

## Belgian politics in 1995

---

**Kris DESCHOUWER & Marc PLATEL**

Kris Deschouwer is professor of Politics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel  
Marc Platel is chief editor of *Het Belang van Limburg*

Nobody expected 1995 to be an easy and normal year in Belgian politics, since elections were due for the end of the year. Elections were held indeed, but earlier than expected and overshadowed by the Agusta-scandal.

### I. The beginning of 1995

#### A. *Voeren back on the agenda*

During the last weeks of 1994 a number of language related issues animated the scene. The francophones did not appreciate the exceptions to the local voting rights for European citizens that had been granted to prime minister Dehaene at the European Top. The Dutch-speakers were not happy with the appointment of a (bilingual) francophone vice-governor in the new province of Vlaams-Brabant, for supervising the application of the linguistic laws favoring the francophone minority in that province. And last but not least José Happart had announced that he wanted to become mayor of Voeren again, this village located in the Flemish Region but with a local francophone majority. Philippe Busquin, the president of the PS (Parti Socialiste) asked the federal government to find a solution, preferably accepting in one way or another a bi-regional status for Voeren. Quite some imagination and a number of nightly meetings were needed to find a way out of this 'crisette' in the early morning of January 9.

The agreement basically accepted the idea that the French 'minority' in Voeren (and the Dutch-speaking minority in the Walloon municipality of Moucron) needed a better protection, and that therefore extra personnel was to be appointed. The College of provincial Governors also received some more power to supervise the activities of these municipalities. The compromise went down rather badly in the Volksunie, whose president Bert Anciaux threatened to make his minister Johan Sauwens leave the Flemish Government. Yet the Flemish prime minister backed the federal government and Johan Sauwens stayed where he was.

#### B. *The implementation of the inter-professional agreement*

The federal council of ministers accepted on January 20 an ambitious plan to redistribute employment in the public sector. It foresees - among others - the part-time early career stop and the voluntary four-days working week. The government also further implemented the inter-professional agreement for 1995-96. The 'Employment plan' had already been passed by the Parliament on December 20 1994 and was to be broadened now with new legislation to encourage employment. The main feature is the possibility for sectors and enterprises to conclude 'employment-agreements' that lead to a net increase in the number of jobs.

### *C. The trade unions and the social elections*

Formally the social elections, organized every four years, have nothing to do with the legislative elections, but when both are organized in the same year, the results of the social elections receive some extra attention. The 1995 elections did not really change the power relations between the three traditional unions. The Christian union won a few votes and lost a few seats, the Socialist union won a few votes and lost a few seats, while the Liberal union won a few seats and votes. The independent union of cadres and the local lists lost quite a number of seats and votes.

For the larger unions this stabilization was welcomed, since they had gone through a number of difficult debates (not able to conclude a central agreement with the employers) and were also facing some internal troubles. The Flemish wing of the socialist ABVV/FGTB had some difficulties (and quarrels with the Walloon wing) finding a successor for its secretary Robert Voorhamme after his election for the SP (Socialistische Partij) in the Flemish Parliament. The sudden decrease of the ABVV/FGTB general president François Janssens also led to long succession debates between the regional wings. Finally the Walloon Michel Nollet was chosen, one of the most active challengers of the government's 'Global Plan'. This did not improve the relations with the Christian union (which had been ready to accept the Global Plan), but the perspective of the coming reform of the social security system obliged them strategically to keep in touch.

### *D. The war against the 'hormone Mafia'*

On Monday February 20 the veterinarian surgeon Karel Van Noppen was murdered near his home. He was working for the 'Institute of Veterinary Inspection' and was a leading figure in the battle against the so-called hormone Mafia. The investigation of the murder did not lead to any significant results. Especially in Flanders the reactions to this murder were quite important. Politicians reaffirmed that they wanted to win that war against the hormone Mafia.

### *E. The monarchy is questioned*

Luc Neuckermans and Pol Van Den Driessche - two journalists - revealed in their book 'Albert, koning na Boudewijn' (Albert, king after Baldwin) that prime minister Dehaene was toying with the idea of giving the king formally and legally the possibility not to sign a bill that has been passed by the Parliament. This was of course an attempt to avoid the kind of problems that had occurred when Baldwin refused in 1990 to sign the abortion law. The idea was also to ask the political parties not to open any political discussion when the king would prefer not to sign. Dehaene admitted that he had been discussing these ideas with the party presidents, but that no agreement had been reached. The project was thus not implemented.

King Baldwin himself was back in the picture when pope John Paul II paid a short visit to Belgium in early June. The pope praised the attitude of the king, referring to his resistance to the abortion law. This reopened the debate on the possible canonization of the late king.

### *F. Amnesty and the reopening of the case Irma Laplasse*

On December 7 the Military Court of Brussels reopened the case of Irma Laplasse, who had been executed in 1945 for giving away resisters to the Germans at the end of the war. The general expectation, both in Flanders and in the French-speaking part of the country, was that a new trial would mean acquittal. Yet in February Irma Laplasse was again found guilty. Since she was acting to protect her son, she was not sentenced to death this time, but to imprisonment for life. Especially in Flanders one expected that this new trial would at least also reopen the debate about a general amnesty for collaboration during the war. The king had suggested early 1994 a general 'reconciliation' among all citizens, and prime minister Dehaene had said several times that discrete talks were going on. Yet nothing concrete happened.

## **II. Early elections**

On Friday February 17 prime minister Dehaene announced that he would prefer to hold the elections before the summer. That came as a surprise, since he had confirmed several times that he wanted to go to 'the end of the journey', to be able to take advantage of the positive effects of the social and economic policy that he was conducting. Yet there had already been rumors that elections close to Christmas and New Year would not be very convenient.

Coming back from a trip to the USA, during which Dehaene was able to hit the headlines of the news and to annoy many political actors with declarations on the financial policy of the Belgian Regions and on the economical price of the social policy, he was accused to have started the campaign. And as soon as he came home, he announced the elections. He denied that this still surprising decision had something to do with the coming Agusta scandal. It was, he said, only based on the idea that this government should try to go on, and that it could therefore better avoid to be obliged to draft the budget for 1996 just before the elections in the Fall. Yet the connection with Agusta was made by many political observers.

### *A. Agusta and the campaign*

Agusta is the Italian company that sold helicopters to Belgium, and that was accused of having paid bribes to Belgian politicians and administrators in order to get the contract. The case was related to the still unsolved murder of the PS former president André Cools in July 1991, because one of the possible reasons to kill him was his knowledge of these bribes and the ways in which the money was used. In January 1994 already three PS ministers (Guy Mathot, Guy Spitaels and Guy Coëme) had been forced to resign because they were accused of also knowing that money had been paid by Agusta to the Parti Socialiste.

On February 17 1995 the central office of the Flemish Socialistische Partij was searched, only a few hours after Dehaene's announcement of his preference for early elections. Four days earlier, Georges Cywie - the Belgian representative of Agusta - had been arrested by judge Anckaert in Liège. And during the following days the Brussels lawyer Puelinckx, the former adjunct-secretary of the SP Luc Wallyn and the financial expert of the SP Etienne Mangé were arrested. Later Johan Delanghe, the head of Willy Claes' ministerial cabinet at the time of the Agusta decision (Willy Claes was then Minister of Economic Affairs) was arrested.

Etienne Mangé admitted on February 20 that the SP had indeed received 50 million BEF from Agusta, and that he had used the money to help a number of SP-related organizations facing financial problems. The SP president Louis Tobback and the former president and now Minister of Foreign Affairs Frank Vandebroucke had to admit that they had indeed heard about the offer, although they had said before that they knew nothing. They declared that Mangé had mentioned the offer early 1989, but that they had immediately refused it. Willy Claes, who was also present at that meeting, kept saying that he knew nothing, not knowing that Tobback and Vandebroucke had already told the story. He had to admit a few hours later that he was indeed present at the meeting, had heard about the offer, and had refused it. This story was confirmed by Mangé, who said that he had accepted the money because he felt he (the party) needed it, even if the party leadership did not want an Agusta gift. For Willy Claes this meant the beginning of the questioning of his position as secretary general of NATO. When his former advisor Delanghe was arrested, he was definitely in trouble.

Dehaene was asked to explain his timing in the announcement of the elections. He had been informed one day before his announcement that Luc Wallyn was going to be arrested, since Wallyn works for the European Union and Dehaene had to agree on the search of his private house. Yet Dehaene kept saying that his timing had nothing to do with Agusta, although he feared that an ongoing scandal climate might have made a further postponing of the elections problematic. He said he had not realized the importance of what was going to start.

On March 3 the French airplane builder Dassault is said to have also paid bribes to get military contracts from Belgium. Again the SP was said to have received money. Five days later, the retired air force officer Lefebvre commits suicide in a Brussels hotel room. He had been in the eighties an important advisor of several Ministers of Defense and had always strongly defended French equipment. Lefebvre had already been questioned by the judges in Liège on his possible involvement in the Agusta case.

On March 22 the news magazine Knack reveals that the former SP president Frank Vandebroucke had ordered Mangé to burn 5 million BEF for which he could not tell the exact origin (and for which Vandebroucke now realizes that it was Agusta money). Vandebroucke had himself already told that story to the judges, but the idea of wanting to burn money was not appreciated at all by the public opinion, and he decided that he could not function as a minister any more. He resigned and was succeeded by Eric Derycke. His position as Vice Prime Minister was taken over by Johan Vande Lanotte, minister of Home Affairs.

The federal parliament quickly accepted a law, allowing the judiciary to go on investigating the case during the campaign. The Court of Cassation immediately asked to search the houses of Tobback, Claes and Guy Coëme, which happened one day later. Especially for Willy Claes this raised again the question of how long he would be able to keep his position in NATO.

After having - among others - accused the former SP secretary general Carla Galle of not being able to prove all the financial moves of the party, the judiciary of Liège surprised everybody by releasing Wallyn, Mangé, Puelinckx and Delanghe on Friday May 19, only two days before the elections.

### B. *The resignation of Willy Claes*

On June 13 the Court of Cassation told the House of Representatives formally that there was nothing in the Agusta case against SP president Louis Tobback.

Nothing was said so far about Claes and Vandembroucke. On June 21 came the announcement that Vandembroucke could be accused of forgery, since the Agusta money was not in the party books, while he knew that there was money around (he had asked to burn it). The House of Representatives gave the Court the possibility to go on investigating this element, but also stated formally that Vandembroucke should be presumed innocent (which is a normal assumption).

Early September the new president of the House of Representatives Langendries received the Court of Cassation report for Willy Claes. Early October a special commission of the House has to decide whether Claes can be accused and whether the Court can start an investigation in depth of his role in the Agusta case. The Court wants to accuse him of passive corruption and forgery in the Agusta and Dassault cases, and wants to do the same for Guy Coëme (who had already been sent to Cassation for the Agusta case). Both Coëme and Claes come to the commission to defend themselves, and Claes can also - on his request - defend himself during a (closed) plenary session of the House. Yet the House follows the Court of Cassation (97 votes against 52) and allows the formal opening of a case against Willy Claes. On Friday October 20, one year and three days after his appointment, Claes resigns as secretary general of the NATO. His reactions and accusations of the Belgian judiciary are extremely bitter and angry. He is a broken man.

### III. The elections of May 21

#### A. *'Not with this VLD'*

The electoral campaign started formally on April 7, after the House of Representatives and the Senate had accepted the list of articles of the Constitution that could be changed by the next Parliament. The approval of this list means the automatic dissolution of both Houses. The list of articles was the same as the previous one, except for the articles that had already been changed or adapted. House and Senate also accepted a law obliging members of the Parliament and higher civil servants to produce a list of all their possessions at the beginning of their mandate.

The campaign was rather quiet in the French-speaking part of the country. The Parti Socialiste was expecting some losses, but hoped to still be 'incontournable' in Wallonia. The Liberal PRL formed an electoral alliance with the Brussels FDF, which was to give it at least a secure position in the government of the Brussels Region. All the francophone parties did agree on the fact that splitting the social security along regional or community lines, an idea put forward in Flanders, was absolutely out of the question.

The campaign was much more animated at the Flemish side. This was the first national election for the new Liberal party VLD, and the real test for its founder Guy Verhofstadt. The Volksunie that had not done well in previous elections announced that it needed 300.000 votes in order to survive as a party. The SP president Tobback had said that 20% of the Flemish votes was a minimum for him, but after the Agusta case he did not want to make any predictions any more. He did fully support the idea of Dehaene that this coalition should be continued if the voters would allow it to do so. And Dehaene was very much in control of the campaign of his CVP. He was himself a candidate for the Senate, because the electoral system of the new Senate with one constituency per language group, turned that election into a real popularity test.



On April 21 Dehaene presented a book entitled 'Sleutels voor morgen' (The keys for tomorrow), which was actually a project for a governmental program. It was published by the organizer of the CVP campaign. The plan consisted of five objectives: (1) more work, new work and other work, (2) a creative approach of the 'information society', (3) a better world to live in, (4) a modernization of the social security and (5) bring Belgium into the European top group. The CVP adopted this Dehaene plan as its electoral program. And the Socialists made clear that the plan was an acceptable starting point.

Yet there was one open question still: what would be the score of the VLD? Its president Guy Verhofstadt was attacked fiercely during the campaign by both CVP and SP. Especially the VLD plan to reform the social security was considered to be unacceptable. Louis Tobback campaigned with the slogan 'Your social security', and the CVP president Van Hecke said at the CVP Congress of May 7 that no coalition would be possible with 'this VLD of this Verhofstadt'.

### B. *The results of the election*

The 1995 elections do deserve the label of 'historic', not because of the results themselves, but because these were the very first elections of the really federal Belgian state. Not only the federal House of representatives was elected in its new (reduced) form, but also the new Senate and the three regional parliaments.

The results were not at all spectacular. Nothing fundamental has changed after this election. There were therefore also no surprises in the process of government formation.

RESULTS OF THE ELECTIONS OF MAY 21 1995  
(percentage of the votes and number of seats)

	House	Senate*	Flemish Region	Walloon Region	Brussels Region
CVP	17.2(29)	26.9(7)	26.8(35)		3.3 (3)
VLD	13.1(21)	21.2(6)	20.2(26)		2.7 (2)
SP	12.6(20)	21.1(6)	19.4(25)		2.4 (2)
VL. BLOK	7.8(11)	12.4(3)	12.3(15)		3.0 (2)
VU	4.7 (5)	8.5(2)	9.0 (9)		1.4 (1)
AGALEV	4.4 (5)	6.0(1)	7.1 (7)		0.9 (-)
PS	11.9(21)	34.1(5)		35.2(30)	21.4(17)
PRL-FDF	10.3(18)	30.1(5)		23.7(19)	35.0(28)
PSC	7.7(12)	19.4(3)		21.6(16)	9.3 (7)
ECOLO	4.0 (6)	11.5(2)		10.4 (8)	9.0 (7)
FN	2.3 (2)	-		5.2 (2)	7.5 (6)

\* Directly elected seats only. Elections were held in each linguistic group separately

### *C. The formation of six new governments*

Prime minister Dehaene was asked only one week after the elections, on May 28, to form a new government. That was not surprising, since his coalition had been able to keep its majority in the Parliament. Other coalitions were mathematically possible, but they were never really taken into consideration. On May 29 Dehaene had a first meeting with the party presidents of the old majority. Before that he had spoken to the two Liberal party presidents, to tell them that VLD and PRL-FDF would not be invited. For Guy Verhofstadt this meant the end of his leadership of the VLD. On June 1 he announced his departure. The VLD members could elect a new party president on Sunday September 16, and chose for Herman De Croo against Patrick Dewael, the latter being considered to be the natural successor of Verhofstadt. The election of De Croo looked a bit like going back to the old PVV.

On May 30 Dehaene started his negotiations on the basis of a draft program, in which he stressed in particular more and new employment, a reform of the social security, and the reduction of the budget deficit to the 3% norm of the Maastricht Treaty. Communautarian problems and the reform of the state were - for the first time since long - not on the agenda. The negotiations had to be slowed down several times to allow for the formation of the governments of the Regions and Communities. Often the same persons had to sit at the different negotiation tables.

Dehaene had his governmental program ready on June 18. It contained the major objectives (employment, social security, financial policy), but surprisingly little details and no fixed calendar. On June 22 the four parties accepted the program at their party congresses, and on June 23 the new team of 15 Ministers and 2 Secretaries of State was sworn in. On Friday June 30 the House of Representatives expressed its confidence in the new government, with 80 votes against 61. The new Senate did for the first time not hear the governmental declaration of the prime minister, since it does not control the government any more.

Immediately after election day Johan Van Hecke, president of the largest Flemish party, asked the outgoing Flemish prime minister Luc Van den Brande to start the talks for a new Flemish coalition. Here also the outgoing coalition of CVP and SP wanted to continue, although it controlled only 63 out of the 124 votes in the Flemish Parliament. The Volksunie also belonged to the previous coalition, but was told that it was not needed this time. On June 20 the new Flemish government, led by Van de Brande, was formally elected by the Flemish parliament.

On the very same day the Walloon Government was elected by the Walloon Regional Parliament. Here, like in the French Community Government, the same two political families of Christian-Democrats and Socialists formed the coalition. The major problem in both negotiations was the financing of the French Community in general and of its educational policy in particular. The Walloon government is led by Robert Collignon (PS) and the French Community Government by Laurette Onckelinx (PS).

On June 22 the Government of the Brussels Capital Region is also formed. On the Flemish side the three old partners CVP, SP and VU are still in the coalition, while on the French-speaking side the PRL-FDF (now the strongest group) takes the place of the PSC. Charles Picqué (PS) keeps the position of prime minister. The Brussels Government is the only one in which the national 'symmetry' has not been respected.

The formation of the Government of the German Community did not cause any significant problem either. The Liberal partner leaves the coalition while the Socialists enter. The Christian-Democrat Joseph Maraite leads this government.

#### IV. The Dehaene II Government

##### A. *The first months and the budget for 1996*

Soon after the start of the Government, the Minister of Defense Wathelet (PSC) caused the first tensions. He left the team on September 4 to become a judge in the European Court of Justice. This choice - by the Belgian Government - was widely criticized, because Wathelet had not shown too much dynamism during his previous mandate of Minister of Justice. Wathelet was succeeded by Jean-Paul Poncelet.

A few weeks later a number of issues opposed the Socialists and the Christian Democrats. First a number of local municipalities in Flanders announced the creation of voluntary 'civil vigil services'. The SP did not at all like the idea, while the CVP explicitly supported it. Then the Minister of Pensions Marcel Colla (SP) re-launched the debate on the legalization of euthanasia by admitting that he had some personal experiences in this respect. Later the Minister of Home Affairs Johan Vande Lanotte (SP) confessed that he had been addicted to hard drugs, Secretary of State for Development Aid Reginald Moreels (CVP) had to face a number of allegations of misuse of development aid money, the PS published a note on the legalization of soft drugs. All these little incidents gave at least the impression that the partners in the coalition were not looking in the same direction. On the request of CVP president Van Hecke the prime minister had a formal meeting with the party presidents of the majority, after which they all promised to keep a lower profile in order not to endanger the major tasks of the government.

On October 3 the federal government presented the budget for 1996. It announced a raise of taxes on petrol (except for diesel), a raise of the VAT tariff from 20.5% to 21%, the raise of the tax on capital income from 13.4% to 15% and a number of measures to fight fiscal fraud. The announced reform of the social security was not started yet, but a number of measures were taken to avoid an increase in the expenses. The government also announced that it would invest 7 billion to compensate for diverse reduction of salary costs. The budget was accepted by the parliament, but later the Minister of the Budget Herman Van Rompuy had to admit that the budget contained a number of one-shot measures, and that the budget of next year would not keep the deficit under the 3% of GNP (the Maastricht norm) if no extra measures were taken. The 1997 budget would be the crucial one.

##### B. *International policy and defense*

The department of Foreign Affairs was in 1995 handicapped by the changes in personnel (Vandenbroucke succeeding to Claes in 1994 and then being succeeded by Derycke in 1995). On the Defense department Delcroix had been replaced by Pinxten in 1994.

On January 27 the United Nations asked and received more Belgian help for ex-Yugoslavia. More troops and/or material would be sent, for approximately 10 million BEF per month. On March 17 a financial embargo was declared against Bosnia-Herzegovina. In September 110 million BEF was given to help refugees



in ex-Yugoslavia and in Rwanda. On April 7 the government decided to actively participate in the International Tribunal on ex-Yugoslavia, and on that in Rwanda. As far as Rwanda is concerned, it was decided on April 28 to suspend the earlier decision to resume the bilateral help for that country, as long as responsibilities for the massacre were not clear. Yet on June 14 the help was resumed, in the line of the European policy towards especially the help for the refugees. Near the end of 1995 the rumor was spread that the Minister of Defense at the time of the Rwanda massacres (Leo Delcroix) had been warned about the genocide, but did not take precautions to protect the Belgian interests. On November 23 a number of victims of the massacres officially accused the former minister of 'not helping people in danger'.

On January 1 Belgium became president of the Schengen Group. During the following months there were several incidents with France, still refusing to apply the Schengen agreement at the French-Belgian border.

On March 1 the military service was definitely abolished. All non-professional soldiers were sent home. The department of Defense got the green light for buying new equipment, such as 105 new Howitzer canons, 54 tanks and four new minesweepers. In the Fall the chief of staffs José Charlier was succeeded by Willy Herteleer, the former chief of the Marine forces.

### *C. Other developments and decisions*

Since 1995 was an election year, with furthermore the unexpected Agusta storm, it was certainly not a year in which major policy decisions were taken. A number of them however deserve to be mentioned briefly. They mostly are related to the further evolution (mainly privatization) of state-owned companies. On April 7 the government decided on a legal framework for telecommunication, which clears the path for liberalization of the market. On July 28 the NMKN/SNCI (National Society for Industrial Loans) was sold to the ASLK/CGER bank. A Christian group with the bank BACOB and the insurance company DVV tried to offer a higher price, but the NMKN/SNCI finally went to ASLK/CGER.

Mobistar, a consortium of Telecom France and the Belgian group Telfino was given a license to develop a second GSM service in the country. On December 14 the group Ameritech-Singapore Telecom-Tele-Danmark was chosen as the strategic partner for Belgacom, the Belgian telephone company. The consortium pays 73.3 billion BEF for just less than half of the shares of Belgacom.

On May 4 Sabena and Swissair signed an agreement of cooperation. The Swiss come and replace Air France. Swissair paid 10 billion BEF for 49.5% of the shares of Sabena. Air France received 5.8 billion for its willingness to leave. Immediately after the take-over by Swissair negotiations start with the unions on a lowering of the salaries and on more flexibility. This results in October in a strike by the pilots and subsequently in the unilateral withdrawal by the Sabena leadership of all the collective agreements concluded before. This last move is very unusual, and is considered by the unions as a declaration of war. Talks between the Sabena top and the trade unions are completely stopped on November 27. Especially the attitude of Sabena president Godfroid is heavily criticized. He will have to go in February 26 1996 and will be replaced by a representative of Swissair.

In the NMBS/SNCF (the railway company) the relations between leadership and unions is also very tense. Early September the leadership of the company announces an expected profit of 1.1 billion BEF for the first half of 1995. At the end of October it presents 'Objective 2005', a plan that expects 200 billion more from

the state during the next 10 years, and that foresees a reduction of the salary costs with 70 billion. That means that 9000 workers will have to go. On December 15 the plan was already accepted by the board of directors, without any previous negotiations with the unions. They protested, but unlike their Sabena colleagues, they kept on talking with the leadership.

Minister of Justice Declerck asked the Senate to organize early December a colloquium on the relationship between press, politics and the judiciary. These relations had turned sour during the Agusta storm. The press was accused to have given non-checked information, the judges were accused to have organized selective leaks to the press, and the politicians were accused to overreact in order to protect their own interests. More generally it was also suggested - by proposing a change of the Constitution - that press crimes should not be treated any more by the Court of Assises (a jury) but by the Court of Correction (judges). It was an animated colloquium, but no formal alterations in the legal organization of the press were decided on.

## V. Evolutions in the parties

*The PS.* Philippe Busquin was reelected president of the party.

*The PRL.* President Jean Gol was first reelected president, but suddenly died early September. He was succeeded by the former party president Louis Michel. This leadership change was believed to soften the attitude of the PRL in linguistic matters, since it was very much the idea of Jean Gol to set up the electoral alliance with the Brussels FDF.

*The PSC.* President Deprez announced surprisingly that he wanted to resign as party leader. He announced on December 18 that he would leave his position to the younger woman Joëlle Milquet.

*The FDF.* Georges Clerfayt was defeated as party president by his challenger Olivier Maingain. This means a victory of the hard-liners in the party, and Maingain immediately caused some angry Flemish reactions with a number of rather aggressive declarations.

*The SP.* This was obviously a very difficult year for the SP. The major challenge was to go to the polls and to survive the Agusta scandal. The party put all its eggs in one basket: party president Louis Tobback. He was able to limit the damage to an absolute minimum. The SP also received the support of a number of Flemish public figures, signing the declaration 'De SP is nodig' (an SP is necessary). Among those who signed was the former CVP minister Paula D'Hondt. Louis Tobback was easily reelected president at the party congress of December 9.

SP and PS organized a joined colloquium on December 20 on the social security, which is a quite exceptional and unique phenomenon.

*The CVP.* For the CVP 1995 was a rather quiet and easy year. The party simply relied on its strong and confident prime minister Dehaene. In the Fall the party celebrated, simultaneously with the PSC, its fiftieth anniversary. Yet the announced new 'Christmas Congress' (referring to the ideological congress of 1945) was not (yet) organized.

*The VLD.* For the VLD 1995 had to be the year of truth. After the spectacular party reform and name change in 1992, this was the first occasion to test to formula at legislative elections. Just before the elections the party organized a (very expensive) 'referendum', distributing a set of questions on the future government policy to all Flemish citizens. It received - unexpectedly - no less than 400.000 answers. Yet the elections themselves were disappointing. The party scored well, reaching its highest point ever, but that was not enough to break the old majority, and that had clearly been the final aim of the whole party renewal. President Guy Verhofstadt resigned, and was succeeded by his old challenger Herman De-croo.

*Agalev.* The Flemish Green party organized an important congress on November 18. It decided there to change the party structures in order to make them more efficient, and especially to give more freedom to a better defined party leadership. At the same time the party keeps a tight control over the executive organs, in which it is still very different from the other parties.

*Rossem.* The party that had caused a big surprise in 1991 by electing three people in the House of Representatives, disappeared completely. A number of former Rossem supporters went to the polls with a new party called Banana, but this was everything but a success.