

Flemish Nationalists (N-VA) Versus the Rest and... Themselves

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The elections of 25 May 2014 have for some years, and certainly since the start of the current Di Rupo I administration in December 2011, been regarded as critical. On that day, membership of the Flemish Parliament, the Federal Chamber and the European Parliament will be decided. In this article we shall consider how the ideological changes in the Flemish party system in 2013 came about and where the Flemish political parties stand at the start of the 2014 campaign.

THE MOTHER OF ALL ELECTIONS

84 The elections in 2014 will be held at every level above the province, and involve many parties, many candidates, many issues and much hard work. And from 2014 even the federal elections will be held every five years so that in theory after 2014 these elections will always coincide. How it will actually turn out in practice remains to be seen. It is dealt with in a complicated section of Belgium's sixth constitutional reform, the so-called 'bow tie agreement' [*Vlinderakkoord*]. But it is highly likely that the next simultaneous elections will take place in 2019. Five years is a long time in politics and the balance of power established in May 2014 at the regional and federal levels will remain in place for quite a long period. It is a period in which all kinds of reforms have been promised, partly because a long break between elections is the best time to push through reform. So it makes a world of difference whether a party is involved in the action or not. Nobody can predict what the political world of 2019 will be like. The question, therefore, is whether the turbulent period which began in 2007 will be brought to a close in 2014 or still continue.

FLEMISH NATIONALISTS (N-VA) VERSUS THE REST...

That is one reason why the 2014 elections are of the greatest importance for all parties, including the traditional parties in Flanders: CD&V (Christian Democrats), Open VLD (Liberals) and Sp.a (Social Democrats). For many years now they have been in decline. Their electoral share in 2010 fell below the symbolic 50% of the Flemish community. If they sink any further and are unable to turn the tide, not only their electoral share but also their role in government will be further eroded. So next year even the traditional parties will have to be on their toes.

That is why in the last few months they have all been giving their ideologies a thorough overhaul. The traditional parties are now widely perceived as virtually interchangeable. It was undeniably the success of the Flemish nationalist N-VA, which does seem to offer a clear alternative, which was the catalyst for their urge to reprofile themselves. The aim of the traditional parties is to improve on their 2010 performance by presenting a face, a profile, that is clearly their own and which

distinguishes them from the others. Working together in a tripartite coalition, they want to offer a fresh and meaningful alternative. All three are acting on the same basic principle: they are not interested in 'demolition politics'; they oppose revolutionary change because they believe it only leads to uncertainty; and their proposals though not spectacular will offer a solution to the country's problems. This common approach will then be given a particular ideological twist according to taste, and topped up with specifically liberal, social democratic or Christian democratic proposals designed to provide acceptable answers to the many uncertainties faced by today's voters.

Notwithstanding that some would prefer not to mention the N-VA at all in the run-up to 2014 there is no doubt that it will dictate at least part of the campaign. In the present political context it would be extremely difficult to organise a blanket of silence around the Flemish Nationalists. On the right, the Open VLD Liberals and the far-right Vlaams Belang need to win back supporters who broke away to the N-VA, and in the centre the Christian Democrats must do the same. As for the left, the N-VA is the incarnation of neoliberalism against which they have always fought. The Social democratic Sp.a has traditionally won most votes on the left of the ideological spectrum, but even they have not been safe from the magnet of the N-VA which has attracted voters who are angry or disillusioned by the whole traditional system of 'Dexia parties'. Furthermore, the Sp.a also has to face a revived Green party, which is becoming increasingly left-wing in its social policies, as well as a radical left represented by the far-left Labour Party (PVDA). But the N-VA will play an important role during this 'mother of all elections' even if the campaign does not directly revolve around it. Of course, the traditional parties are themselves partly to blame for this by relying on their status in government and allowing the N-VA too much of a free run before finally launching their counteroffensive.

... AND AGAINST THEMSELVES

Nevertheless, the greatest challenge to the N-VA will be itself. It will have to make sure that its message remains focused and that it avoids a 'losing victory'. To do that, it is going to have to make some difficult ideological and strategic decisions. The battle is far from over. The crucial issue is whether the voters can be persuaded that things will be better and more efficient with the N-VA. Dislike of the traditional parties will not give it a solid enough victory. N-VA will have to show voters that a 'force of change' exists and that it can work. It is a difficult balancing act. It has to propose changes that set it apart from the other parties, but which are not so radical that they frighten voters away.

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IDEOLOGICAL PURITY

Since 2010, the traditional parties have been eclipsed by the N-VA electorally and in their publicity, although they do seem to have recovered a little ground during the 2012-2013 season. A common explanation for this state of affairs is that they no longer project a clear message. *'That we can speak of CD&V, Open VLD and Sp.a in a single breath is (...) symptomatic. For is it not the interchangeability of the traditional parties, their amorphous ideologies, their coalescence in power that lies at the heart of the problem? What distinguishes the Open VLD precisely from the other two? That they shout more loudly about company cars? And how exactly does the Sp.a offer a clear left-wing alternative to the current approach to the eurocrisis? It doesn't ... Instead of responding to the needs of the Flemish voter (...) they just serve up more of the same.'* These words of Wouter Verschelden, former editor of newspaper *De Morgen*, vividly express a widely-held perception of the traditional parties (12 March 2012).

These criticisms are not new and have spurred the party chairmen on to sharpen up their party profiles and distinguish themselves more clearly from one another. The democratic function of this exercise is open to different interpretations. On the one hand, one might expect political parties to

offer people a clear choice of alternative policies. In that way voters can play their role to the full. For if the parties all say the same thing, voters have no real opportunity to choose or influence policy. On the other hand, radical or ideologically-inspired proposals can cause instability by making it difficult to form coalitions, or lead to disillusionment with politics because 'clear' proposals are subsequently smothered in a 'grey' coalition compromise.

This insoluble dilemma is primarily subjective and normative. A more 'objective' approach is to consider the strategic importance of more clearly-defined party differences at election times. Rabinowitz *et al.* (1991) argue that parties increase their electoral chances if they are slightly more extreme than their competitors but do not overstep the mark of what is acceptable. N-VA is the incarnation of this principle: chauvinist without actually mentioning separatism; just respectable enough on immigration to avoid being completely sidelined like the far-right Vlaams Belang, and socio-economically just that bit more aggressive than the Liberals without demanding the right to secede. In the hunt for electoral success, policy makers try to create areas of tension and distance themselves from other parties. Voters seem to like clarity and prefer straight talking to an amorphous message. Their main source of information about politics is the media which always likes to polarise issues, preferring a sharp riposte or a memorable quote that puts an opponent down.

THE BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

According to N-VA's chairman, Bart De Wever, his party has been successful because it reflects the basic feelings of the Flemish people. If so, it implies that the majority of Flemish voters embrace centre-right values. They want a strict, but fair, system of immigration and justice and a government that is supportive of people who work, run businesses and save. A party that is able to build a credible right-wing programme around these values will, according to De Wever, win the elections (*Knack*, 19/12/2012).

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Post-electoral research after the elections of 2010 tends to confirm this view. The victorious N-VA was in the first instance a refuge for former supporters of its cartel with the Christian Democrats, followed by disillusioned former supporters of the far right Vlaams Belang and Open VLD (Swyngedouw *et al.* 2012: 15-16). These new N-VA voters were particularly attracted by the party's approach to constitutional reform, immigration, the economy, the budget and criminality (Abts *et al.* 2011: 6-7). In other words, by positioning itself between the Liberals and Christian Democrats on the one side and between the far-right Vlaams Belang and the small right-wing populist LDD on the other, the N-VA succeeded in drawing blood from the entire Flemish right.

The North Flank

The parties on either side of the N-VA - Christian Democrats (CD&V) and Liberals (Open VLD) on the north flank and Vlaams Belang (VB) and LDD to the south - are hoping that their refreshed ideological profiles will win back the voters. In particular, the chairman of Open VLD, Gwendolyn Rutten, in her book *De geëngageerde burger* [*The engaged citizen*], has thrown down the gauntlet to the Flemish Nationalists. Less sharply critical than the manifestos produced by former chairman and now MEP Guy Verhofstadt, but with similar classic liberal recipes, she competes for the favours of the centre-right electorate. The N-VA, after all, has now become the most credible player on the right of the socio-economic divide, a position which the Liberals had once monopolised. Now by arguing for slimmed-down government, lower taxes, deregulation, and the primacy of politics over interest groups, the Open VLD is hoping to take back ownership of the issues which the N-VA has stolen from it. In her book, Rutten also distances herself directly from De Wever and his ilk. She argues that the nationalist N-VA is not a genuinely liberal party because it always supports the first against the last. The Open VLD, with its positive message and in particular its rejection of confederalism, is now ready to take on the nationalists.

Avoiding the battleground of state reform, where the N-VA enjoys an advantage, is a strategy which

all the parties except for the far right Vlaams Belang (VB) have adopted. For them, a constitutional reform will not be an issue for 2014. The VB will try to show that the N-VA has lost credibility on that point because it does not dare to go for separatism but is pressing for the soft option of confederalism. The traditional parties and Green will emphasise the dangerously radical nature of the confederalist adventure. The battle over confederalism will not be waged with rational argument so much as with graphic imagery.

The strategy of Open VLD in the run-up to 2014 will be concerned with preventing its centre-right message from being drowned by the policies of the tripartite Di Rupo government. Considering the multi-coloured nature of the coalition this will not be straightforward. Indeed, every time the Liberals launch an offensive, it might be asked what more the party needs to push through these measures while it is in the federal government. Cynics might suggest that liberal reform will only be possible with a strong electoral support for the N-VA. And indeed there was a certain amount of background noise to Rutten's message about the linguistic problem. Even before its official release, her confession of faith in the Federal construction (instead of confederalism) was skilfully explained away by the pro-Flemish wing of her party, who wanted to go even further and remove some basic supports of the Federation such as parity in government, which would have required extremely radical constitutional changes.

Just before the municipal elections of October 2012 the chairman of the Christian Democrats, Wouter Beke, admitted that his party lacked a clear message. Operation 'Innesto' was then launched to stimulate an ideological rethinking. By clarifying its standpoints, the CD&V hoped to recapture its former position in the Flemish electoral marketplace and also win back voters from the N-VA. Without much humming and hawing and in the party's spirit of 'personalism', it launched proposals such as shorter summer holidays for schools and road pricing for private cars. But at times the CD&V seemed to be afraid of its own shadow, for at the slightest hint of protest it would temper or moderate the proposal concerned. The question therefore is how much further the party will go. In complete contrast to the CD&V of earlier years, there were no proposals relating to a seventh constitutional reform.

We have already remarked that avoiding any reference to a new state reform was a strategic decision based on a belief that electors would not consider the present crisis period as the right time to stir up linguistic problems or to enter another record-breaking delay in forming a government. In any case, the CD&V, together with its federal coalition partners (Open VLD and Sp.a), also believes in 'issue ownership' (Petrocik 1990; 1996). According to this golden rule, a party programme should avoid its opponents' pet themes because it only gives them greater credence within the electorate. In the campaign for 2014, the Christian Democrats would prefer to focus on socio-economic issues and its new image concentrates heavily on this. Meanwhile, it has again become apparent that the 'personalism' of CD&V - an ideology that sets the individual above the economy and opposes Socialism and Liberalism rather than standing between them - does not self-evidently lead to concrete proposals and is readily perceived as fence-sitting, or as an either-or approach. That is because, on the one hand, in the 'Innesto' texts there were proposals which seemed to be fairly right-wing. The CD&V repeatedly demanded less government, argued against permanent appointments for civil servants, and for helping businesses by a wage freeze and longer hours without extra pay. On the other hand, proposals in Beke's book *Het moedige midden* [*The Courageous Centre*], were drawn from centre-left. Beke said that he did not favour the right of the strongest and was prepared to veto handing health care over to the free market. He also argued strongly for the Rhineland model of a 'caring' free market, and for a strong civil society. The CD&V must take care that voters see coherence and internal consistency in its proposals and in particular that the basics should be clear and comprehensible. After all, many voters will not look much further than the basics.

The CD&V's balancing act is understandable. On the one hand, the party is targeting the centre right voters which it lost to the N-VA in 2010 (Abts *et al.* 2012: 6). In Kris Peeters, the Flemish Minister-President, it has the ideal leader for the task. As the popular ex-head of Unizo, an interest group that represents SMEs, he also has a highly credible centre-right profile. On the other hand, the party must not forget that its core support is actually centre-left (Abts *et al.* 2011: 5). Within the ACW, the

umbrella organisation of Christian trade union, it has been suggested at various times that its close connection with the CD&V has run its course and that it should perhaps look for a political party which was ideologically closer. But dropping their centre-left voters does not look like an attractive option, for it would probably leave the party entirely at the mercy of the volatile electoral market. CD&V therefore seems to be condemned to a balancing act between left and right. The question is whether pursuing this zigzag course will not obscure the clear kind of message that will win votes.

The South Flank

On the N-VA's south flank, the most interesting aspect is the profile of the extreme right-wing Vlaams Belang (VB) [Flemish Interest]. They too saw many of their supporters go over to the N-VA at the last federal elections (Swyngedouw *et al.* 2012: 18). There seem to be many voters who find the issues raised by the VB important (stricter control of immigration and crime), but believe that by voting for the N-VA there is a better chance of action. The VB has been condemned to perpetual opposition by the *cordon sanitaire* imposed by the main parties, so a vote for the VB is in effect a vote for opposition. However, there are signs that the issue of immigration is no longer particularly important to the electorate. The VB must therefore come up with some new messages. Also its role as the anti-system party has lost its impact since the N-VA started to attract large numbers of disillusioned voters by promising change from within the system, instead of endless protests outside the gates.

In Gerolf Annemans the VB has a new chairman who communicates less aggressively while still maintaining his party's principles. Its view towards the future of the Belgian state therefore remains resolutely separatist and the party hopes that this will attract Flemish Nationalist voters who are tired of the N-VA's lack of clarity on the issue. De Wever's party has opted for confederalism, even though it is unclear how this chimes with article 1 of the N-VA's statutes which commits it to pursue an independent republic of Flanders.

With that we have touched on the Achilles heel of the N-VA. But before considering it further, we shall first look at the Flemish left.

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WHO WILL BE LEADER OF THE LEFT RESISTANCE?

Whereas on the right-wing of the political spectrum the problem is how to win back voters from the N-VA, on the left, the Labour Party (PVDA), the Greens (Groen) and the Social Democrats (Sp.a) have to decide who will lead the left's campaign at the polls. In the course of the election battle, the title of 'progressive alternative to the N-VA' can win a large number of voters. The left will claim that the N-VA wants a coalition with the Liberals and Christian Democrats, as in Antwerp since 2012 under mayor (and N-VA chairman) Bart De Wever, and that those who want to prevent it must therefore cast their vote for the left. The press loves nothing better than a good duel, so the party that succeeds in stepping up as the antipode of the N-VA will have made a good start. Like the right, the left will use ideological renewal to shore up its dam against the N-VA with solid socio-economic input. In this they are to some extent on home territory even though it has been a long time since the left has succeeded in launching a credible counter-offensive against the right.

In this confrontation, large-scale themes have been introduced. One important feature of the debate with the right is the desirability, or otherwise, of the German model for Belgium. Admirers of the policies employed by our eastern neighbours are particularly impressed by the large trade surpluses, German competitiveness in the global economy and low unemployment. Their opponents highlight the flexible employment, the mini-jobs and the low wages; in short, the impoverishment of the workers. In the Sp.a's left-wing revision of its declaration of principle, '*The Flanders of Tomorrow*', it firmly opposes the German system. Instead of 'mini wages', it emphasizes the need for a respectable income and as many jobs as possible. More effort should go into such things as taxing capital gains,

combating fiscal fraud, and imposing a minimum level of taxation for large businesses. The income that this raises would go towards lowering income tax. This emphasis on a number of traditional social recipes makes *The Flanders of Tomorrow* read like a left-wing version of the Sp.a's usual message. However, this is probably essential because for the first time in many years it is being threatened on the left flank not only by the Greens but also by the Labour Party (PVDA), currently the darling of the Trade Unions. So a more left-wing image for the Sp.a in the present political constellation can only be an advantage since by moving to the edge, it can steal a march on the extreme left-wing Labour Party. Furthermore, the party need not fear any falling away to the right because there is a large void between them and the political centre. The chance of left-wing voters turning to the liberal Open VLD, as happened on occasion a decade ago (Bouteca 2011:1), is now most unlikely. Open VLD's more right-wing direction and a campaign that is likely to focus on socio-economic issues, will not be conducive to an exchange of voters between Liberals and Socialists.

At the moment, the most left-wing alternative to the right of the Sp.a is the Christian democratic party (CD&V). But for a variety of reasons, including their historic philosophical differences, the two parties are not exactly communicating vessels. So on the basis of its programme the Sp.a's prospects do not look at all bad. But it is not enough to look promising from the outside. Also internally, the ideological choices must create unity. Moreover, a party does not win elections with manifestos alone. And the party still has problems with its personnel policies.

On the basis of past election results, the leadership of the left is almost certain to fall to the Sp.a, unless a monumental shift occurs in the meantime. The Flemish Socialists still have ownership of more socio-economic issues than their closest rivals, the Greens. That party, chaired by Wouter Van Besien, is primarily known for its concern for the environment, political renewal and multicultural questions, though it has also been trying to move into socio-economic territory by emphasizing the green economy, and lately by playing on 'red' themes. If the election campaign focuses mainly on the socio-economic debate, the Greens will now have their own contribution via their 'Impulse Congress' of October 2013, which was an attempt to make their electoral profile sharper and more credible on the socio-economic front. Wouter Van Besien summarises the 'unique selling proposition' of the Greens as 'less pollution and more in the wage packet'. With that programme the ecologists are targeting the left wing of the Christian Democrats and those Social Democrats who are disillusioned by the Sp.a's involvement in such federal policies as the wage freeze and the cutting back of unemployment benefits. The question is whether this change of course by the Greens has not come too late. Perceptions of parties change extremely slowly.

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The question of which party will be the most credible opponent of the German model is naturally closely connected to the question of which politician will lead the attack. And therein lies the catch for the left-wing parties. Their standard message will automatically bring in about one fifth of the vote, but one needs charismatic politicians to drive the number of voters up further. Steve Stevaert, for example, was able to do this in 2003 as Sp.a chairman. But at the moment there is a lack of charisma on the left. Consequently, it could be that the contest in Flanders will boil down to a duel between the two titans, Bart De Wever for the Flemish Nationalists and Kris Peeters for the Christian Democrats. On the left there is no-one to match them.

N-VA IN A TANGLE

In spite of the fact that the N-VA is under assault from all sides, the greatest threat to the party is possibly not in that but rather in the doubts that may arise about precisely where the N-VA is going. In the next few months the party is going to have to answer to what extent its 'necessary socio-economic reforms' are, or are not, dependent on a 'necessary constitutional reform'.

For a long time the greatest strength of the N-VA has been its crystal-clear communication. The

party usually speaks without any hint of self-doubt, or at least it gives that impression. It does this very deliberately, breaking with the ambiguities of its People's Union [*Volksunie*] past. Nobody was able to say whether the People's Union was right wing or left wing despite many attempts to find out. Perhaps the N-VA still wrestles internally with this question, but it has been very successful in hiding it. It thereby makes a very consistent, straightforward impression. It sells itself as being unlike the other parties. It is less ready to compromise, it will remain more faithful to its programme, and in many kinds of reform it is prepared to go further than the traditional parties.

However, in recent months maintaining that ideological cool-headedness has not been so easy. It has to do with the contradiction that now threatens the party's message on the future of the Flemish community. According to its statutes the party has a separatist agenda, but it has opted for confederalism because there is little support for outright independence. Research shows that only a minority of voters (10%) and N-VA members (30%) are eager to see an independent Flemish state (Swyngedouw and Abts 2010; Wauters 2013). So from an electoral viewpoint, it seems logical to opt for confederalism.

This confederal state consists of two sub-states: Flanders and Wallonia. Brussels would lose a lot of its current autonomy and its inhabitants would largely depend on the Flemish or Walloon sub-state. Both would govern Brussels together. The confederation would only have the competences that it gets from the sub-states. On the one hand, this confederalism is less radical than the party's own statutes while, on the other, many voters and potential coalition partners will regard even that confederalism as a gamble to be avoided in these economically difficult times.

The N-VA, therefore, not only faces the problem of positioning itself along the fault line of Flemish autonomy but also having to decide how far its plans for Flanders should take priority over its socio-economic policies. One might insist that it should be a 'both-and' affair, but in a party system where coalitions rule, it would be difficult to persist with it if every potential coalition partner rules out any constitutional reform after the 2014 elections. On the basis of current opinion polls, if the party is serious about wanting to be in government, it would seem logical to set the socio-economic agenda above its 'flamingant' demands for confederalism. But the uproar which resulted from the notorious remark made by the N-VA MP Siegfried Bracke shows that office seekers in the party cannot (yet) slip past the inner ring of principled defenders of policy who are firmly attached to the first item on the party programme: confederalism. In a newspaper interview, Siegfried Bracke created an opening for the party. When in government, he said, the N-VA would be prepared to make a start on socio-economic reforms before any agreement had been signed on confederalism. It soon became obvious that he had spoken too soon and that this revised strategy had not been fully discussed or agreed by the party. Chairman Bart De Wever confirmed this and stated that the party would naturally listen to any government involved in socio-economic recovery but it would not join a government without an agreement in principle to major constitutional reform. It might, however, join a government without a fully worked-out agreement, but only if its partners accepted confederalism and gave the N-VA a guarantee that at some point it would be fully implemented. But how exactly this is supposed to happen, and within what period, remains unclear and vague. But how exactly that was supposed to happen, and many other related matters, remained unclear and vague. So N-VA has placed an 'equals' sign between confederalism and socio-economic reforms without removing the question mark against what confederalism precisely signifies.

The Flemish Nationalists have shifted the core of their strategy outside the party and that is risky, particularly because nobody else wants constitutional change, let alone confederalism, in 2014. The N-VA is asking its coalition partner(s) for a commitment to introduce constitutional reform. But experience has shown that the best way to keep up the pressure for institutional reforms is to link them directly to the process of coalition formation. How otherwise does the N-VA think it is going to impose it on the other parties and obtain the necessary two-thirds majority? The Flemish Nationalists assume for the sake of convenience that the Walloon Socialists (PS) will take the easy way out and simply

retreat back into Wallonia when confronted by a right-wing 'reformist' government. An extremely unlikely assumption. Furthermore, would confederalism have to sustain the many transfers which the N-VA has talked about which would be the PS's price for allowing the N-VA have its own way?

MP Siegfried Bracke's remarks, intended to remove a major obstacle to the N-VA's participating in government, were rapidly countermanded, although the manner in which De Wever did it still left things open-ended. The question is whether a new solution can be found. It is not impossible, but very unlikely. In which case, the party's only hope is to achieve a spectacular 40% in 2014. The other parties might then be so bowled over by this sledge-hammer blow to the political system that they would see it as a deafening demand from the electorate for further constitutional reform. However, the polls do not suggest that it is likely and neither does the N-VA believe it will happen. The outcome, therefore, will probably be a second Di Rupo government, or in any case a federal government without the N-VA. The party is therefore doing everything possible to win a resounding victory in the Flemish elections so that it can use the Flemish government as a platform from which to put pressure on the federal government. This scenario would be most unwelcome to the other parties, because five years of tension between the two levels of government is nobody's idea of fun.

In other words, N-VA is wrestling with itself. If it clearly declares in advance that constitutional reform is not absolutely essential, it will face internal problems in the form of accusations of betrayal and opportunism and the party would also lose one of its unique selling points. If, on the other hand, it makes its demands for confederalism a non-negotiable precondition, they are likely to appear too radical or unrealistic, certainly to potential partners, and voting for the N-VA will begin to look like a wasted vote. Furthermore, the N-VA has to show the importance of change in areas other than the issue of state reform in order to keep the bar high, but on the other hand it must not make its demands so difficult or uncomfortable that the voters will consider the party too hard-nosed or radical. Faced by such 'either-or' considerations the N-VA risks falling into the same trap that has kept the traditional parties imprisoned for decades. That, and the question whether the party has enough competent personnel to communicate effectively with the electorate leads us to conclude that the N-VA will have most to fear from ... the N-VA.

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