

Belgian Politics in 1981 : Continuity and Change in the Crisis

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When one reads the explanations offered by Belgian politicians and commentators for 1981, one is left with no doubt that it was a crisis year. Granted that one could object that politicians and commentators use the word « crisis » all too often and too loosely, but now even the King is saying that Belgium is in a « state of war » (1). When one considers the most significant political events of 1981, it is indeed difficult to avoid the impression that Belgian society in 1981, in virtually all of its sectors, manifested symptoms of immobility and crisis. Belgium in 1981 had one less government than in 1980, but there were still three ; one prime minister was, according to his own account, confronted with ministers on strike (2) ; several political parties struggled with serious internal difficulties ; the number of unemployed rose above 400,000 ; the Walloon steel industry had to be saved from bankruptcy by the State ; high interest rates inhibited economic recovery ; the deficit in the national budget

(1) The King used these words when addressing the Chairmen of the Chamber and the Senate, the chairmen of almost all the parties represented in parliament, and the leaders of the most important union and management organizations on the occasion of the resignation of the Martens IV government. The King declared : « It is now high time to put differences aside, of whatever nature they might be, and to give priority to survival. This is what we would do if we were at war. Now, this is war, war for the preservation of our economy. »

(2) Prime Minister M. Eyskens stated this on the occasion of the Cabinet Meeting of 18 September. The French-speaking socialist ministers refused to proceed with the agenda of this meeting as long as no agreement had been reached about Walloon steel (cf. below).

reached a record high ; and the weak Belgian franc had to be strongly supported for almost the entire year.

However, to sum up the political events of 1981 under one term, crisis, would be to ignore the factors of continuity and also of change in Belgian politics in 1981. An approach from this point of view, the tracing of the elements of continuity and change, brings us closer to the original meaning of the word crisis, namely, to what extent can the political developments in this year be indeed considered as a « decisive stage » or as a « turning point » ?

Without answering this question definitively, one can still make an initial attempt to perceive the mechanisms of change and continuity in the Belgian political system by means of a description of the political developments of 1981.

If 1980 with 4 governments and just as many coalition formulas reflected not political stability but rather political instability, so, too, 1981 can hardly be described as a year of political stability. Three governments succeeded each other last year so that Belgium had 7 governments in two-year's time, which inspired political observers to make comparisons with the period shortly before World War II, when cabinet crises also followed each other in rapid succession, and the Belgian parliamentary system experienced a profound crisis. The basic difference from the pre-war period is that the power position of the traditional parties is now not being threatened by new parties, but that the instability is to be attributed to the difficulty these traditional parties are having in adapting to the structures of a regionalized Belgian state and to the sharper economic polarization.

On 31 March 1981, the Prime Minister, W. Martens, presented the resignation of his not yet 6-month old Christian Democrat-Socialist government (Martens IV government : CVP, PSC, PS, SP : 22 October 1980 - 1 April 1981). The immediate cause of the fall of the Martens IV government was the economic emergency plan worked out by the Prime Minister. A few days later, on 6 April, his party colleague, M. Eyskens, followed Martens as prime minister. For the rest, the composition of the Eyskens I government remained the same. The only difference was that R. Vandeputte took the post of Minister of Finance, the job that M. Eyskens had in the Martens government. Barely 6 months later, the Eyskens I government fell (6 April 1981 - 2 September 1981) because of budgetary difficulties and the steel question.

After the dissolving of Parliament and the parliamentary elections of 8 November 1981 that followed, a new government was formed with

W. Martens again as prime minister (Martens V : CVP, PSC, PVV, PRL : 17 December 1981- ?), but now at the head of a Christian Democrat - Liberal government. This government adopted the goal of implementing a powerful economic recovery policy ; it requested and received special powers from Parliament in order to carry out such a policy.

Particularly impressive in the Martens IV and Eyskens I governments is the number of plans formulated and also partially cast in draft legislation that were intended to cope with the economic and budgetary problems : a recovery plan, a mini-recovery plan, a budgetary rescue plan, an economic rescue plan, an economic stimulation law, an emergency programme, etc. Thus, different plans, but all of them with a common theme, namely, their object was to bring the production costs of Belgian firms down to the level of those of the neighboring countries (by a moderation of the income of the wage and salary earners) and the reduction of the budget deficit to acceptable norms.

The 1981 political year was started with the parliamentary passage of the so-called *income limitation law*, a collective name for the eight draft laws that formed the global *recovery plan* approved by the Martens IV government on 23 December 1980 and that were an extension of the *mini-recovery law* that was approved by Parliament at the end of 1980. The income limitation of wage and salary earners that was provided in this law was abrogated shortly after the approval of the law in the Senate because of the central *income limitation agreement* concluded between the unions and the management organizations on 13 February. The government had agreed to abrogate the income limitations it had imposed if a central agreement were concluded before 15 February between the unions and the management organizations would provide the same results as the income limitations foreseen in the recovery law. The remaining specifications of the income limitation law remained in force, for example, the very controversial « solidarity contribution » for government officials.

After the approval of the income limitation law and the signing of the central agreement, attention turned to a new plan, the so-called budgetary revision plan. The intention of this plan was to limit the ever increasing budget deficit by economies and by new income. After the laborious negotiations on this plan, the government partners reached an agreement on 22 March. The most striking measure of this plan was the floating of a one-time state loan « with attractive conditions », the so-called crisis loan. Barely nine days after the government conclave at which the budgetary revision plan was approved, a short circuit occurred between the government partners that was largely due to the differences of opinion regarding the linkage of the wages to the index of consumer prices. Automatic index

linkage had already been under discussion for a considerable time. It was contended, primarily from the employers' side, that automatic index linkage was the principal cause of the increasing wage costs and the resulting weaker competitive position of Belgian firms. Indeed, secret negotiations on index linkage were started after 22 March with the labour union leaders with a view to changing the indexing modalities. On 29 March, Prime Minister W. Martens presented an *economic rescue plan*, which included a fundamental change in the existing index system, without having reached an agreement with the union and management organizations and the socialist parties. Martens had drawn up this economic rescue plan after the negative reactions of the most important government party, the CVP, to the budgetary revision plan and after the strong criticism of the Belgian monetary policy by government leaders from the EEC member states on the occasion of the European summit meeting of 23-24 March in Maastricht. The proposal in the economic rescue plan for a temporary cessation of indexation and the implementation of a new indexing system on 1 January 1982, however, was vetoed by the socialist parties. As a result, Martens offered the resignation of his government.

The new Eyskens I government also set out to reinforce the competitive capacity of the Belgian economy and to reduce the budgetary deficit. This government presented an *emergency programme* to this end in which again there was a revision of the indexing mechanism. The most concrete result of this emergency programme was the so-called Maribel operation. This operation implied the partial replacement of the employers' contributions to social security for blue collar workers by means of an increase in indirect taxation. The Eyskens government did not reach an agreement about index linkage, primarily because the PS linked it to a solution for the Walloon steel industry, which was, in fact, the cause of the downfall of the Eyskens I government.

The reaction from the unions to the various income limitation and economizing proposals of the Martens IV and the Eyskens I governments was primarily defensive in nature and concentrated largely on the preservation of automatic index linkage. The unions have yet to succeed in adapting their strategy to the altered economic circumstances. The actions against the income limitation policy remain mainly limited to strikes and demonstrations, for which primarily the socialist labour union, the ABVV-FGTB, tried to mobilize the workers, though, in general, with only moderate success. Nor did the unions succeed in forcing a breakthrough in the negotiations with the management organizations. But for the first time in 6 years, a new central agreement (the central income limitation agreement of 13 February) was concluded between the union and management orga-

nizations. However this agreement was quickly overtaken by the political developments of the subsequent months.

A method that had often been applied with success in the past to stimulate union-management negotiations during periods of economic crisis consists of organizing special union-management negotiations, usually outside of the existing legal negotiations institutions. This method was also tried in 1981. On 25 March, the Round Table Conference on the new industrial policy started, but its ambitious goal was not reached. On 22 May, the Association of Belgian Entrepreneurs, the general employers' organization, left the conference without concrete results being obtained. That a climate of mutual trust between the social partners could not be reestablished and that the union-management negotiations could not break out of the impasse, confirmed the contention that the Belgian consultation syndicalism is effective for periods of substantial economic growth and much less so for periods of economic crisis. Moreover, the employers' and employees' organizations had to see how, in 1981, the government became an ever more important third party in the union-management negotiations. This was expressed in such things as the various economic plans of the government and the measures in them regarding the income policy, a matter that traditionally pertained to the competence of the social partners. The income limitation agreement concluded in February was, contrary to custom, co-signed by the Prime Minister, W. Martens, and the Minister of Labour and Employment, R. De Wulf (SP).

An important characteristic of the Belgian socio-economic system is the intervention of the government in the economic problem sectors. The most striking illustration of this mechanism is the evolution in the Walloon steel industry during the last year. At the same time, another tendency was manifested in the steel problem, which political observers had been pointing out for some time, namely, the flowing together of socio-economic and communitarian cleavages. The developments in the steel industry began spectacularly. On 17 January, reports appeared in the press about far advanced negotiations regarding a merger of the steel industries in the Charleroi triangle with Cockerill in Liège, which reports were soon confirmed. The proposed merger was more political than economic. While the socialist minister of economic affairs, W. Claes (SP) had previously argued for a filialisation of the two large and money-losing steel firms, he was confronted with a *fait accompli* by the then PS chairman, A. Cools, who had taken part in the negotiations on the merger and stubbornly defended them. The merger took effect 26 June, when Cockerill-Sambre was established. The new company began with a capital of 36,032 thousand million francs, of which 81.44 % was contributed by the state. Before the

merger took place, the steel firms were already confronted with new financial difficulties.

On 23 April, the general secretaries of the FGTB of Liège and Charleroi issued a call in the Walloon socialist newspapers for the Walloon ministers to refuse to discuss any other dossiers so long as no agreement was reached on the steel question. This call was reacted to negatively in Flanders where more and more voices were being raised for a regionalisation of steel and the other national industrial sectors (textiles, coal, shipbuilding and repair, and hollow glassware). That the Flemish committee of the Christian trade union, the ACV concurred with this position on 25 April meant an important shift in the options.

On 4 May, the Minister of Economic Affairs, W. Claes, presented an aid plan for the merger group, Cockerill-Sambre, to the core cabinet. On 7 May, the PS ministers refused to take any decision on any dossier at the meeting of the socio-economic core cabinet so long as no priority was given to the steel problem. With this, they went along with the call of the FGTB. In the meantime, the Walloon and particularly the Flemish regional governments formulated additional conditions and demands for the steel plan. A few days later, on 15 May, the government reached an agreement on the steel policy. The agreement confirmed the Cockerill-Sambre merger and provided for the establishment of a financing society for Walloon steel. At the same time, the government accepted the obligation of financing one third of the steel investment programme. After the vacation months, the entire steel dossier went into high gear. On 2 September, the PS Chairman, Spitaels, pronounced an ultimatum : the negotiations with the private banks on the financing of the steel industry must be concluded before 15 September, or the PS ministers would block the operation of the government. Prime Minister Eyskens ignored this ultimatum and began to negotiate only on 16 September with the banks, from which 31 thousand million francs of new credits for Cockerill-Sambre had been requested at the end of August. However, the banks refused to issue new credits if they could not have an integral state guarantee. After the failed negotiations of 16 September, the political core cabinet reached an agreement to involve the public credit institutions along with the private banks in the negotiations about the possible financing formulas. Apparently under pressure from his party chairman, Vice-Premier Mathot (PS) withdrew his approval with this agreement. The French-speaking socialists did not want to discuss various formulas but only one, namely, financing by public credit institutions, and again demanded priority for the steel dossier. At the cabinet meeting of 21 September, a definitive break occurred in the Eyskens I government : the PS ministers held to their position and the Prime

Minister therefore offered his resignation to the King. Thus, further action on the steel dossier fell to the Martens V government.

In addition to the communitarian aspects of the steel dossier, more traditional communitarian bottlenecks came to or remained in the fore in 1981. Thus, the Voer region remained uneasy, particularly as a result of the so-called « tourist walks » of Flemish nationalist organizations. After one of these « walks », the Minister of Justice and Institutional Reform, P. Moureaux (PS), later supported by his party colleague, P. Busquin, the Minister of Domestic Affairs and National Education, declared that the status of the Voer must be re-negotiated and, linked to it, the Brussels problem. These declarations generated negative reactions from the Flemish side. On the occasion of the discussion of his budget in the Senate, Prime Minister Eyskens answered that the status of the Voer would not be altered.

Shortly after the discussion about the Voer, another communitarian incident occurred on the occasion of the appointment of the Walloon socialist, W. Monfils, as director-general of the Belgian Service for Foreign Trade (BDBH). The appointment for this job had been dragging on for a long time, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists not being able to come to an agreement on the matter. Because of the lack of consensus within the government, the Minister of Foreign Trade, R. Urbain (PS) made the appointment of W. Monfils on his own « for the good of the BDBH », according to the Minister. The Flemish parties and pressure groups criticized the appointment of the French-speaking W. Monfils in view of the majority share of Flemish firms in Belgian export trade.

During the campaign for the parliamentary elections of 8 November, the Dutch language school in the Walloon facilities commune of Komen again muddied the communitarian waters. The school, which was established in 1980 after a great deal of difficulty, did not have enough pupils to be eligible for recognition and subsidisation by the French-language, Minister of National Education, P. Busquin (PS). The petition for exemption from these norms by the Committee for Dutch-Language Education and Culture in Komen was rejected by Busquin, which aroused negative reactions from the Flemish side. On 9 October, the political core cabinet did not succeed in reaching an agreement on the continued existence of the school. As a result, the work of the Eyskens caretaker cabinet, which was handling current affairs, was completely blocked. All ministerial meetings were cancelled until a « new fact » occurred. The new fact did occur on 13 October when, after an intervention of the King, the Prime Minister convened the Cabinet Council. However, no solution was reached for the school at Komen. It was closed, and the Minister of Dutch-Language

Education, W. Calewaert (SP) then decided, although it was not legally permissible, to include in his budget the operational and personnel costs of the school, which had been transferred to the Flemish Cultural Center in Komen, a decision the government « took notice of ».

Much more important for communitarian development was the new phase of state reformation that went into effect after the last election. The most important innovation in this regard was the fact that the executive boards of the three regional parliaments were no longer appointed by the King but were chosen by the parliaments themselves from their midsts during the inaugural meeting. Moreover, the community and regional ministers no longer were part of the national government but were only responsible to their own parliaments. During the first term of 4 years, these executive boards are selected proportionally, i.e., the parties are represented in proportion to their numerical strength in the parliaments. The distribution of the residual powers (those not given in the law) created difficulties in the Flemish regional government. In this distribution, a CVP-PVV coalition (the coalition of the national government) was formed, and the other two parties, the SP and the Volksunie, were assigned no residual matters. The possibility provided for in the law of distributing these powers by consensus among the members of the executive boards was thus not followed. The disunity was still greater in the Walloon Regional Council : the regional ministers did not even succeed in naming a chairman for their executive board in 1981 because the PS, in the opposition on the national level, and the PRL and the PSC, in the government on the national level, each had 3 seats on the executive board. In the French community government, the majority was formed by the national opposition parties. The composition of the Brussels regional government took place at the same time as the composition of the national government. Other than the remaining three executive boards, who lead their own existence, the members of the Brussels area government also are part of the national government. Further, the composition of the three regional parliaments also changed : henceforth, the chamber members and only the directly elected senators are members.

The instability on the level of the government and the almost permanent crisis climate in 1981 was significantly influenced by the difficulties within and between a number of the coalition parties, particularly the PS and the CVP. In the PS, friction arose as a result of the growing conflict between its chairman, A. Cools, and the Walloon leaders of the socialist union. They were not so happy with the role that the PS chairman had played in the creation of the merger of the Walloon steel firms. In the PS parliamentary group, dissatisfaction reigned because of sanctions requested by Cools but

rejected by a majority of the group members against two PS chamber members who had voted against the income limitation law. At the end of January, Cools announced that he would not be a candidate for the prolongation of the chairman's mandate at the PS congress of 22 February. G. Spitaels was elected the new party chairman at this congress, although only in the second round. Spitaels just barely beat out E. Glinne, who had the support of the left wing and also of the right wing of the party. As chairman, Spitaels succeeded rather quickly in avoiding a possible break between the moderate stream and the left wing of the party and in repairing the relationship with the Walloon socialist union. By his strong positions on the index, social security, and Walloon steel, Spitaels saved his party from further electoral decline in the elections of 8 November, which were otherwise notable. The PS maintained its 1978 electoral position, and, after 8 November, the PS chairman worked on the creation of a Walloon progressive front. Thus, the PS had already opened its lists at the elections to candidates from a new Walloon federalist party, the Rassemblement Populaire Wallon, and with the cooptation of the national senators, a common PS-FDF/RW-Ecolo list was submitted. In the Walloon regional parliament, the PS received the support of the Communists, the RW, and the ecologists in the election of the chairman, A. Cools.

Because of the strongly profiled Walloon positions of the PS, a growing alienation was to be perceived with the Flemish socialists. The SP did not succeed in accomplishing a breakthrough in the elections of 8 November. Although they did not lose they did not win either. By this status quo and the gains of the Liberal party, the SP saw itself lose its place as the second party in Flanders for the first time since the implementation of simple universal suffrage.

The elections of 8 November had important consequences for the two Christian democratic parties, the CVP and the PSC. The CVP remained, it is true, the largest party, but it suffered the most severe election defeat since the Second World War and reached an historic low point in both the number of seats and in percentages. The party chairman, L. Tindemans, had admitted long before the elections of 8 November, publicly that the party suffered from a malaise (namely, in a free platform of the newspaper, *Le Soir*, 5 June). According to Tindemans, the cause had to be sought in the impossibility of his party to bring about changes in the socio-economic policy, in spite of its proposals and plans. As a consensus party covering all classes, it was becoming ever more difficult for the CVP to formulate clear socio-economic positions. In addition, there was the increasingly tense relationship between the party leadership and its ministers: the compromises made by the CVP ministers with the Socialists in the government

were often later disapproved of by the party. Also the resignation of Prime Minister W. Martens and his succession by M. Eyskens at the head of the same government team was incomprehensible and unacceptable for many in the party and created an upheaval in the CVP parliamentary group. After the election defeat, voices were raised in the CVP to go into the opposition (the CVP has been permanently in the government since 1958). But after the dust raised by the defeat had settled somewhat, more emphasis was placed on its function as a policy party, although reserves were expressed against a Christian Democrat-Liberal government by the ACW, which represents the workers in the CVP. These reserves were generated by the growing uneasiness in the Christian workers' movement regarding the ACW-CVP relationship. A number of ACW militants even insisted on a reorientation of the political position of the ACW with respect to the CVP, and, in the Metal Processing Union of the ACV, the formation of an independent Christian workers' party for the elections of 8 November was advocated, although for the time being without success.

The PSC had still more difficulty than the CVP in coping with the severe loss of 8 November. The resistance against new participation in the government was also much greater than in the CVP. The PSC initially opted to be in the opposition, but the right wing, the CEPIC came out for a government of Christian Democrats and Liberals, a position that would later prevail. The tensions between the « social groups » after 8 November led ultimately to the resignation of P. Vanden Boeynants as party chairman and to the formation of an « engagement de comportement politique ». With this « engagement », the party leadership attempted to end the organized « social groups » in the PSC. G. Deprez succeeded P. Vanden Boeynants as party chairman pending the election of a new chairman in 1982. G. Deprez was appointed political secretary at the end of September in addition to P. Vanden Boeynants in order to give the party a stronger Walloon cast.

Difficulties also arose in the FDF because of the further rapprochement of this party to the RW. At the beginning of January, both parties approved a policy memorandum that took distance from the federalistic idea in favour of a more autonomous position and in which it was stated that Wallonia and Brussels should have a far-reaching independence in the Belgian state structure. At the same time, both parties announced that they, while preserving their own character and programme, would participate in the parliamentary elections together. This alliance policy was the cause of growing dissension both in the FDF and in the RW, and, in fact, yielded no fruit in the elections. The former RW chairman, P. Gendebien left the party and founded the Rassemblement Populaire Wallon

(RPW) ; others formed an association with the Front pour l'indépendance de la Wallonie (FIW) founded in the beginning of 1981 by the former RW senator, E. Duvieusart. P. Havelange, a member of parliament left the FDF. This was the beginning of the exodus of mandataries from this party. Both the RPW and the FIW with their « independence tendency » exercised a very limited power of attraction for the Walloon voter. The FDF and the RW both suffered heavy losses on 8 November.

The Flemish nationalist party, the Volksunie (VU), on the contrary, did considerably better in these elections and could repair the damage done by the Egmont Pact in the last elections (1978). Not only did the Volksunie recover its electoral position, the internal oppositions arising out of the approval of the Egmont Pact in 1977 were also settled ; that had been expressed by, among other things, the election in the beginning of 1981 of H. Schiltz, the former party chairman, as vice-chairman of the Party. Schiltz also acted as spokesman for the Volksunie in the most important chamber debates and became the VU member in the Flemish regional government.

The largest winners in the elections of 8 November were the Liberals. In Flanders as well as in Wallonia and Brussels, it strengthened its electoral position considerably. In Flanders, the Liberals became the second party after the Christian Democrats. This was also the case in Wallonia, and in Brussels, it won first place again after suffering severe losses there in 1977 and 1978.

The success of the « green » lists was also striking : for the first time, they won seats in Parliament.

No survey of Belgian politics would be complete without mention of the relations with Zaïre. As usual, Belgian-Zaïre relations had high and low points in 1981. With the visit of Premier W. Martens and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ch.-F. Nothomb (PSC) to Zaïre (27 February - 5 March), the relations between the two countries were significantly improved. The relaxation was, however, of short duration. The President of Zaïre, Mobutu, reiterated his previous criticisms of the Belgian government regarding the residence of Zaïreans dissidents in Belgium, among them Nguza Karl-I-Bond, who had resigned his position as prime minister in the middle of April from Europe and had since then lived in Brussels.

In the context of Belgian foreign policy, finally, the peace demonstration of 25 October cannot go unmentioned. More than 100,000 people then demonstrated in Brussels for an active peace policy and for the dismantling of the nuclear arsenal in the East and the West. The demonstration, which was organized largely outside of the traditional political organizations and about a matter lying outside the traditional cleavages of Belgian politics, was a unique event.

Indeed, Belgian politics suffered important shocks in 1981, and saw significant shifts, although there were many elements and phenomena of continuity present.

Abbreviations

ABVV - FGTB	Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond - Fédération Générale du Travail en Belgique : General Belgian Union
ACV	Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond : General Christian Union
ACW	Algemeen Christelijk Werkersverbond : General Christian Workers' Association
BDBH - OBCE	Belgische Dienst voor Buitenlandse Handel - Office Belge du Commerce Extérieur : Belgian Service for Foreign Trade
CEPIC	Centre Politique des Indépendants et Cadres Chrétiens : Political Center of the Christian Self-Employed and Managers
CVP	Christelijke Volkspartij : Christian Democratic Party (Flemish)
FDF	Front Démocratique des Bruxellois Francophones : Brussels French-Speaking Democratic Front
FIW	Front pour l'Indépendance de la Wallonie : Front for the Independence of Wallonia
PRL	Parti réformateur libéral : Liberal reform party (Liberals, French-speaking)
PS	Parti Socialiste : Socialist Party (French-speaking)
PSC	Parti Social Chrétien : Christian Democratic Party (French-speaking)
PVV	Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang : Party for Freedom and Progress (Liberals, Flemish)
RPW	Rassemblement Populaire Wallon : Popular Walloon Rally
RW	Rassemblement Wallon : Walloon Rally
SP	Socialistische Partij : Socialist Party (Flemish)
VU	Volksunie : The People's Union (Flemish nationalists)

