Waiting for 'The big one':The uncertain survival of the Belgian Parties and Party Systems(S)

Kris DESCHOUWER

Professor of Politics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel

This article wants to analyze the present state and potential future state of the Belgian parties and party system. Since it wants to do it in a comparative perspective, and with special reference to the Italian case, the basic line of analysis will be the search for the stability of the parties and the party system. Is there any chance of Belgium going Italian? Can one imagine a rapid implosion or collapse of the system? Can one imagine a sudden disappearance of the major political parties? Can one imagine the rise and success of something similar to Forza Italia, on the Belgian or Flemish or Walloon level?

The answer is obviously yes. Why would political evolutions that have proven to be possible in Italy, be completely impossible in Belgium? They might at first sight be unthinkable, but that goes also for what happened in Italy. The unthinkable simply happened.

The article will thus be slightly biased. We would like to deliberately defend the idea that the unthinkable is possible, that Belgium can indeed and maybe even quite easily 'go Italian'. We will look for the features that might be the omen of the coming collapse of the parties and party system. We will deliberately overlook most of the indicators of stability and rigidity. We are well aware of the fact that this strategy is debatable, even if it has been the strategy of quite some party research and electoral research of the last few decades. By measuring change and focussing on change, we might forget that what we still need is some kind of theory that enables us to explain the incredible amount of stability in parties and party systems.

Still, we do believe that change is what we need to look for. There are two reasons for this. In the first place there is the very strange assumption that the Belgian parties and party system have always been stable, and that only recently some major changes are becoming visible. This assumption is very present in the political debates that started in the Flemish part of the country on the night of the general elections of November 24 1991. This election day, quickly labelled 'black Sunday', is too often believed to be a starting point. And therefore changes in the electorate and changes in the parties are seen as a result of this 'black Sunday'.

The second reason is that one can simply not defend the idea that everything has always been smooth and stable, when in only one single decade (1968-1978) all the major Belgian parties *disappeared*, and at the same time the Belgian party system simply *disappeared*. If there is something strange to be explained, it is not the stability of the parties and the party system, but the hardly changed perception of the Belgian parties and party system being solid and stable. The persistence of this perception might of course be an argument against our strategy: it might illustrate that what a political scientist believes to be major changes, does

not really affect the functioning of the system, and therefore is not perceived as change by the political actors.

Nevertheless, we will search for change. Because change there is, even if it is not perceived as such. Anyone walking around in the city of San Francisco will find it hard to believe that this city could be completely blown away by a major earthquake. Of course there have been some heavy quakes in the past, but the city has been able to recover, even from the devastating quake of 1906. So it looks nice and solid again. But the scientists knowing the underground, those knowing and understanding the deep cleavage that hides beneath the surface of the earth and that caused the minor quakes, know for sure that San Francisco is only waiting for 'the big one'.

The Belgian parties and party system have experienced some quakes: 1965, 1981, 1991. Parties have reacted. Parties have been rebuilt, parties have been searching for quake-safe structures. And the 1995 elections (with a low volatility rate) seemed to be the proof for the solidity of the structures. But the (political) scientists knowing the underground, those knowing and understanding the deep cleavages that hide beneath the surface and that caused the minor quakes, know that the Belgian parties and party system might only be waiting for 'the big one'.

I. Belgium: a consociational partitocracy

Until the early sixties, Belgium was a relatively stable democracy indeed. It was considered to be one of the typical examples of a consociational democracy (Lijphart, 1977), where the potential instability was countered by prudent leadership and techniques of power-sharing.

The role played by the political parties in this type of democracy, is very important (Luther, 1992: 46). The parties are deeply rooted in society. They are much more than purely political organizations. They are the political expression of a subcultural network of organizations. At all levels of society, and in almost all spheres of life, the parties can be seen. At least, the subcultural divisions can be seen, but then the party belonging to that subculture is never far away.

At the same time, the parties are the structures that organize the seeking of consensus at the level of the political elites. It is actually the parties' elites that must be 'prudent leaders', in order to prevent the subcultural divisions (which they themselves organize and mobilize) from becoming the source of centrifugal conflicts. The political agreements then also have to be implemented, and therefore the parties need a firm control over the parliament and over the public administration. The parties - like we said above - are almost everywhere. A consociational democracy tends to be a partitocracy.

Looking at the parties' internal life, certainly reveals a number of characteristics that can be understood as the consequences of the role played by the parties under conditions of consociationalism. The most obvious is the need for *a strong leadership*. The party elites must have the means to make the most appropriate strategic choices, without constantly being challenged for it. Too high a level of internal criticism would diminish the credibility of the leaders when negotiating with the other party leaders, and would therefore undermine the power and the weight of the party in these negotiations. Strong leaders are a blessing for the party, and are necessary to make the consociational system work. This is the iron law of consociational oligarchy.

The counterpart of a strong leadership is obviously a very *low degree of political participation*. Passive citizens are an important precondition for the good functioning of consociational democracy. It is a 'favourable' condition that was not so much stressed by Lijphart, but made very explicit in Huyse's analysis of the Belgian democracy (Huyse, 1969, 1971). The voters and the militants have to be loyal, in order to keep the whole system stable. They must be ready to follow the leaders, one day in getting mobilized to defend their sub-cultural values, the other day in accepting the compromise that has been reached.

If the members of the subculture, and the voters of its party in particular have to be loyal, it is hard to imagine that their commitment to the party can be very ideological. If the incentives offered to the participants were mainly purposive incentives (Clark & Wilson, 1961), the party leadership would not be able to keep its strategic freedom. A social organization with ideologically committed members, can not be flexible. It has to stick to its declared purpose, and prove it constantly to the members. These will always be ready to choose the exit option, when they feel that the organization is moving too far away from its original goal. The political and electoral stability in a consociational (and thus compromising) democracy, is an indicator of the relative absence of ideological or purposive incentives being used to keep the subgroups together.

The incentives used are then rather solidarity or associative incentives, and material or selective incentives (Clark & Wilson, 1961; Panebianco, 1988; Deschouwer, 1990). The first mean that the participants are attracted by *appealing to a sense of belonging* to a relevant and visible social group or community. They participate because they feel at home in the group in which they participate. In a consociational democracy, with separated and closed societal subgroups, this kind of incentives is very much available to the parties. They are in the centre of a societal segment, in which the members see and meet each other at all levels and in all spheres of social life. The pillars then provide the parties with a reservoir of loyal members and voters.

The societal segments in a consociational democracy are more than just subcultures. One of the consociational techniques is granting them a large degree of autonomy, and thus delegating to them a series of state tasks. They can organize - with state subsidies - their own religious services, their own schools, their own cultural organizations, their own hospitals and social welfare organizations. They can distribute to their members the services of the welfare state. The links between the parties and all these organizations, provide them not only with a social community out of which they can recruit, but also with a large reservoir of *selective incentives*. And since the pillarized organizations are also those being recognized as the representative pressure groups in the corporatist circuits of decision-making, the parties - by being almost everywhere - can offer almost everything. They can act as brokers, offerings services to their clients. It makes and keeps them strong, with a loyal and elite-directed rank and file.

A final typical feature of the parties in a consociational democracy, is the *weakness of the parliament*. The role of the parliament is a reflection of the procedures of decision-making. It is the party elites that agree on what has to be done. And even if the constitution states - like all democratic constitutions - that the parliament makes the rules, its real role is the mere approvement of decisions that were already reached elsewhere. This means that the parties need a firm control over their parliamentary groups. They can not allow them to go their own way, to be too critical, to bring the delicate governmental consensus in danger. It is not really important who is in the parliament. The important thing is how many MP's each party has, and how well they can control them.

II. The end of the consensus

The year 1960 is an excellent moment to start with a story on the evolution of the Belgian parties, especially since the description of changes is what we are looking for. In 1960 the parties were more or less the same as those in the beginning of the century. The party system could be labelled a 'two and a half' system (Blondel, 1968), with a large socialist and christian-democratic party, and a smaller liberal party.

The 1961 elections were the last almost normal and predictable elections: the three traditional parties polled together 90.5% of the votes, while the Communists got 3%. The rest, and here is the start of a new story, went to other and new parties. These new parties would really break through in 1965.

The 1965 election was a dramatic event. It can be considered as the beginning of a new era, for which the major characteristics are the high volatility and the increasingly high fractionalisation. The Liberal party almost doubled its score, while Christian-Democrats and Socialists each lost more or less one fifth of their voters. The old consociational and stable system came under pressure. There was also the rise and success of the nationalist parties. In Flanders the 'Volksunie' gained momentum in 1965, while in Brussels a party of Francophone defense (The Front Démocratique des Francophones Bruxellois) was created, winning three seats in 1965. In Wallonia a smaller and less successful Walloon Rally (Rassemblement Wallon) was created in 1965, associating itself electorally with the Brussels FDF.

These nationalist or regionalist parties produced a double challenge to the traditional system (Deschouwer, 1994a). In the first place there is their primary ideological concern: the granting of more autonomy to the regions and linguistic communities. They did not introduce the idea - it had been heard before - but their electoral success obliged the other parties to become aware of the fact that a new political problem had arrived, and could not be avoided any more.

But asking autonomy was not the only value being stressed by these new parties. They also presented themselves as an alternative way of doing politics in Belgium. They challenged the system as such. They criticized the pillarization, the control power of the traditional pillarized parties, the poor democratic quality of the system.

Two explanations can be put forward for the rapid success of these new parties (apart from the general explanations of value changes and generational changes that made all democratic regimes move). The first lies in the consociational system itself. It is indeed a very closed system, with a small cartel of elites arranging things the way they want. It locks out those who at a certain moment would like more and better participation. The reaction will then be stronger.

And second there is the nature of the traditional parties. Since they are real mass parties, they lack the flexibility to adapt themselves easily to new challenges, or to incorporate new questions and new movements. These have then to go and create new movements and parties outside the existing ones (Deschouwer & Koole, 1993).

The stability and survival of the Belgian parties is thus at stake as the result of two challenges. We will further refer to them as the 'first' and the 'second' challenge. The first is the linguistic problem. The second is the challenge to the consociational system and procedures, and of the kind of political parties than come with these procedures.

The reaction of the traditional parties on the challenges of the new parties, was clear and coherent on the first one, but much less consistent on the second one. The urge to take into account the demands put forward by the Flemings and the Walloons, finally led to the death of the traditional parties. They all fell apart into two different parties. The Christian-Democrats divorced in 1968 (creating the unilingual CVP and PSC), the Liberals did it in 1971 (giving birth to PVV and PLP) and the Socialists died in 1978 (creating SP and PS).

The challenge to the traditional parties did not only come from the regionalist parties. More new parties appeared and were electorally successful. There are the two Green parties Agalev (Dutch-speaking) and Ecolo (French-speaking), the Vlaams Blok (a radical Flemish nationalist party that moved towards right-wing populism in the eighties) and the Front National (right-wing populist and French-speaking).

In 1961 there were three major parties, with a tiny communist party and a very young and small Flemish nationalist party. In 1995 twelve parties have representatives elected in the Parliament. The three decades in between have been decades of change, both in the parties and in the party system.

III. The divided party system

When in 1978 the Belgian Socialist Party disappeared, the Belgian party system was also gone, or had at least taken a rather strange and awkward form. In the electoral arena, the party system has disappeared, since the Belgian parties do not compete directly (except in the Brussels constituency) with each other. The Flemish parties do not compete with the French-speaking parties. An electoral result on the Belgian level is therefore absolutely meaningless. Whether for instance the Flemish Christian-Democrats poll 15% or 17% of the Belgian votes, is for them and for the other parties not a significant piece of information. Since it is a Flemish party, its result will be looked at *within* the Flemish part of the country. The 17% at the Belgian level means there something like 28% of the votes.

Furthermore it is important for that Flemish Christian-Democratic party to know what the results of its electoral opponents are. The 12% or 13% of the Walloon Socialist Party is less relevant than the 20% *at the Flemish level* of for instance the Flemish Liberal Party (which is also about 13% at the Belgian level). The bottom line of this, is that the parties compete within their own language group, and therefore one must recognize the existence of *two electoral party systems*.

Yet there is more that just the absence of a national electoral arena. The characteristics of both party systems are very different. The Flemish party system is much more fragmented and is more oriented to the centre (the strongest party being the Christian-Democrats). The largest Walloon party is a Socialist party, and its *regional* strength and dominance is more important than that of the largest Flemish party. The Flemish party system is also more polarized, with a right-wing party polling almost 13% of the Flemish votes. One can use all the classical party system measurements, and find different results for the two Belgian party systems.

In the governmental arena however, the parties still compete. But they do so in a strange way. The governmental level is the place where the two party systems join. This juncture is made relatively strong by the unwritten rule that national coalitions ought to be symmetrical, with the parties belonging to the same ide-

ological family being together either inside or outside the government. This has so far always been the case. But it is a rule that is difficult to abide to, if at the same time there needs to be a relation between the electoral result and the right to govern.

This relation is seen in the public debate as a relative one, i.e. a party that improves its score is considered to have 'won' the elections, while those who score less than what they did before are believed to be the 'losers' of the elections. Although it is a strange way of interpreting the results, it is an understandable way of giving substantial meaning (producing a meaningful link between election result and government making power) to elections under the proportional rule. The other way of doing this, looking at the largest party, is meaningless in Belgium since there is more than one largest party in the electoral arena. The fact that the Flemish Christian-Democrats are larger than the Walloon Socialists, is simply due to the size of the Flemish electorate, and not to the relative strength of the Christian-Democrats in Flanders. They score less than the Socialists in Wallonia. The two electoral systems produce two different largest parties.

So the expected and legitimate link between electoral result and government building, a link that can produce something like a Belgian party system at the governmental level, is problematic. It assumes (or hopes) that the electoral movements up or down of the members of the same ideological family are the same. Yet this is not the case. The parties in the two party systems move in different directions. The table below gives an overview of the electoral movements (up or down) for the six traditional parties since 1981. It shows clearly how the two electoral party systems move in different (or at least unpredictable) directions. The result as it is seen in the public debate can be and often is very different in the two party systems. To form a government that 'respects' the will of the voter, is a difficult exercise, and it is bound to go against the expectations of the public. The split of the parties and of the electoral party system, did certainly not help to bridge the gap between the elites and the citizenry.

	Christ-Dem		Socialists		Liberals	
	Flem	French	Flem	French	Flem	French
1981	DOWN	DOWN	UP	DOWN	UP	UP
1985	UP	UP	UP	UP	DOWN	UP
1987	DOWN	-	UP	UP	UP	DOWN
1991	DOWN	DOWN	DOWN	DOWN	UP	DOWN
1995	UP	-	UP	DOWN	UP	UP

The existence of two electoral party systems in a country that attempts to have one governmental party system, is a feature that has furthermore not improved the stability of the coalitions. The linguistic cleavage as such has proven to be a very effective coalition killer, but the effects of the cleavage on the parties and the party system have even reinforced this killing power (Deschouwer, 1994b)

At first sight the parties might seem to have a more easy job now. They do not have to seek internal compromises any more. For the parties this is easier indeed, but for the coalitions it is a major problem. When before the split of the parties a linguistic issue could eventually be solved by reaching a compromise within the parties, almost every linguistic issue that comes to the surface now after the split of the national parties, ends on the table of the government, and thus means a conflict in the governmental party system. It is impossible to avoid these issues.

The effect on the life of coalitions is obvious: the partners compete in the national governmental arena, but they are not sanctioned at that level. Elections can not really solve problems, because when an election is called as a result of a linguistic issue, the Dutch-speaking voters are offered no choice between different attitudes: all the parties will defend the Flemish point of view. And in Wallonia everybody defends the other view. And after the election, the two dissenting opinions have to coalesce again anyway. There is thus no danger to be sanctioned by the voters for blowing up a coalition. The parties in the opposition will often have defended an even more radical view than the parties in the government. When a linguistic problem comes up, parties feel a lot of pressure to be radical, and eventually to leave or kill the coalition, and not so much pressure to try to find a compromise in order to save the coalition. The separation of the national Belgian parties has built in a strong mechanism to shorten the life of the coalitions.

Since 1970 the Belgian constitution obliges all the coalitions at the national level to respect a perfect balance between the two language groups. It means that the numbers of French-speaking and Dutch-speaking ministers (except for the Prime Minister) have to be exactly the same. This is called 'linguistic parity'. The Belgian government is a collective body that reaches its decisions by consensus. That is not a written rule, but it is generally accepted. It enforces the meaning of parity, for no decisions can be taken against the will of any of the language groups. The consequences of this for the life of the coalitions are again very important.

At first sight this device can help the coalition to stick together. It obliges the partners to look for consensus, and it offers the possibility of solving conflicts by log-rolling. A very often used technique to avoid a cabinet crisis, is letting several problems come together, and then solve them all at once. When the tension in the cabinet becomes very high, the solution can be very close.

Yet this consensus-type of decision making, combined with the linguistic parity, can also work in the opposite direction. It can attract problems, and especially - once again - the problems concerning the linguistic divisions. If one group feels that an issue is very important, and that it should be solved very quickly, it will try to get it on the agenda of the government. Then the other group is not able to avoid it, and when it does so, it opens immediately a crisis. A good example of this is what happened in 1981. The French-speaking Socialists wanted absolutely that the national state gave subsidies for the steel industry of Wallonia. The Flemish partners did not really refused this, but did not want to be pressed too hard. They wanted to deal with other matters first. The PS Ministers then went on strike, refusing to start any cabinet meeting if the first agenda item was not the Walloon steel industry. It meant the end of the coalition, also because the other French-speaking partner in the government had to follow this radical line.

If one party has a dissenting opinion, it might well decide to forget it and stay with the others. For the outside world there is then consensus. But if the issue is linguistic, it is never the problem of one party, it is immediately the problem of half of the government, and thus of the government as a whole. The Belgian coalitions are extremely vulnerable for these kind of problems.

IV. Federalism without federal parties

So far we have described how the linguistic cleavage has caused direct and even dramatic changes in the Belgian parties and party system. At the same time we have been able to show that these changes had quite some effects on governmen-

tal stability, and on the legitimacy of the parties. The starting point was that parties in a consociational democracy are under pressure to be centralized, have autonomous leaders, reduce the degree of internal participation. The split of the parties and the split of the party system have not taken away these systemic pressures on the parties. The political system and the political game is even more complex than before.

If we want to understand the reactions of the parties to the second challenge to the old consensus, the challenge of the consociational procedures, we need to keep in mind that by adapting to the pressures caused by the linguistic cleavage, the Belgian parties have put themselves in a position out of which it is even more difficult than before to change and to accommodate to the challenge of those parties and movements that want them to become more open, more responsive, more democratic.

Maybe the federalization of the country offers new possibilities. Indeed, the introduction of the federal state structure might take away (part of) the linguistic pressure, or might offer an institutional setting in which the parties have more possibilities to deal with the second challenge. The federalization might take away the continuous obligation to accommodate, to bargain, to compromise.

The federal system is very young, and it is difficult to assess already its effect on the functioning of the parties. But the way in which the federal system has been set up, and the way in which the parties act in it, can already give us some ideas. The point we like to make, is that the federal logic will certainly not reduce the degree of partitocracy, *because there are no federal political parties.* We still see the same logic: the way in which the parties adapted to the linguistic cleavage, pushes them further away from the possibility to change the fundamental (bargaining) logic of the Belgian political system. And by not changing, by not being able to change, they can not avoid that the pressure from below increases. It is the pressure coming from the electorate, the erosion of the legitimacy of the system.

The Belgian federalization, being the result of a bargaining in which (hardly) nobody defended the centre, has given a very large degree of autonomy to Regions and Communities. Furthermore the policy packages are fairly homogeneous. When Regions or Communities received some policy domain, they received (claimed) it almost completely. There are of course some notable exceptions (in financial matters for instance), but if the Belgian distribution of competences is compared to other federal states, it is clear that there is very little room for joint decision-making of the federal state and the federated entities. And since the distribution of competences is so clear-cut, there are no procedures for joint policy-making.

There are of course procedures to deal with conflicts of competences, but these are (almost) strictly judicial. There are also procedures to deal with conflicts of interest, and these procedures will prove to be very important. Policy domains are not static. They constantly change according to the demands that are produced by the changing society. One of the newer policy domains, that seems to be discovered in almost all the western countries, is 'the city'. The cities, and especially the inner cities, are some kind of focal point where many current societal problems merge into one new question for the future: how to make sure that the inner cities are still places to live, that they do not become the place where all those that lose touch with society get concentrated.

When in the Belgian (and other federal systems) a policy for the city has to be developed, it is not clear who will have to do it. 'The city' as such was not part of

the policy domains that were allocated. But the different aspects of it (security, housing, education, employment,...) have been. And a policy for the city requires cooperation and therefore involves conflicts of interest.

This will in two ways strengthen the role of the parties. In the first place the conflicts between the regional and the federal level are conflicts *within the same parties*. Unlike in other federal systems, it is not the federal party that deals with the federal level, and the regional party that deals with the regional level. The Belgian regional parties are present at both levels. They will be obliged to develop internal procedures to solve conflicts between regional and federal ministers, between regional and federal MP's. They will need a good organization and in the first place a strong and authoritative leadership.

In the second place there is the way in which conflicts of interest can be solved. The Belgian federation has developed a very Belgian institution to deal with them. It is called 'concertation committee'. Whenever a conflict of interest is put on the agenda by one of the actors, the committee meets. It is composed in a very consociational way: an equal number of representatives of the federal and of the regional governments, with of course also linguistic parity. It reaches a solution by consensus. That means that the *governments* reach (have to reach) a compromise, that will then afterwards be ratified (have to be ratified) by the parliaments. Once again the parties dominate. The parliamentary groups have no choice but to follow the leaders. If they refuse, they bring down the subtle compromise. If they don't - which they might as well do in the future - they simply bring down the system. But the only way to rebuild or repair it, is yet another compromise between the parties.

A federation without federal parties has at least the in-built danger of keeping the partitocratic procedures going. A federation without federal parties therefore adds to the erosion of the legitimacy of the system. The Belgian federation without Belgian federal parties intensifies the 'second' challenge to the Belgian parties.

V. The crisis of legitimacy

Several other chapters in this volume deal with the legitimacy crisis of the Belgian political system, the electoral changes, the rise and success of right-wing extremism. We will not discuss these developments in detail. We will just assume that they are there, and look at their consequences for the political parties. And we will consider them as a challenge, as the 'second' challenge which is the questioning of the basic features of the Belgian consociational partitocracy. This discontent with the classical structures is (was) present in the regionalist parties, in the Green parties, in the right-wing populist parties. Recently the Flemish Liberal party also joined this line of protest and opted for a radically different type of internal organization.

It is not easy for the parties to decode the messages coming from the electorate, and to react or to adapt in a proper way. One can even say that the parties in the Belgian consociational partitocracy are trapped. There is not really a way out, because there is a double pressure, a double challenge that seems to ask for opposite and maybe even incompatible answers. The first challenge has been dealt with. The linguistic tensions produced a double party system and a federal state structure. But the cooling down of the linguistic tensions has increased the complexity of the political system and has kept and even reinforced the necessity of subtle arrangements and compromises. The systemic pressure to produce the type

of party that we described in the beginning of this article, is not gone. Parties are still better fit to deal with the Belgian problems, if they are centralized, have a strong leadership, control their parliamentary groups, have a low degree of internal participation, have possibilities to offer associative and material incentives to the rank and file.

The second pressure is one towards more internal democracy, towards more responsiveness, towards more ideological clarity, towards loosening the links with the pillarized pressure groups. This pressure comes from below, from the electorate that is getting dealigned, that is leaving the traditional pillarized electoral behaviour.

A close analysis of the evolution of the party structures in Belgium, shows a true concern for answering to this second pressure. Parties try to offer their members more possibilities to participate. They lower the thresholds for participation in the party congresses, they try to have genuine elections for the party leaders, either at a congress or through a poll in which all members participate. And whenever they introduce these kind of changes, they try to explain at large that they have understood the message, that they really want to be an open and democratic membership organization.

But these kinds of changes in the internal party life do not change the perception of the party in the electorate. How important is it really that a party adopts a slightly more open procedure for the drafting of electoral lists? How important is it really that a party bureau is elected by all the members and not by a congress of representatives? How important is it really that the congress takes a secret vote to elect the party president? The problem with this kind of changes is that they are genuine attempts to link the party's central office in a more democratic way to the party's membership, when this link is not the most relevant aspect of political parties any more (Mair, 1993).

But (slightly) changing the way in which the party leadership is connected to the membership, does not affect at all the position and role of the parties in the Belgian political system. The problematic relationship, the one that is questioned and challenged, is the relation between the party leadership and the state. The challenge is to *the position of the parties in the political system*. What is at the centre of the debate is not the responsiveness towards the membership, but towards the electorate. A party can easily change or adapt its internal life, but changing its position in the system is less a matter of free choice. The systemic and societal pressures dramatically reduce the freedom to choose in this respect.

Mair (1994) and Katz & Mair (1995) have nicely described the evolution of the political parties in democratic regimes as a slow 'migration into the state'. They say that parties, which originated out of (subgroups in) society, tend to loosen their links with society (see also the catch-all thesis of Kirchheimer) and to seek and find their resources for survival in the state rather than in their link with society. The parties need the state to communicate with the public, need the state for their personnel, need the state for their financial resources.

The comparative research on which Katz & Mair rely to defend this point, also shows that parties have increasingly been taking advantage of public resources for rewarding the rank and file. Patronage is a phenomenon that has certainly not faded away. It is a perfect example of the use of the state to provide something (in casu incentives for the participants) that can not or to a much lesser extent than before be provided through social or ideological linkages with society, or through privileged links with service-providing pressure groups. And if the

pressure groups provide services, they are also able to produce them through their linkage with the state.

If parties rely increasingly on the state, as a result of their inability to keep stable linkages with a loyal electorate, it means that parties have to rely increasingly on themselves. The resources provided by the state, are obviously produced by the parties themselves. It is the parties themselves which decide - to cite only this one example - on public funding of the parties. These evolutions also account for the increasing convergence of the parties. They all have governing experience, they all have to rely on state rules and state funding, they all rely on expensive professional advice for campaigning, and therefore use very similar campaign techniques.

This all accounts for a greater power of the parties, and certainly not a decline of parties. But at the same time this greater impact of the parties, the sometimes spectacular growth (in terms of means and personnel) of the parties' central office, also accounts for an increasing *perception of remoteness* of the parties. They are far away, dealing with their own - very crucial - problems of survival in a changing and dealigning society. And the way to deal with the difficulty of linking themselves in a stable and predictable way to society, seems to be the further migration to and reliance on the state.

In a consociational partitocracy, where the linguistic issue has even increased the necessity of the party elites to accommodate, to constantly meet and negotiate, to produce subtle and complicated solutions, this migration into the state and this perception of remoteness can be expected to be even more important. The Belgian parties, by adapting to the linguistic and systemic pressures, are increasingly unable to meet the expectation of responsiveness to the electorate. The parties have always been seen as remote (Huyse 1969). That is the consequence and condition of the consociational logic. But depillarization and dealignment has not changed this position. That is of course to a great extent due to the fact that in the linguistic cleavage there is no 'depillarization' (on the contrary), and no dealignment, because the party system has been broken up along the lines of the linguistic cleavage. The newly built federal state still contains the continuous need to bargain and to compromise, and the impact of the parties in this process is still enormous.

Conclusion

Refering to the story above on the parties' migration into the state (a story for which we heavily relied on Mair (1994)), Peter Mair writes: "This picture resembles the image of the dying years of the traditional Italian parties (...), an image which rightly emphasises those long-term preconditions of transformation that preceded the catalytic 'mani pulite' investigations. The Italian case, to be sure, is *exceptional* (my italics, KD), as is the sheer extent of party system transformation which subsequent ensued. At the same time, however, the crisis which was evoked in parties which had become far too entangled with the state, which had neglected to adjust to changes in civil society, and which had become almost entirely caught up with their own internal manoeuvrings, is one to which the established parties in all western democracies could well pay heed" (p. 19-20).

We totally agree with this analysis, but not with the Italian exceptionalism. The collapse of the Italian party system can be explained with a general theory of party change, which is based on empirical evidence in eleven European countries (Katz & Mair, 1992). Of course one needs the details of the Italian society and

history to understand why Italy is an *extreme* case of the general pattern. But Italy is not exceptional.

The aim of this article was to show and to explain that Belgium, with its consociational tradition and its hidden effects of the linguistic tensions, can at least be considered as a case that comes close to Italy. Long term changes have made the parties move towards a position in which they are more vulnerable than ever before. The vulnerability lies in the lack of legitimacy, the lack of responsiveness to society. The consociational tradition and the adaptations to the linguistic tensions give the Belgian public more reasons than in other countries to perceive the parties as remote and slightly self-sufficient. The consociational tradition and the adaptations to the linguistic tensions brought the Belgian parties in a position out of which they can not answer the challenges. The conditions in which the Belgian parties function allow therefore for the building up of a very high degree of tension. There are therefore more chances for a dramatic earthquake than for a slow and smooth process of change.

Italy is not exceptional. Belgium comes close, and countries like for instance Austria might belong to the same category. It would then be the category of countries in which the parties and the party system should be prepared for 'the big one'.

Abstract

The Belgian party system is often considered to be or to have been very stable. This article investigates the possibility of the Belgian parties and party systems to 'go Italian', i.e. to be confronted with a radicial change resulting from a fundamental lack of legitimacy. This problem of legitimation can be expected from the fact that Belgium is a very consociational democracy, in which the parties play a very important role, but tend to become very entangled with the state. The split of the national parties and the federal reform of the state have made the decision-making structures even more complex than before, and have therefore not at all reduced the 'partitocratic' nature of the system. For these reasons a future Italian-style collapse of the parties and the party systems is certainly not to be excluded.