

The Impact of European Integration on Belgian Politics

by Daniel CARDON de LICHTBUER*

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INTRODUCTION

To consider Belgian political affairs in isolation, without reference to external influences, would be to leave out of account a major element in the country's whole life. Everywhere, nowadays, to a far greater extent than in the past, growing economic interdependence and swift communication of ideas have been bringing countries closer together and increasing their influence on one another. And moreover, especially in the last few decades, various links have developed among nations which have made for greater solidarity.

This is true of all countries, but truer perhaps of Belgium than of most. Being so small in size, Belgium has always been wide open to outside influences. This has been her bane in one way, since it has meant that she has very seldom been able to take a course purely of her own choosing, but at the same time it has been a blessing too : Belgian readiness to accept the practical benefits of the Industrial Revolution and cross-frontier trade expansion has been proverbial for a hundred years, and Belgian receptivity to new ideas has made her an excellent test subject for several bold experimental projects — the Benelux Union, the Schuman Plan, the Common Market.

At the present moment Belgium is going through a crisis, and her two halves, as they become increasingly aware of their separateness, are tending still more than they formerly did to look, in the first place, to the two neighbouring countries whose respective languages they

* Born November 16, 1930, at Brasschaat, Antwerp, Belgium. Doctorate in law, 1953, University of Louvain (Flemish stream), Read economics and sociology at University of Oxford; international law at Academy of the Hague. Degree in applied economics, 1955, University of Louvain (French stream).

Principal Private Secretary (« Chef de cabinet ») to the Vice President of the High Authority of European Coal and Steel Community, Mr. Albert Coppé.

share — the Netherlands and France — and also, more generally, to the outside world at large.

But this sense of belonging elsewhere than to the Belgian nation as such has not often found expression on the world plane. The Korean war, it is true, in which a Belgian battalion fought, and the Congo eruption, leading to United Nations intervention, did briefly rouse large sections of public opinion to pay attention to world issues. But apart from these episodes, Belgians, one feels — over-conscious of the smallness of their country — are inclined to remain very much mere onlookers at world events.

With regard to Atlantic ties, mainly in matters of defence, the same attitude is apparent. Perhaps there has been a bit of a change in the last few months, what with NATO headquarters setting up in Belgium and the Foreign Minister, M. Harmel, conducting a notably forward policy. But who can say whether it is a real change, or just a flash in the pan?

In complete contrast to all this are Belgium's relations with the European Communities. It is no exaggeration to say that the Treaties of Paris and Rome are one of the biggest events in her history since she gained independence in 1830.

In the first place the Treaties opened up a new political horizon for her just when she needed it most. Ever since the end of the Second World War her internal divisions have been gaping wider and wider, and many Belgians to-day are hoping that Europe will supersede Belgium as the focus of allegiance. They feel that this broader context offers a chance of solving problems that the two segments of the country are failing to solve by a dialogue within the nation-State.

But what has been so completely transformed in the last fifteen years has been the state of the country's economy. In 1952 12 % of the sales of Belgium and Luxemburg were to the other Four, in 1966 22 %. Procurements from the other Four have risen correspondingly, and now represent more than 50 % of total imports of Belgium and Luxemburg.

And, most important of all, in most of the main fields of economic policy the Belgian authorities can now take no action without first consulting with the other Common Market countries, while a great many matters come direct under Community jurisdiction, as for instance does practically the whole agricultural sector.

So in discussing the impact of European integration on Belgian politics, I shall in fact be discussing the external factor which has most influenced Belgium as she is today and will most influence her future.

I. THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION ON THE POLITICAL PARTIES

When the ECSC Treaty was under negotiation, and still more at the time of the abortive EDC project and its more fortunate successor the Treaty of Rome, it was noticeable that the various political parties were in a state of intense activity. They had to come out for or against the developments impending. In point of fact, apart from the Communists, all the big parties were very largely in agreement on the aims to be pursued — economic integration gradually turning into fuller union, strong Community Institutions empowered to decide by majority vote, and so on. The differences were only as to means and not to ends — social policy, for example.

Today, after fifteen years of integration, this is still the case : the Belgian parties are, by and large, agreed on the line to be followed on European policy. At most there is a certain divergence of opinion between the two halves of the population, the French-speakers inclining more to the French view, the Flemish-speakers less. One notable example was their respective reactions to the question of Britain's membership of the Common Market.

But these are simply personal stances by individual politicians and by individual citizens. The parties' Flemish and Walloon wings as such have never come out in opposition to one another on foreign policy in general or on European policy in particular.

The reasons for this broad consensus ? There are quite a number, but I think these are perhaps the most important.

Firstly, in face of the integration process now going forward, all the Belgian parties are bent on the same thing, to maintain and improve the country's standard of living, which is among the highest in Europe.

Secondly, European integration so far has been concerned solely with building up what has been called « a Europe of practical facts ». The integrators have deliberately turned their backs, particularly in the last few years, on anything liable to give rise to clashes of basic principle, and concentrated firmly on the solid, practical considerations necessitating pooling. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the Belgian parties should be pretty well entirely at one on European policy.

Lastly, the leading figures in each party who devote themselves specially to European matters are few in number, and consequently all personally acquainted. The fact that they are regularly present together on all sorts of « European » occasions — the sessions of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, the conferences, seminars and so

on sponsored by the European Movement — has made them, in general, thoroughly like-minded.

Beyond this, however, party politics can hardly be said to have been affected by European integration at all. In the early days it was fully expected that those of a particular political colour in one country would quickly join up with their opposite numbers in the others, to form what might be termed integrated political fronts. But nothing of the kind happened. Partly because it is not so much by the party dynamic as by Government action that the new Europe has developed, and largely at a technical level which has made the process in many respects inappropriate for purely political debate; partly also because at the present stage in that process public opinion is still more concerned with national affairs. There has been some limited strengthening of cross-frontier party ties, through international link-ups — for instance of the European Left — and the formation of groups of political allies in the European Parliament, Western European Union and the Council of Europe, but only to the extent of lining up views on matters of European policy proper, not of influencing national politics in any way.

Belgian party attitudes and platforms, then, have been very little affected by these moves. On the other hand, the feeling of all belonging to the European Community is already giving rise to much greater interest in the other member countries' politics, and so making the Belgian public more receptive to foreign party modes. The impact of Gaullism on Belgian opinion is worth noting. The Belgian parties which have observed this trend are beginning to take it into serious account.

II. THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION ON THE EXECUTIVE

The Belgian parties may not have been radically affected by integration, but the Executive has. Every Community country's Government is of course still sovereign in many fields, but the fact remains that in all matters of real moment there is more and more the Common Market angle to be considered.

In Belgium's case this is peculiarly true, for a whole series of reasons.

a) She is one of Community's smaller members, and cannot really conduct a policy of her own in such wide fields as defense or monetary affairs.

b) Every Government since the war has been hard put to it to cope

unaided with the problems arising out of what really amounts to the need for a complete overhaul of the country's socio-economic set-up. On many occasions they have been only too glad to have forced on them by others unpopular measures which they could not afford or did not dare to introduce themselves : for example when it came to closing down hopelessly uneconomic coalmines the Belgian Government was perfectly willing to be compelled to do so by the High Authority of ECSC.

c) The Belgian Government has purposely adopted a keenly European policy, considering this to be the policy most consonant with its own interests and also with the fact that its capital city is the provisional headquarters of the Common Market. Many steps have been taken to bring Belgian affairs into line with Europe's, often before they were strictly required by the Treaties : thus for instance Belgium recently offered to submit the national plan for the steel sector for Community discussion.

d) The Common Market has highlighted the advantages of various arrangements adopted by the Governments of other member countries, and caused the Belgian Government to adopt them too — the more willingly since, quite objectively, the country's rather effete administrative structure did suggest that some shortcomings could be best remedied by imitating foreign models. For example, the Belgian fiscal system is now being replanned with a view to introducing added-value taxation as practised in France.

III. THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION ON THE LEGAL WORLD

« The Community Treaties, as well as being a mental source of law for the Communities themselves, form part and parcel of the municipal law of the member States : by each Act of Ratification they became incorporated into the municipal law of the country concerned on the same basis as any other national enactment* ».

Thus the Treaties, and still more the Regulations promulgated in implementation of them, have brought radical changes in Belgian law, as witness the wealth of matter published in the Official Gazette of the Communities which appears alongside the national Official Gazettes.

* Nicola CATALANO, *Manuel de Droit des Communautés Européennes*, seconde édition, Dalloz et Sirey, Paris, 1965, p. 143.

As a result, there has for several years been a huge demand among Belgian lawyers for information on Europe; the Belgian courts are increasingly turning to the Community Court of Justice for interlocutory rulings, and every Belgian University's Faculty of Law has organized courses and seminars on European law as part of its syllabus.

IV. THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION ON THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL FEDERATIONS

Belgium is a country in which organized associations of operators in the different sectors of the economy and society — employers' federations, trade unions, farmers' associations, associations of the middle classes — play a very important part in the national life. Now it is true to say that the representatives of these bodies are more alive to what European integration means than political circles proper. In addition to working very actively for the European cause, the federations are directly represented on two extremely important Community Institutions, the Consultative Committee of ECSC and the Economic and Social Council set up under the Treaty of Rome. Moreover, with their leaders in daily contact with top European officials in Brussels and Luxembourg, it is really through them that European integration has reached furthest into Belgian life.

CONCLUSION

In all the fields I have mentioned, European integration has very considerably influenced Belgian political affairs, and looks like doing so still more as time goes on.

This in itself is something of a problem, as a matter of fact. For until Belgium is merged into a full-scale federal State, in which decisions are prepared and promulgated by federal institutions, she is bound, being so small, to be on the receiving end of all sorts of influences, far more than she can herself possibly exert influence on others. And that means that the present interim period, in which she has her frontiers wide open to the inflow not only of goods but of ideas from her partners, cannot continue trailing on indefinitely with no sign of a move-in by federal institutions — a federal Executive and federal Parliament — to which Belgians can feel they fully belong. If things did just drag on and on in this way, a general sense of frustration might easily develop, turning before long into a reversion to nationalism, or more likely to Flemish/Walloon regionalism — the more

speedily inasmuch as there is still a great deal of this regionalist feeling in the country.

Does this mean that Belgium is a purely passive participant in integration, caught up in the process and having no say whatever in the course it is to take? No not at all Belgium and Belgian Governments do have quite a lot of influence on the rest of the Community and on the course of integration, but it is a special kind of influence. Like all the smaller countries, she has had two alternatives open to her :

a) she could take up positions of her own and be liable frequently to find herself without support or sympathy from any quarter, which for a small country usually means in the end having to pipe down and accept what the others decide ;

b) or she could avoid plumping at the outset for a particular position, and try instead to influence the positions of other, bigger countries by persuasion, and to evolve working compromises acceptable to all and bearing the stamp of her particular approach.

Belgium has regularly chosen the second, and, as we can see if we look carefully at many Community decisions and arrangements, with a very real measure of success.

