



The Belgian prime minister Elio Di Rupo.

A New Federal Government for Belgium after 541 Days

King Albert of Belgium was clearly enjoying it very much. On the 6th of December 2011 he finally gave a reception for his country's new government at Laken Castle, following 541 days of political negotiations and one deep crisis after another. Smiling and joking, he worked his way along the line of ministers and secretaries of state with raised hands who were swearing allegiance to himself, to the constitution and to the laws of the Belgian nation.

But if anyone still thought that at the end of the interminable process of forming a government nothing had changed in the country of King Albert, that view was no longer valid after the 6th of December. For who among those present took the oath, with self-assurance, in their own language alone? Almost all the Dutch-speaking

ministers and secretaries of state. And who did it all in both French and Dutch? The French-speakers, who, according to many Flemings, prefer to speak only their own language, and expect everyone else to adapt to this.

As a spectator you couldn't help thinking that the French-speaking members of government had been given a serious talking-to by the prime minister, the French-speaking socialist Elio Di Rupo. Di Rupo, whose Dutch is not very good either, was very aware how threatening the political crisis had become for the unity of the country. The differences of opinion between the Dutch-speaking north and the French-speaking south of the country seemed to be making Belgium ungovernable. The fact that it had now, nonetheless, been possible to form a government didn't mean that the danger had disappeared just like that. The new government had a majority in the Belgian Parliament, but not in Flanders.

And according to opinion polls, Belgium's largest party, the Flemish nationalist N-VA, who want independence for Flanders, had gained strength.

For more than a year the French-speaking politicians had been saying that the N-VA, who had won the elections in 2010, *must* be in the new government. The Flemish Christian-Democrats (CD&V) were also increasingly saying the same: without the N-VA leader, Bart De Wever, they would not participate. And De Wever himself was saying that he would very much like to see his party in the government. Not everyone believed that, but, according to the Flemish Socialist Johan Vande Lanotte, one of the 'royal intermediaries' in the formation of the government, he had very serious negotiations with De Wever.

It may never be completely clear why nothing came of all this. Who precisely didn't want to co-operate with whom? The N-VA says that they 'were forced out'. The other parties say the N-VA gave up. The breaking point was a memorandum in the summer from Di Rupo, the person charged with forming a government at the time. The N-VA rejected it, the others broke off negotiations.

There was relief among the French-speaking media: without the N-VA success was in sight at last. But De Wever's Flemish Nationalists were fierce fighters. In the discussions about a reformed state the Flemish Christian Democrats, in particular, felt threatened by them – if we're into 'Flemishness', N-VA is their chief rival. During the negotiations over a social and economic policy it was the Flemish Liberals (Open Vld) in the main who found them a nuisance: the N-VA is not only Flemish nationalist but also right-conservative.

But there was no way back – either by means of a new attempt at negotiation or fresh elections. Because that could only make the N-VA really important and powerful. In September there was an agreement over a new way of organizing the state of Belgium, with more powers for Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, and a settlement was also reached on the fiercely disputed electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, a

symbol for decades of the tensions between Francophones and Flemings.

It was still months before the parties were also agreed on a social and economic policy, which needed to find savings of more than eleven billion euros. The Flemish Liberals and the French-speaking Socialists were diametrically opposed to each other. According to the Flemings, the Francophones were interested mainly in protecting their own unemployed and making no changes; according to the Francophones, the Flemings were only standing up for their own businesses.

Nonetheless an agreement was reached, under great pressure from the European Commission, which threatened to impose sanctions unless a budget was decided quickly, and from the financial markets – interest rates for loans to Belgium reached a record high. Di Rupo now heads a government with six parties: the Social-Democrats, Liberals and Christian Democrats from Flanders and those from French-speaking Belgium.

But he is not automatically the big winner and Bart De Wever the loser. From disclosures from after the formation of the government it appeared that Di Rupo, just like many other French-speaking politicians, is now taking serious account of the fact that Belgium may fall apart one day. They seem to have said that 'Plan B' is coming into operation. But Wallonia needs time to strengthen its position economically – the Francophones still can't do without the money from Flanders. The Francophone politicians must also have made clear to Di Rupo that they should grant their Flemish colleagues a lot of successes, otherwise at the next elections they'll stand no chance at all against the N-VA. And if that happens will it ever be possible to form a government again?

PETRA DE KONING

Translated by Sheila M. Dale