

# From Belgian Nation State to Nations in Belgium: Past, Present and Future<sup>1</sup>

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It is common knowledge that the history of Belgium is characterised by three fault lines:

1. a socio-economic fault line between 'labour' and 'capital', the contrast between capitalism and the labour movement, or in contemporary terms, between employers and employees;
2. an ideological fault line between Catholics and freethinkers;
3. a linguistic fault line between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking people which has now developed into a 'community' fault line between communities and regions.

Each of these fault lines has led to severe conflicts in Belgian history, conflicts that are bridged time and again by historical compromises. For example, the Social Pact (1944-1945) ensured definitive integration of the labour movement in the civil-capitalist state, and the School Pact (1958) and the Culture Pact (1973) invalidated the ideological fault line. In the course of the 20th century language laws and state reforms pacified the linguistic and community fault lines, but did not solve them, as appears from the state of the Belgian Kingdom in the year 2010. Nowadays they are even endangering the very survival of the country.

At present there are approx. 6,000 languages and around 200 sovereign states. The existence of different linguistic groups within one state is therefore rather the rule than the exception. The use of languages also often leads to political problems; in this respect too Belgium is no exception. In history, the politicisation of the use of language occurred at a more recent date. Multilingualism was the rule in the Ancien Régime. For centuries the Southern Netherlands were part of the Habsburg Empire, which was a multilingual empire. Language became a political problem in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of nationalism. Language became an important identification for nations, in contrast to the situation during the Ancien Régime when language was actually an item in the feudal negotiations between the sovereign and his subjects, but not a subject for horizontal solidarity between citizens. A country such as France was a multilingual country until the French Revolution. Half of its population did not speak French but Occitan, Breton, Basque, Flemish or another regional language. It was the French Revolution with its *égalité*, *fraternité* and *liberté* which ended this. This seems to be a paradox. Freedom, equality and fraternity should in fact provide space for diversity. Nothing is further from the truth. The principle of the sovereignty of the people, which was the issue in the French Revolution, precisely necessitated a demarcation of that people, and this in turn implied a clear identity characterised by a homogeneous culture. In a literal and figurative sense the people had to speak the same language.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the British philosopher and one of the most influential thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the founder of modern liberalism, considered a uniform language as a *sine qua non* for an administrative system on the basis of democratic representation<sup>2</sup>. In 'Considerations on Representative Government' (1861) he argued that it is impossible to construct a democracy in countries in which people speak different languages. He was actually convinced that this purpose

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on historical analyses of nationbuilding and nationalism(s) in Belgium: K. DEPREZ EN L. VOS (eds.), *Nationalism in Belgium. Shifting identities, 1780-1995*, London ; New York, 1998; J. KOLL (ed.) *Nationale Bewegingen in België. Ein historischer Überblick*, Münster ; New York ; München ; Berlin, 2005; J. STENGERS, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, Tome 1, *Les racines de la Belgique. Jusqu'à la Révolution de 1830*, Bruxelles, 2000; J. STENGERS AND E. GUBIN, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, Tome 2, *Le grand siècle de la nationalité belge. De 1830 à 1918*, Bruxelles, 2002; L. WILS, *Van Clovis tot Di Rupo: De lange weg van de naties in de lage landen*, Leuven/Apeldoorn, Garant, 2005; E. WITTE AND H. VAN VELTHOVEN, *Language and Politics. The Situation in Belgium in an Historical Perspective*, Brussel, 1999; *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tiel, 3 delen, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The following section is based on PH. VAN PARIJS, *Belgium Re-Founded*, in: F. DE RYNCK, B. VERSCHUEREN AND E. WAYENBERG (EDS.), *Re-Thinking the State. Critical Perspectives on the Citizen, Politics and Government in the 21st Century*, Mechelen: Kluwer; University College Ghent, 2009, pp. 85-102.

requires a defined public opinion and he thought this impossible if people do not read the same newspapers and books. Democracy needs a forum in which people can exchange thoughts on an equal basis and therefore one single language is required. For Mill the boundaries of nationality had to correspond to those of the state. This is also the classic dogma of nationalism, viz. that nation and state have to concord, although Mill is not a nationalist; for him it is a matter of a public forum, the possibility for communication, not national identity as such. In his opinion, language is purely functional.

His point of view was thus completely different from that of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1804), a generation older than Mill – in fact he died when Mill was born. The latter is known for the witticism 'language is the entire nation', the idea that a nation as it were reveals itself in the language. In this notion language acquires an existential value. The context in which Herder formulated this thought was that of German nationalism, of which the German language was the major vehicle. Unlike France, which had been a strong state for centuries with its regal absolutism, until 1870 there was no German state but a patchwork of larger and smaller states where German was spoken – more than 300 in Herder's time. Herder's concept of language has the same effect as Mill's view, i.e. the need for homogenisation. If language is the entire nation and the nation is the power basis of the state, there is no room for other language groups in the state.

The views of Herder and Mill set a challenge for the Belgian politicians of the young Belgian state with its different languages. What were the options and how were they manipulated in the course of history?

A first option was implementing monolingualism. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this could only mean Frenchification throughout Belgium and therefore also of its Dutch-speaking inhabitants. It was also the firm conviction of the leading elite: the necessity of one single language for efficient administration of the country. All major political, economic and cultural matters were dealt with in French. This was a matter-of-course for the leading elite in Belgium, which had been Frenchified for generations in the part of the country where the population also spoke a Dutch-language dialect. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French was a language with a very great cultural prestige. The aristocracy and the elite outside of France too liked to speak French. This is more or less comparable to the way in which English is now becoming dominant in certain sectors. So the Belgian leading classes considered Belgium as a French-speaking state. Why were they not able to implement that plan?

In the first place, those elites did not take any initiative to eradicate the Dutch-language dialects in the Northern provinces – in contrast to the state of France where this was done after 1789. This vernacular in fact still had a function for the young Belgium because it could be used as proof of the self-image of the young Belgian state, viz. that it was at the crossroads of the Romance and German cultures.

In the second place, the Dutch language was an argument against the French lust for territory. France was the imperial power to be feared and the use of the French language in Belgium could be an argument for annexation.

In the third place, the elite hardly bothered about the social and cultural conditions of the common people. Compulsory education up to the age of 14 was only introduced in Belgium in 1918. Until then the people received very elementary mass education, which was insufficient to implement Frenchification of the population.

In the fourth place, a political movement developed which resisted the dominance of French. This 'Flemish Movement' demanded recognition of Dutch as a cultural language, as an administrative language, as a language for education etc. The Flemish Movement found following among lower middle-class groups, who earned their bread in language-sensitive sectors and who also saw the Flemish Movement as a means to take a stand against the higher classes in a battle for political and cultural supremacy.

In the fifth place, Belgium was a liberal democracy with a very liberal constitution that considered freedoms as being of paramount importance. This also included the use of language, which was free. In the first instance, this played into the hands of the strongest and therefore gave full scope to Frenchification. In the second instance, however, freedom of language also provided space for the Flemish Movement to expand freely and to undertake cultural and political actions.

The fact that the complete Frenchification of Belgium did not occur in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can also be read as a paradox: in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Belgium was actually excessively and inadequately democratic. It was inadequately democratic in the sense that it only promoted the political and social interests of the higher classes and did not provide education and other tools for cultural and social edification of the common people. If this were to have been the case, for example, by introducing compulsory education, it would probably have been the death-knell for Dutch in Belgium. At the same time Belgium was too democratic in the sense that there was room for opposition and therefore for a pressure group such as the Flemish Movement. If the Belgian state would have been more authoritarian, like most states in the Europe of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it would have violently suppressed the Flemish Movement and in that case Flanders would probably not have existed. For contemporary Flanders is a product of the Flemish Movement and not vice versa. The Flemish Movement brought about the awareness of the speakers of dialect in the northern provinces of Belgium that, because of the mother tongue, they lived in opposition to the French of the elite. These language dialects were gradually defined as 'Flemish', even by people in Brabant and Limburg, who also started to call themselves Flemings, whereas that name was restricted to the provinces of East and West Flanders for a long time and also still after the birth of Belgium.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Flemish Movement gained more following and therefore more power. A major milestone was the introduction of the General Multiple Voting Right in 1894. The elected rulers had to persuade Flemings who could not speak French to vote for them. This boosted Dutchification of public life and affected the balance of power. In 1898 the Flemish Movement had acquired sufficient political power to enforce fundamental linguistic equality in the Belgian constitution with the so-called 'Act of Equality'. It was to take over 30 years before this fundamental equality also became legal equality and even many more years before legal equality became de facto equality. Nevertheless, the Act of Equality was a turning point.

Thus the language conflict entered a second stage. By then the assimilation of Dutch speakers was no longer a politically feasible option. The French-speaking elite, who were still dominant in Belgium but by that time had to suffer a solid Flemish-minded contra-elite, wanted to maintain French as the standard language, in addition to the recognition of Dutch as the second language in Flanders. The second language in various respects, viz. a language secondary to French, which remained the superior language, suitable for example for university education for which Dutch was not an eligible option. A second language in the sense that French remained an official language in Flanders, which therefore became de facto bilingual, while Wallonia was considered to be a monolingual French-speaking region. However, because of economic migration in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an estimated 300,000 Dutch speakers lived in Wallonia who continued to speak their language for one generation. That group was not much smaller than the approx. 5% French-language mother-tongue speakers in Flanders. So in theory the Act of Equality also could have had another consequence, viz. equality of languages in the entire Belgian territory. It is not a theory in the sense that no-one would have thought of that consequence. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, voices were heard within the Flemish Movement to achieve equality of language in this way.

However, it remains theory because the political and social conditions rendered this option impossible. In the first place, the language minorities on both sides were socially incomparable. The Flemings in Wallonia were lumpenproletariat in search of a better life in the Walloon mines and metal industry, fleeing from the terrible economic conditions in rural Flanders where agriculture and cottage industries were facing a crisis. 'Poor Flanders' is a well-known image. The French speakers in Flanders belonged to the elite. Often, they were either long-Frenchified indigenous people or immigrant Walloons who could get the better jobs there because of the Francophone administrations.

The second reason why generalised bilingualism remained a purely theoretical possibility was that the French-speaking elite was absolutely convinced that French was a superior language to Dutch and that it could in no way be justified for French speakers to be obliged to learn Dutch. Recent historical research indicates that this notion was also prevalent among common Walloon people<sup>3</sup>. In this respect the Dutch-speaking Flemings remained what they had always been. As a demographic majority in Belgium they were a sociological minority because of their mother tongue.

There was a third reason why generalised bilingualism was not a realistic option and that reason has to be found in what we know from socio-linguistic research. Voluntary bilingualism, in which two languages can evolve freely within one single territory, always leads to the gradual disappearance of one of the two languages. There is a simple reason for this phenomenon, viz. if two population groups want to or have to communicate with each other, knowledge of one of the languages suffices. Learning a language requires great effort and this effort is not made spontaneously. It always leads to a scenario in which the more dominant language ousts the other language or languages. Belgium is an example of this. In spite of the official equality of languages announced in 1898, Frenchification simply continued in Brussels, along the entire language border and in Flemish towns with a French-speaking presence. There appears to be only one way to maintain bilingualism, viz. when the state imposes bilingualism from above by demanding bilingualism for public service posts and therefore also imposes it as a qualification requirement. The option was illusory in the Belgium of the Belle Epoque, in the first place because of the constitutionally imposed freedom of language which renders enforcement of a language impossible and, in the second place, because the French-speaking elite did not acknowledge Dutch as a language in its own right. This is illustrated by the statement of the Walloon lawyer, socialist politician and leading man in the Walloon Movement Jules Destrée (1863-1936). When confronted with the proposal for generalised bilingualism, he frankly called it 'imbécil'. It is also in that context that we should interpret his famous 'Lettre au roi' from 1912. "Sire" – Destrée wrote – "il n'y a pas de Belges", there are only Walloons and Flemings. For Destrée, language was in actual fact the entire nation and in this respect he was on a par with the Flemish radicals of his time, with the difference that Destrée considered the historical bilingualism of Flanders as an argument to retain French in Flanders and thus not harm the career opportunities of Walloons in Flanders. The continual resistance of French speakers against Dutchification of higher education should be seen in that light so, in retaliation, Dutchification of Gent College became one of the key demands for the Flemish Movement. The three crowing cocks, Frans Van Cauwelaert, Louis Franck and Camille Huysmans, three Flemish-minded politicians from the three Belgian parties who together demanded Dutchification of Gent University, were a symbol of the broad Flemish-minded resistance. That was the situation on the eve of World War I.

What does this teach us for the future of Belgium? In the first place that there should be no dreaming about naive solutions as if Flemings and Francophones were to get together spontaneously by, for example, learning each others' language. In the second place it teaches us that there is quite a responsibility for the administrative elite, the powers that be, who have to keep their finger on the pulse of society and should not be blinded by their own condition humaine and political interests. Destrée and his generation of French-speaking rulers misjudged the language problem, since they sacrificed the complaints of the Flemings to their own interests and the interests of a French-speaking minority in Flanders.

The latter was to become apparent during and after World War I in the third stage of the Belgian language fault line. By then we can call this fault line a community fault line, since because of the language dispute linguistic communities had developed as well. The Flemish Movement had made Dutch-speaking Belgians aware of belonging to a Flemish nation and the Walloon Movement – which as we saw was generated by a reaction against the Flemish Movement – had given the Walloons Walloon awareness, although to a far lesser degree. But in spite of this and notwithstanding Destrée's witticism of "sire il n'y a pas de belges", an all-embracing sense of Belgian nationalism was still very strong. This had been demonstrated meanwhile during World War I when the Belgian enthusiastically defended their fatherland against the German invader. It was also apparent from the fact that the German occupier hardly succeeded in setting up a collaboration movement worth

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<sup>3</sup> See M. VAN GINDERACHTER, *Het Rode Vaderland. De vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen voor WO I*, Tielt; Gent: Lannoo-Amsab-ISG, 2005, pp. 348-355.

speaking of, not even when the latter Dutchified Gent University in December 1915 and thus complied with one of the core demands of the Flemish Movement. The majority of the Flemish Movement remained true to the Belgian fatherland, and this was also the case for the Flemish minded at the IJzer front. However, a radicalised Flemish-minded Front Movement arose which flirted with high treason, but this involved a small minority and the idea of high treason also played a part in only a small minority within that minority.

Nevertheless, part of the French-speaking elite was to seize the Flemish-minded collaboration and the radicalisation of the Front Movement to thwart any concession to the Flemish Movement. On the triumphant restoration of the Belgian government in 1918 the Dutchified university in Gent was Frenchified again. The French-speaking elite totally misjudged the frame of mind of the Flemish population, who had indeed spat out German-minded collaboration, but because of the war experience started making major demands from the Belgian fatherland. These comprised in particular the recognition of Dutch as a legal and de facto national language in its own right. The French-speaking elite thought that they saw rejection of the Flemish Movement in the Belgian patriotism of the population and therefore deemed that preservation of French-speaking supremacy was guaranteed. This appeared to be a fundamental error. History teaches that wars are key moments to strengthen or break the formation of a nation. The experience of war interferes in everybody's life, causes insecurity and mortal danger, and in those circumstances people fall back on large protective structures such as the nation. The Belgian patriotism that really flared up during the war could have been the starting point for shaping a new Belgian nation state.

But, in historical reality and because of the circumstances described, the war on the contrary caused a rift in the Belgian nation state. Since the demands of the Flemish Movement and the complaints of the majority of the Flemish population were not met, an anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism acquired the potential to grow. Because of the Dutch language's long and frustrating battle for equality in law and in fact, a major part of the Flemish elite lost its faith in the Belgian fatherland since the political battle was all about equality. People could only believe in a Belgian fatherland if the latter recognised the language and culture of the Flemish population as being equal to the French and Walloon population.

Why was it so difficult for the French-speaking Belgian elites to comply with that demand? In the first place, because they were convinced that the Belgian fatherland would be destroyed if French was given up as the uniform language. In the second place, because they did not want to give up the French-speaking minority in Flanders – small, but politically and symbolically extremely important. It was to take until 1932 before there was the political will to finally do the unavoidable, viz. to recognise the Flemings' equality in law and in fact by means of a series of language laws. The latter started from the principle of language-homogeneous regions on the one hand and on the other from the principle that the language of the region is at the same time the language of the administration, education, jurisdiction etc. Therefore the language laws of the 1930s created a territorialisation of the language fault line with an in principle monolingual Dutch Flanders, a monolingual French Wallonia and the capital of Brussels as a bilingual area.

The possibility of a bilingualism imposed from above was not taken into consideration, since especially for the French-speaking region it was not a matter for discussion. When, during discussion of the 1932 language law on administrative matters, Flemish negotiators suggested imposing bilingualism for top-level civil servants, it was resolutely rejected by the French-speaking negotiators, so that the system of the language roles and the appointment of deputies from the other language system came into force. A top Flemish negotiator predicted that this would mean the end of Belgium<sup>4</sup>. This happened in the year 1932.

The French-language resistance to bilingualism, which would come from two sides, can be explained by the above-mentioned socio-psychological problem of making efforts for a language that was considered to be inferior as such and by reasons of self-interest. The bilingual Flemings would take up top positions en masse at the expense of monolingual Walloons. It was no coincidence that the French-speaking socialists as well as the Christian-democratic trade union firmly resisted the idea of bilingual top positions. In any case, the aforementioned impossibility of having two languages co-exist

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<sup>4</sup> See L. Wils, *Burgemeester Van Cauwelaert 1922-1932. Schepper van een Nederlandstalig Vlaanderen*, Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 2005, pp. 148-167.

on a free basis was to be demonstrated in Brussels where bilingualism was not regulated by means of a legal context and where Dutch was being more and more suppressed. This was in fact also true for the Dutch in communes along the language border. The next major round of language laws was therefore concerned with Brussels and the language border, but it only came about in the 1960s, *inter alia* because a new world war had intervened.

What can we learn from that third stage of the language conflict, the stage in which the first major language laws came about which led to language-homogeneous regions and language-homogeneous administrative positions? Was this really the beginning of the end of a unitarian Belgium, as one of the Flemish-minded negotiators thought? The language laws of the 1930s can indeed be considered to be the beginning of the end of unitarian Belgium, since the language-homogeneous regions opened the door to language-homogeneous politics and consequently to political parties and therefore to federalism. Incidentally, that process started immediately. In 1936 the Catholic Party federalised and in the BWP [Belgian Workers party] there were great rumblings, and in 1938 the French and Dutch Culture Councils were established. World War II was to interrupt this early process of federalisation and cause a new boost of Belgian patriotism and unitarity, also because of the collaboration of the radical Flemish Movement. After the war, federalism was completely discredited, but this was only a postponement. In 1968 the CVP/PSC [Christian Party] split again and in the next decade all Belgian parties divided. In 1978, as a result of the first Belgian state reform, Culture Councils developed again and parliament was divided into language groups. Twenty years and four state reforms later, Belgium officially became a federal state in 1993 on the basis of a *sui generis* federal model with communities and regions which reconciled the divergent complaints of Flemings and Walloons and also positioned Brussels, where citizens belonged to one of the two communities on the basis of their language. Whereby, however, Brussels also received regional competences and after some time its own directly elected parliament as well. This is not the place to analyse the complicated state reforms. However, it can be concluded that less than 20 years after the official establishment of federal Belgium and after even some more state reforms, confederalism or the end of Belgium is predicted aloud, *inter alia* because Flemings and Walloons just cannot agree on what should happen to Brussels and its periphery in the future.

The question is whether this is an inevitable process. This leads to a difficult problem on the level of the historical explanation. There is the risk that the course of history is going to be confused with its explanation. Matters took their course as they did, so it was probably inevitable or, in other words, the explanation is the course as such. This is a classic thinking error. History is a process in which at any moment alternatives are possible. History is contingent, defined by circumstances and therefore open. Does this not mean that anything is possible at any moment? Not at all. It is precisely the circumstances that render a particular development more plausible than another. In theory, in 1830 Belgium could also have been founded as a Dutch-language state, but circumstances made it completely impossible, for states are formed by the leading elites. This is recurrent in history. Therefore the course of history is partly predictable, but on the other hand circumstances change continually so that history is never completely predictable.

In the matter in hand, circumstances changed very fundamentally. The sociological minority which the Flemings were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, living in a 'poor Flanders', a real economic development area, has changed fundamentally. Nowadays circumstances are completely different. The Flemings are 'les nouveaux riches' and have increasingly fewer complexes. Flanders is a rich region on a rich continent. Europe has become a symbol of peace, so that the inhabitants no longer have to fear their neighbours. National defence is becoming less relevant, just like the national currency disappeared. In short, both internally and externally, circumstances have changed a great deal and in answering the question of what will happen to Belgium in the future this should be taken into account. Thus, at first sight, the development of the European Union seems to promote centrifugal forces in Belgium; for numerous issues the Belgian state level is no longer required. But, on second sight, the European Union can also give second wind to the Belgian state and society model. Belgium is sometimes presented as the laboratory of the EU, which is also involved in a multinational state reform process. The core of the debate is the validity of national identity and the possibility or impossibility of a post-national future.

The history of Belgium already teaches us that language and the way in which language has political implications is a problem for Europe which should not be underestimated. Increasingly, English is becoming the lingua franca in the world and also in Europe. It may be wondered whether this offers the perspective for a future Belgium in which English will be a common medium for communication in well-defined fields, such as federal politics. Or is there a perspective hidden in the more mental shifts, which may effect an increase in the willingness of French speakers to learn Dutch? Maybe space will thus be created for bilingualism imposed by the authorities for anybody whose ambition is a social position anywhere in the country.

Is it a fallacy to think that language politics can offer a solution anyway? Is language the entire nation, as Herder thought, and is there therefore an unbridgeable gap between Dutch speakers and French speakers which is why they no longer form a polis, why they have become two democracies? There are strong arguments in favour of the assertion that this has actually happened. A party landscape with only parties per language group for instance, or a strictly separate media landscape.

But is this a law according to Herder, as nationalists claim, or was this defined by circumstances and are there therefore still possibilities for Belgium to celebrate its 200th anniversary in the pink of health? The future will tell.