Maxima's tears, while Willem-Alexander himself shed none.

A man of flesh and blood

No research on the matter has been done recently, but in Belgium it is assumed that most French-speakers support the monarchy. The royal family is one of the last remaining symbols of the unity of the country that many French-speakers wish to preserve. Philippe's popularity is on the increase in Flanders: according to a poll by the Flemish television channel VTM, 64% think he is doing well, and 72% are happy with Mathilde.

Marc Van den Wijngaert, the expert on the royal family, thinks that support for Philippe has also increased because of people's incomprehension of his father's behaviour. It seems Albert does not intend to accept that his son is now head of the royal family. He gave an interview – in French – to a commercial broadcaster without previously consulting Philippe. When his other son Laurent was seriously ill, Albert and his wife Paola did not at first visit him in hospital. Later, again without consulting Philippe, they published a letter about their son's illness that was seen as excessively emotional and perhaps even



Philippe and Mathilde on the balcony of the Brussels palace on the day of the coronation on 21st July 2013

damaging to Laurent, who was already known to be the family's weak link.

Philippe and Albert never did have an easy relationship. Albert, involved in a long-term love affair, did not pay his children much attention. And now, by sacking Albert's Chief of Staff, Philippe showed himself – in the eyes of public opinion – to be no pushover. The Flemish too considered this a resolute action.

But when it is proposed that the kingship in Belgium could also be made purely ceremonial, the call almost always comes from the Flemish. The desire for a republic is also a Flemish phenomenon and is mainly associated with those more on the right wing of politics. But this is not the wish for a Belgian republic... only a Flemish one.

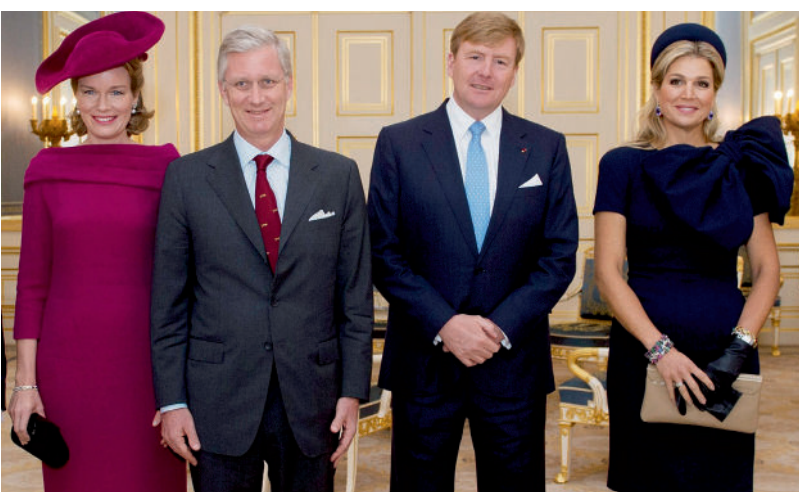
If the Belgian monarchy should one day come to an end, it will probably be to make way for a Flemish republic and a French-speaking neighbour.

You hardly ever hear left-wing Flemish politicians speaking against the monarchy: they evidently prefer to keep quiet so as not to be associated with

Flemish separatists. Things are different in the Netherlands: those who have left-wing ideas and vote for a left-wing party also tend to have greater doubts about the monarchy than those who think and vote on the right.

There are also left-wing Flemings who think that it is a matter of their national character: they say that the Dutch take a lot of things – including the royal family – more seriously than the Flemish. Nor do they think that Philippe can do much harm, and they say that his awkward behaviour simply shows that he is a man of flesh and blood. According to one Belgian psychoanalyst (with a Flemish mother and a French-speaking father), the Belgians see themselves reflected in their royal family: 'We find ourselves a little clumsy too, and belittle ourselves, not putting on any airs.'

In the Netherlands, the Meertens Institute, which collects and analyses expressions of Dutch culture, has examined the population's sense of 'Orangeness'. It turns out that this is by no means associated only with the royal House of Orange, but just as much with people such as the Dutch astronaut André Kuipers and Dutch sports stars.



Monarchs of the Low Countries

Ceremonial kingship?

The accession of the two new kings appears to ensure the continued existence of the monarchy in the Low Countries. There is still little to be said about the two crown princesses – the Dutch Amalia (11) and the Belgian Elizabeth (13). The fact that Elizabeth is first in line to the throne and has been going to a Dutch-speaking school since she started at the nursery says a lot about the effort Philippe wants to put into gaining the confidence of the Flemish and preserving the unity of his kingdom.

In his book *België en zijn koningen* (Belgium and its Kings), Marc Van den Wijngaert writes that in Belgium the substance of the King's role is diminishing *de facto* and is thus becoming more and more symbolic: as a result of state reforms, Flanders and Wallonia are increasingly deciding things for themselves. The Netherlands soon became accustomed to the head of state no longer being



Princess Beatrix and her granddaughters in
the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam on 30th April 2013. © ANP

involved in forming the government. And, even without any appreciable pressure from republicans, the ceremonial kingship that Willem-Alexander has already mentioned may not be far off. As Van den Wijngaert says: 'From the fact that Willem-Alexander talked about it himself I had the feeling that the Netherlands may be moving nearer to this sort of ceremonial kingship than Belgium.' ■



Princess Elisabeth of Belgium

Translated by Gregory Ball