

Belgian Politics in 1998

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For the third consecutive year, Belgian politics was to a large extent dominated by the aftermath of the Dutroux-pedophile case. The political world was under pressure to reform the judiciary and the police forces, as these had shown lack of competence in this case. The pressure mounted after Dutroux' brief escape on April 23rd, which caused the resignation of the ministers of Interior (Van de Lanotte) and of Justice (De Clerck). Dutroux' escape, however, reunited the majority and the opposition parties to make a deal on the reforms of the judiciary and the police forces (the Octopus-agreements).

The aftermath of Dutroux' escape, and the Octopus-agreements overshadowed the entry of Belgium into the EMU. It also made an end to the everlasting speculations about snap elections.

From autumn 1998 onwards, most attention was paid to the policy on asylum and the Agusta/Dassault trial. The death of a Nigerian refugee during her forced repatriation caused the resignation of deputy prime minister Tobback, and a limited adjustment of the procedure to grant asylum. In December 1998, the Court of Cassation convicted the politicians that were charged in the Agusta/Dassault-bribery cases.

Other important issues in 1998 were the policy on employment, the right to vote for non-Belgian citizens and disputes on the implementation of the language-laws in communities with a special linguistic status.

I. The political consequences of the Dutroux pedophile-case

A. *The second report of the parliamentary committee 'Dutroux'*

The special parliamentary committee 'Dutroux', set up on 17 October 1996, continued its activities until mid-February 1998. The committee looked for indications of 'decay of moral principles, corruption and protection'. The last weeks of the committee's activities were influenced by a fierce debate in the media between so-called 'believers' and 'non-believers', i.e. between supporters and opponents of the theory that Marc Dutroux and Michel Nihoul formed part of a pedophile ring that was protected by high officials. The controversy began with the publication of parts of a hearing of the so-called 'Witness X1' (Miss. Regina Louf) in the newspapers 'De Morgen' and 'Téléoustique'. Louf claimed that she had been a victim of a pedophile ring and that she had witnessed unsolved murder cases in Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels, dating back as far as the mid-1980s. However, at the end of April 1998 the offices of the public prosecutors in Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels officially stated that the declarations of 'X1' were implausible and that therefore the case had been closed. In the meanwhile, some 25.000 to 30.000 mainly francophone people, had given rise to their discontent on the en-

during series of failures by the judiciary, the police and the political world, on 15 February 1998.

The next day, on February 16th, the committee 'Dutroux' approved its second report. Unlike the first report, there was no unanimous support for the second report. Four members voted abstention (2 PRL, 1 Ecolo, 1 Vlaams Blok) for divers reasons. The report was presented in the Chamber on February 17th, and retained massive attention by Belgian and international press. The committee concluded that there was no evidence that Dutroux had benefited from protection by high officials, nor that Dutroux and Nihoul formed part of a large pedophile ring. However, the committee concluded that Dutroux and Nihoul had benefited from 'indirect protection', pointing at a decay of moral principles and corrupting behaviour of police officers, members of the judiciary and civil servants. The report contained a series of proposals for the reorganisation of the police forces and the judiciary (cfr. *infra*).

After the plenary debate, during which the chairman of the committee (Marc Verwilghen) had deplored that none of the recommendations of the first report (February 1997) had been implemented, the second report was approved by the Chamber of Representatives on February 19th. The majority parties (christen-democrats and socialists) and the Flemish liberals (VLD) voted in favour, while the francophone Liberals (PRL) and the Green parties voted abstention. The MPs of Vlaams Blok, the Volksunie and the Front National voted against the report. Prime Minister Dehaene said the accusations of Verwilghen were "unjustified". Nonetheless he apologised (on explicit demand by Verwilghen) to the parents of the Dutroux-victims: "What has happened was incorrect. It is sad to find out that the death of the children could have been avoided if our institutions had functioned in a better way".

At the end of the debate, the committee 'Dutroux' was transformed into a 'follow-up'-committee, which would keep an eye on the implementation of the recommendations it had put forward in both its reports.

Out of the ten police-agents that following the first report of the committee 'Dutroux' were blamed for the unsuccessful investigation to the missing girls, only one was downgraded.

B. *The plans of the government to reorganise the police forces and the judiciary*

In his 'State of the Union' of October 1997, prime minister Dehaene had announced the governments plans to reorganise the police forces into one integrated police force, as was recommended by the first report of the committee 'Dutroux'. The standing committees of Internal Affairs and of Justice of both Chamber and Senate, had started to discuss the governments plans in November 1997.

On February 7th, 1998, the core cabinet (the prime minister and the four deputy prime ministers), joined by the minister of Justice Stefaan De Clerck, gathered for a first revision of the drafts of three specific bills concerning the reorganisation. The core problem was the 'integration by association' on local level. This problem was solved on February 16th.

Most trade-unions of policemen criticized the plans, for they feared even more confusion among police forces of the exact competencies of the different brigades. Even some christen-democratic MPs were opposed to the governments

plans. Nonetheless, the three bills were approved by the government on a special council of ministers on February 18th. Prime Minister Dehaene declared that the government had aimed to implement the recommendations of the committee 'Dutroux' "as far as possible". He stressed that the main objective remained to fully integrate all police forces on local level. He expected that the reorganisation would lead to "a dynamism of more co-operation". He promised the reorganisation would be evaluated after four years.

In the meanwhile, the government continued to work on the reorganisation of the judiciary. On February 6th, the council of ministers approved the installation of a Board for Nominations and Promotions, which was put in charge of all nominations and promotions in the judiciary. Therefore, article 151 of the Belgian Constitution needed to be revised by a two third majority (of which the government did not possess). Contacts with the opposition parties revealed that only the Flemish liberals were willing to co-operate, be it under strict conditions. The attitude of the other opposition parties would change dramatically after the brief escape of Dutroux, and the consequent resignation of two ministers.

C. The resignation of the ministers Stefaan De Clerck and Johan Vande Lanotte

As a bolt from the blue, the news was spread on April 23rd, that Marc Dutroux had escaped from the court of justice in Neufchateau at around 3 pm. The moment the Belgian press agency Belga distributed the news, the plenary session of the Chamber of Representatives was suspended, due to the dismay of most MPs. Instantly, the core cabinet gathered in the office of prime minister Dehaene. A couple of hours later, while Dehaene was in a meeting with the leaders of the parliamentary parties, Marc Dutroux was seized. Dehaene returned to his cabinet, to reconsider the situation. At 8 pm, the prime minister said, in a brief declaration before the Chamber, that he was perplexed by the fact that Dutroux had escaped. He said it was "unacceptable", but added that there were no indications of any compliance. He promised that the government would investigate what had happened, and that parliament would be informed about this investigation.

Dehaene said that he was asked by Johan Van de Lanotte (SP) and Stefaan De Clerck (CVP), the ministers of Interior and of Justice, to present their resignation to the King. He added that he was very grateful for their efforts, and the extraordinary amount of work they had done on very demanding departments and in extremely difficult circumstances. He continued as follows: "They are not to blame, but they feel responsible and had the courage to take their responsibility. In doing so, the government can continue its activities and persist in its aim to reorganise the police forces and the judiciary".

King Albert, who had to return from taking holidays in France, accepted the resignations. The next day, on 24 April 1998, Louis Tobback (SP) was sworn in as deputy prime minister and minister of Interior, and Tony Van Parijs (CVP) as minister of Justice. The appointment of the latter, posed a deontological problem, as Van Parijs had been member of the committee 'Dutroux'. As new minister of Justice, he was put in charge with the implementation of sanctions. This would make him judge and party at the same time. Therefore, deputy prime minister Herman Van Rompuy was asked to deal with the issue of sanctions.

The appointment of SP-party leader Louis Tobback was a surprise, and was interpreted as a strong signal of the governments will to continue its activities, de-

spite the opposition's call for resignation. The majority parties as well as the parties in opposition agreed that not only politicians, but also members of the gendarmerie and of the judiciary had to draw conclusions from Dutroux' escape. In this respect three people were particularly looked at: the commander of the gendarmerie (Willy Deridder), the prosecutor-general of Liege (Anne Thily) and Melchior Wathelet, judge at the European Court of Justice. After the meetings of the partybureaus on 27 April 1998, the presidents of the four governing parties explicitly claimed the resignation of high officials of the gendarmerie and the judiciary.

The next day, on April 28th, the Chamber had to deal with some votes of no-confidence. In his address to the Chamber, Dehaene repeated the demand that other officials of police forces and the judiciary would "step aside". He admitted to have received a letter by commander Deridder, in which the latter put his function in the hands of the government. (In the end, the government would accept Deridder's resignation two weeks later (May 15th), for as Deridder had uttered severe criticism in the press. Deridder was succeeded by Herman Fransen).

In reaction to Dehaenes address, the liberal parties said to be willing to co-operate with the government in creating a High Council for Justice. This needed a two thirds majority. The liberal parties wanted to deliver their support under strict condition that they would get involved in the reorganisation of the police-structures. The votes of no-confidence were rejected, majority against opposition.

As a consequence of Dutroux' brief escape, a disciplinary procedure was started against 8 officers of the gendarmerie. The procedure was not yet finished by the end of 1998.

II. The Octopus-agreement on the reorganisation of police forces and the judiciary

Immediately after the votes of no-confidence of April 28th, the presidents of four parties in opposition met for discreet negotiations. The initiative was taken by Patrik Vankrunkelsven (VU), who had convinced Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) of the need to co-operate in order to draw up an alternative plan for the reorganisation of the police forces and the judiciary. Louis Michel (PRL) and Olivier Maingain (FDF) were the other party leaders that took part in the negotiations. The green parties were absent, and that had much to do with the strategic reasoning of Ecolo, as they were linked in a very profiled way to the 'White Movement'. Agalev did not dare to take part in the negotiations without its francophone sisterparty. The four parties rapidly reached an agreement. In the afternoon of April 29th, the party leaders signed the agreement, on the basis of which they jointly wanted to negotiate with the government.

The majority parties first reacted in a very reserved way. However, prime minister Dehaene declared on April 30th that he was willing to negotiate with the opposition parties. These negotiations started on May 11th, with the issue of the High Council for Justice. Less than two weeks later, the negotiations were completed. On a press-conference on May 24th, prime minister Dehaene, surrounded by the eight presidents of the parties involved in the agreement, presented the agreement to the public. All parties were very enthusiastic about the final result.

III. The policy on asylum

A. *The death of Semira Adamu and the resignation of deputy prime minister Louis Tobback*

On 22 September 1998, Sémira Adamu, a 20-year old Nigerian asylum-seeker, died when she was being deported from the country. The judicial investigation made clear that the woman had died of suffocation after a pillow was placed over her face as police tried to force her aboard a plane.

Immediately after the incident, the government decided to suspend all deportations. On a press conference on September 23rd, the interior minister Louis Tobback took responsibility for the incident, but did at first not respond to calls for resignation. So, the news that Tobback had ordered prime minister Dehaene to offer his resignation to the King, in the evening of September 24th, came as a surprise. Tobback said that the incident was "the blackest day in [his] political career". He felt responsible for the behaviour of the officer of the gendarmerie who had violated the code of conduct for deportation. Although he claimed that he had not been informed on the fact that the officer already once had been suspended after having mistreated a deported asylum-seeker, several sources within the gendarmerie challenged this statement.

As the possibility of his resignation had caused great upheaval, both members of the government and of his own Socialist Party tried to convince Tobback not to resign. Tobback agreed to postpone his final decision for another 48 hours, at the end of which he confirmed his prior decision. Consequently, a summit of socialist leaders took place in Hasselt, in order to deal with his succession. Fred Erdman (party leader), Norbert De Batselier (chairman of the Flemish Assembly), Johan Vande Lanotte (former interior minister) and Steve Stevaert (mayor of Hasselt and 'coming man' of the SP) agreed that Luc Van Den Bossche (minister of education in the Flemish regional government) would replace Louis Tobback in the federal government. This decision resulted in a cabinet reshuffle on the Flemish regional level. Steve Stevaert entered the Flemish government, and was sworn in as minister of environmental planning. The former minister of this department, Eddy Baldewijns, moved on to the department of education.

B. *Differences in opinion among the majority parties on the policy on asylum*

While Luc Van Den Bossche was sworn in on 28 September 1998, the majority parties discussed the future of the asylum policy during their weekly meetings on the party headquarters. It became clear that the parties had different opinions as to whether or not the policy on asylum had to be altered. In a newspaper interview, the former minister of interior, Louis Tobback, criticized the fact that the francophone parties did not back the implementation of the governments policy on asylum, while they had not opposed the principles on which this policy is based.

A few days later, on 2 October 1998, the core cabinet discussed a report of Luc Van Den Bossche on modifications to the policy on asylum. The negotiations were difficult, as a result of which the government could only reach an agreement on small modifications. On the one hand, the practice of forcible deportations was suspended, the use of a pillow was prohibited, and an advisory committee was

installed to evaluate the use of coercive measures. The procedure for regularisation, on the other hand, had to be more transparent, and the criteria on which regularisation could be given were to be determined. Special attention had to be paid to information campaigns and courses by which the return of the refugees' own free will would be encouraged. The following debate in the parliamentary committee on internal affairs showed some positive reactions by the coalition parties, and fierce criticism by the parties in opposition (esp. Vlaams Blok and the Green parties).

Three weeks later, the regularisation of people who illegally stayed in the country (the so-called 'people without papers') returned as a hot topic on the political agenda. Some fifty, mostly black, refugees had occupied a church in Liège. They were supported in their protest by the parish priest. The following days and weeks the number of church-occupants in Brussels, Antwerp and Verviers, raised to some 700. They demanded a residence permit for all asylum-seekers that lived for more than 5 years in the country and for those whose dossiers had been left untouched for the last three years.

Early November 1998, the leaders of the majority parties CVP and SP blew the whistle on some of their MPs who had expressed their support to the actions of the asylum-seekers. Van Peel and Erdmand confirmed the support of their parties to the governments policy on asylum and were opposed to a general regularisation of illegal residents in the country.

The occupation of churches lasted until December 28th, 1998.

IV. The budgetary policy and Belgium's entry into the EMU

A. The budgetary results for 1997 and the control of the 1998-budget

On February 16th, the minister of Finance, Philippe Maystadt, declared that the overall public deficit for 1997 had dropped to 2,1 % of GDP. As a result of this, the debt to GDP ratio was 122,2 % (being 8.673 billion BEF). Four days later, on February 20th, prime minister Dehaene declared that the financing debt for 1998 was estimated to be a mere 1,8 % of GDP, which would lead to a further decrease of the debt to GDP ratio (estimated at 118,5 %). According to Dehaene, Belgium would meet the criteria for entry into the EMU. Still, he warned that the budgetary discipline had to be continued in future, for as the debt to GDP ratio was still far above the 60 %-norm of the Maastricht Treaty. On 13 March 1998, during a regular council of ministers, the government dealt with the annual control of the budget. Due to a better economic situation and to low interest rates, the government thought of being able to reduce the financing deficit to 1,7 % of GDP. This would lead to a debt to GDP ratio of less than 118,5 %.

On March 25th, the European Commission and the European Monetary Institute published their reports on the basis of which would be decided which countries could enter into the European Monetary Union from January 1st, 1999 onwards. Whereas the European Commission was quite positive on the Belgian measures to meet the criteria, the EMI expressed more concern. According to the EMI-calculations, the Belgian debt to GDP ratio would meet the 60 % Maastricht-criterion not before the year 2031.

At a 'historic' summit in Brussels on 2 May 1998, the heads of state and heads of government of the EU-Member States decided that Belgium could enter into

the EMU, together with Germany, France, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Italy, Austria, Portugal and Spain.

B. *The 1999-budget*

Yet on 27 March 1998, the minister of Budget, Herman Van Rompuy made firm to his fellow ministers that the strict budgetary discipline needed to be continued. Not only was it necessary to do so in order to meet the Maastricht-criteria, but as well to create room for a reduction of the costs of labour and to be prepared for the consequences of the strong increase of the ageing population. While Van Rompuy urged for caution, he was put under pressure by his own party (CVP) to make an end to the fiscal discrimination of married couples by the year 2003. This operation would cost approximately 60 to 80 billion BEF. Prime minister Dehaene responded to the CVP-audience on the party congress where this resolution was passed (Leuven, June 6th) that it was not possible to start this operation instantly, as the government already had decided to lower the costs of labour for a total of 18 billion BEF. Dehaene said that there was no room for other likewise operations. In reaction to the decision of the CVP-party congress, the socialist coalition partner remarked that they also had a list of priorities (the encouragement of jobcreation and a raise of the lowest social benefits). However, the socialists said they were willing to think about an equal fiscal treatment of both married and unmarried couples from 1999 onwards.

On October 10th-11th, the core cabinet made up the draft of the 1999-budget. The deficit on the budget was estimated at 121,8 billion BEF (being 1,3 % of GDP). The original budgetary plans which dated from September 17th, had to be changed as parts of the country suffered from heavy floods in September and October. The government promised to give aid to the victims for a total of 2,5 billion BEF. By November 1998, the government needed an extra effort of 7 billion BEF to keep the budgetary plans for 1999 on track, due to the economic crisis in Asia and the less optimistic prospects on economic growth (which had dropped from 2,6 % to 2,4 %).

In his annual 'State of the Union' before the Chamber of Representatives (13 October 1998), prime minister Dehaene paid a lot of attention to Belgium's entry into the EMU, to the governments policy on employment and to the reform of the police forces and the judiciary. He urged the social partners to continue the talks for a new 'central agreement'. These negotiations were halted by the unions of employers in reaction to the governments decision to postpone a minor cut in the costs of labour (see chapter 5).

On December 10th, the government accepted the bid from the Dutch-Belgian holding Fortis for the last quarter of the shares of the ASLK-bank. Fortis paid 50,5 billion BEF.

On 18 December 1998, the government agreed on a so-called 'stability pact'. This pact, agreed for the period 1999-2002, was the implementation of the 'stability and growth pact' that all EU-Member States had signed in June 1997. In doing so, the governments of the EMU-countries had promised to proceed with a rigorous budgetary policy after the introduction of the Euro. The Belgian 'stability pact' foresaw in a debt to GDP ratio of around 100% by the year 2002.

V. Employment and social policy

A. *Belgium's Employment Action Plan and the Maribel-issue*

The governments 1998-policy on employment was largely the result of three evolutions which had occurred in 1997: Dehaene's call on the social partners to make a deal on the reduction of the costs of labour and the redistribution of labour; the willingness of the social partners to strive for a social agreement; and the demand by the European Union to set up a National Employment Action Plan.

The High Council for Employment, which was set up at the end of 1996 to advise the government on employment policies, published its first report on 29 January 1998. The High Council pleaded for a gradual reduction of the costs of wages, in combination with alternative ways to financially support the social security system and with different formulas to encourage the redistribution of labour. In its annual report, which was presented on 13 February 1998, the National Bank also advised the government to reduce the costs of labour, to continue a policy of wage restraint and to increase the efforts to redistribute labour in order to decrease the level of unemployment.

At a first meeting with the social partners on 2 February 1998, prime minister Dehaene left the idea of a 'general pact'. Instead, he wished to take gradual initiatives for a National Employment Action Plan in which all state levels (the federal state, the communities and the regions) would be involved. Several other meetings between the government and the social partners in February-April 1998 resulted in Belgium's Employment Action Plan. The government agreed on the Plan, on April 24th. Special attention was paid to the young and unemployed people, and the ways in which they could be introduced in the job-market. A second series of actions was intended to encourage job creation in companies, via a reduction of the costs of wages and the promotion of the system in which people could temporarily interrupt their career. A third series of actions intended to increase the flexibility of employees, by encouraging programs of training and permanent education. However, it took the majority parties another 6 months to agree on the concrete implementation of these measures. In the meanwhile, the Belgian government was urged by the European Commission in its first evaluation report of the Belgian Employment Action Plan, to take more accurate actions to integrate unemployed people in the job-market.

Still in 1998, the dispute continued between the European Commission and the Belgian government on presumed illegal financial aid to companies that operate in highly competitive international markets - the so-called operations 'Maribel 2' and 'Maribel 3'. On 14 July 1998, the European Commission summoned the Belgian government to the European Court of Justice because of its refusal to pay back the financial advantages. The Belgian government was convicted on November 12th, but the dispute continued even after that.

By the end of 1998, official figures stated a number of 411.575 unemployed people. This was a drop by 39.493 units in comparison with 1997. It was the lowest number of unemployed people since 1991.

B. *Social Agreement for 1999-2000*

After the summer holidays, the social partners started negotiations for a new social (interprofessional) agreement for 1999-2000. Although the talks had started in a constructive way, the atmosphere changed after the government's decision to postpone the reduction of the costs of labour (12 October 1998). The unions of the employers threatened to leave the negotiation table, for they accused the government of breaking its promise. After a few days, however, the unions of employers agreed to return and continued the talks. A final agreement was reached on November 17th, which was solemnly signed on December 8th. The text of the agreement was deliberately kept vague, and paid special attention to job-creation and training on the spot.

To prevent that the social negotiations would coincide with the social elections of May 1998, the minister of Labour, Miet Smet, decided to postpone the social elections to May 2000.

C. *The 'social Maribel'-operation in the non-profit sector and the social security budget for 1999*

Since the autumn of 1997, the trade unions of the welfare and healthcare sectors pushed for actions to increase employment and to lower the pressure of work for the employees. The unions demanded 70.000 new jobs in a period of 3 to 5 years, so that the working hours would drop to 35 hours a week.

On a so-called 'States General' (18 January 1998) both trade unions and employers unions of the healthcare, welfare and social-cultural sectors signed a joint declaration in which they urged all governments (federal and regional) to set up a so-called 'social Maribel'-operation. This intended to decrease the labour costs of every employee by 13.000 BEF a year. In doing so, new jobs would be created and the pressure of work would decrease. To back their demands, the trade unions planned a manifestation in Brussels on 22 January 1998, at which between "some 10.000" (according to the police) and 30.000 (according to the organisers) people participated.

Several actions followed, as the government's concessions were judged too poor. In the last week of March, the Flemish minister of Welfare, Luc Martens, even had to call in thousands of employees on strike, in order to assure a minimum-service in the healthcare institutions.

Contrary to earlier alarming reports, the social security budget was closed with a deficit of 'merely' 2,6 billion BEF (on a total budget of 453 billion). Civil servants of the RIZIV estimated the needs for 1999 at 476,8 billion BEF, while the health services asked for 488 billion. At the end, the government decided to fix the social security budget for 1999 at 477,8 billion BEF.

VI. Internal Affairs

A. Institutional legislation

Ministerial responsibility (articles 103 and 125 of the Constitution)

The issue of the revision of the constitutional articles 103 and 125, on criminal responsibility of federal and regional ministers, caused some tension between the majority and opposition parties. The French-speaking liberal party PRL played a key-role, as they decided on 10 March 1998 to withdraw their support to the proposed revision. The PRL was upset by the way in which the PS-PSC-majority had solved the issue of the parliamentary immunity of former PS-president Guy Spitaels (see chapter VII). At the end of the debate in the standing committee for the revision of the constitution a compromise was found. The involvement of the Chamber of Representatives when the criminal responsibility of a minister is at stake, was cut back. The Chamber of Representatives passed the bill on 23 April 1998; the Senate did so on June 11th. From this moment onwards, the only task of the Chambers of Representatives is to verify whether charges against ministers are not merely inspired by political opportunism. Ministers would no longer be summoned to appear for the Court of Cassation, but for one of the Courts of Appeal. They could go for appeal at the Court of Cassation, an opportunity they did not have previously. The parliament no longer has to give its permission to the judicial authorities to start an investigation into a ministers' actions. Only in case a minister would instantly be arrested, parliament would still have to grant its permission.

Electoral laws

Early 1998 the political parties agreed to put forward the date of the elections of the federal parliamentary assemblies, which normally was due on June 27th, 1999. In this respect the elections of the federal assemblies would coincide with the European and regional elections of June 13rd, 1999.

At the beginning of July 1998, the green party Agalev said it would introduce a bill which would prevent politicians to stand for more than one parliamentary assembly at a time. This was a reaction to the announcement that some popular politicians like Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) and Bert Anciaux (VU) had the intention to stand for two parliamentary assemblies in June 1999 (when the voters would have to elect at least four assemblies). At first, nearly all political parties reacted in a positive way to the Agalev-bill. Still, a majority of MPs in the standing committee on internal affairs decided to postpone the debate, until after the 1999-elections.

The financing of political parties

In accordance with the outcome of the special task-force on a 'New Political Culture', the Belgian legislator modified the laws on the financing of political parties and the costs of campaigning. The modifications were laid down in three bills (two of 25 June 1998, and one of 19 November 1998). Parties could spend no more than 40 million BEF for an election and a moratorium on the use of advertising boards, was imposed. All giant advertising posters (20 m²) were prohibited within a period of three months before election day. The ban on donations by companies to political parties was extended to "all components of political parties", such as party's research centres and other organisations which are di-

rectly linked to a political party. All donations of individuals of more than 5.000 BEF had to be registered, and individuals could donate no more than 20.000 BEF to a party and 80.000 BEF in total.

Another important element in the debate on the financing of political parties, was the bill proposed by Claude Eerdekens (PS), to abolish state subsidies (for a period of one year) to parties with a racist or xenophobe platform. In the law on the financing of political parties the granting of state subsidies was linked to respecting the European Treaty on Human Rights. After a long debate, the standing committee for internal affairs voted in favour of the bill on 23 June 1998. A large majority in the standing committee deemed that violations of the European Treaty had to be punished. It was clear to all that Eerdekens' bill was aimed at punishing the extreme right party Vlaams Blok.

However large the majority in the standing committee, the plenary debate on the bill revealed that some political parties were very reserved to back the bill. The key question was whether or not it is up to politicians to decide which parties can be granted state subsidies. Especially the CVP was hesitant, for they feared the bill would put the Vlaams Blok in a position of martyr. The CVP asked for a delay in order to allow the Council of the State to examine the constitutionality of the bill. In its first advise of 2 September 1998, the Council of the State judged the bill to be unconstitutional, because only courts can decide whether or not an act is liable for punishment.

A compromise was found on 1 December 1998: in case five members of the parliamentary committee would make a complaint to the Council of the State, the latter had to start an investigation. A judgement had to be made within two months time. Parties could go for appeal to the Court of Cassation. On 10 December 1998 the Chamber passed the bill; the MPs of the Vlaams Blok voted against, while the Flemish liberal party and some of the Volksunie MPs voted abstention.

The right to vote on community level for non-Belgian citizens

The granting of the right to vote to citizens of the EU-Member States was strongly opposed in Flanders, because it was believed that these voters (up to a potential total of some 135.000) would favour the French-speaking parties. Hence, this could weaken the position of the Flemish community in Brussels and in the Brussels' periphery.

The issue was related to the question whether or not a revision of the constitutional article 8 was necessary to install this right to vote. As at some points of the discussion the majority parties were looking for allies among the opposition parties to get a two thirds majority in the Chamber (which was necessary in case the constitution had to be revised), some of the opposition parties made their support conditional to their own demands.

In the meanwhile, the Belgian state was convicted by the European Court of Justice on 9 July 1998, because it had not yet implemented the EU Council Directive 94/80/EC. For prime minister Dehaene, the conviction was a means to accelerate the negotiations on the issue.

Early March 1998, the PRL said to be willing to co-operate with the majority parties for the necessary revision of article 8 of the Constitution. However, it would take until after the summer holidays before prime minister Dehaene and the lib-

eral party leader Louis Michel reached an agreement to settle the issue (3 September 1998). The liberals obtained some guarantees on the relaxation of the naturalisation procedure in return for their support. Consequently, on 4 September 1998 the government agreed on the text of the bill. In an opinion article, which was published in the newspaper 'De Standaard' on September 8th, some CVP-backbenchers uttered criticism to the agreement. They asked for a guaranteed representation of the Flemish community in Brussels. The 'rebellion' was rapidly suppressed by prime minister Dehaene and Marc Van Peel, party leader of the CVP.

At last, a majority of christen-democrats, socialists and the French-speaking liberals passed the revision of the constitutional article 8 and the new procedures for naturalisation on 29 October 1998 in the Chamber of Representatives and on 10 December 1998 in the Senate. The supplement to article 8 of the Constitution stated that "contrary to the general principle, the right to vote for citizens of EU-Member States could be granted by simple revision of the law. This right to vote can be extended to residents of non-EU-Member States, but only after 1 January 2001". This last sentence meant that migrants could not take part at the local elections of October 2000.

C. The issue of the facilities, and the Columberg report

The circular letters of the Flemish ministers Luc Van Den Brande (7 October 1997), Leo Peeters (17 December 1997) and Luc Martens (10 February 1998) continued to cause great upheaval among the French-speaking community in Belgium throughout 1998. The circular letters stated that the linguistic facilities that were granted to the French-speaking population in some of the communities in the Brussels' periphery, might not be considered to be a life-time achievement. Through these 'facilities', the French-speaking population had the right to be addressed in French despite the strict linguistic laws of the (Flemish) territory in which these communities are located. The circular letters stated that every French-speaking person would have to declare his or her wish to be addressed in French at the beginning of each year.

The government of the French-speaking community declared on 5 January 1998 to make an official complaint against the letter on the basis of a conflict of competences. As a result of this, the implementation of the circular letter was immediately suspended for 60 days. Asked for its advice, the Council of the State confirmed at the end of February 1998, that there was a conflict of competences between the Flemish government on the one hand and the governments of both the French-speaking community and the Walloon region on the other hand. In the meanwhile, the (francophone) mayors of the six so-called 'communities with facilities' in the Brussels' periphery declared that they did not wish to implement the circular letter of minister Peeters, pending the decision of the Council of the State. The mayors were backed in their protest by a joint declaration of 25 March 1998, which was signed by the leaders of all French-speaking political parties.

The Council of the State took its final decision on 7 July 1998. In its verdict, the Council of the State denied the claim of the governments of the French-speaking community and of the Walloon region to peremptory suspend the circular letter of minister Peeters, as they had suffered no direct disadvantage by the circular letter. But still, even after the verdict of the Council of the State, the tension did not pass away. In October 1998, the leader of the Brussels francophone party FDF, Olivier Maingain, called on the French-speaking inhabitants of the Flemish periphery around Brussels to civil disobedience.

In the meanwhile, a lot of attention was paid to the 'Columberg-report'. Dumeni Columberg, a Swiss MP, paid a visit to Brussels (May 25-27th) on behalf of the Council of Europe to verify the situation of the French-speaking community in the Brussels' periphery. His visit was a result of a resolution introduced by Georges Clerfayt (FDF) in the Council of Europe, in which Clerfayt stated that a group of francophone people in Belgium did not have a democratic statute, that the borders of the city of Brussels had not been assigned in a democratic way, and that the French-speaking community in the province of Flemish-Brabant does not have the right to use their own language. During his short visit to Brussels, Dumeni Columberg met with some fifty federal, regional and local politicians.

In his report (published on 1 September 1998) Columberg suggested to gradually introduce bilingualism in the whole country (after a referendum on the issue) and to annex the Flemish periphery to the Region of Brussels-capital. However positive the reactions in the francophone camp, the report was greeted with jeers and negative criticism in Flanders. Prime minister Dehaene said to be surprised by some of Columberg's proposals, while the Flemish minister-president Luc Van Den Brande started a diplomatic offensive to correct the so-called "inaccurate image" that was drawn by the Columberg-report.

Finally, after some important amendments that were initiated by the Flemish members of the Council of Europe, and which significantly changed the original text, the Columberg-report was approved by the MPs Council of Europe on 25 September 1998. Thanks to the 'last minute' amendments, the Flemish political parties spoke of a victory in blocking the hostile francophone attack.

D. *Other tensions between the two communities*

The anti-tobacco law of 10 December 1997 upset the French-speaking community. The law had been initiated by the Flemish socialist Louis Vanvelthoven and had been passed thanks to the support of mainly Flemish deputies. The francophone political world feared that because of the law, which abolished all tobacco advertising from 1 January 1999 onwards, major sport events would become impossible in future (e.g. the Belgian F1 Grand Prix in Spa-Francorchamps). Several MPs of the biggest francophone political parties tried - in vain - to amend the text of the law. Even attempts to bring the case before court did not bring the desired solution, as judges declared the case to be beyond the competence of the court.

At the end of February 1998, three Walloon regional MPs initiated a proposition of decree to get round the federal law. They aimed at creating a kind of 'godparenthood', by which events that take place in buildings or on places that are owned by the Walloon Regional Government, or that are subsidised by this government, could unconditionally take place. Based on this proposition of decree, the *Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile* (FIA) decided to keep the Belgium F1 Grand Prix on the agenda for 1998. The proposition of decree was passed with an overwhelming majority on 16 December 1998.

In the meanwhile, a second attempt at federal level to get round the law had been made in October 1998. Even prime minister Dehaene declared at that time that "we do not have to be more catholic than the pope", meaning that the EU Directive only prohibited tobacco advertisement from 2006 onwards. Dehaene deemed that the Belgian law was too severe in this respect. However, for once the CVP did not back its own prime minister. SP party leader Fred Erdman as well blew the whistle on two SP-senators who had voted abstention on the issue in

the standing committee of the Senate. These events marked clearly that the division between supporters and opponents of the anti-tobacco-law was linguistically based.

Another hot issue in linguistic perspective was the rearrangement of the distribution code for the federal means for education (since 1989 a competence of the community governments). The French-speaking political parties were in favour of a distribution code based on the number of students (which was favourable to the French-speaking community), while the Flemish political parties demanded that the issue would be linked to an extension of the fiscal autonomy of the regional states. Prime minister Dehaene tried to calm the feelings in consultation with the minister-presidents of the community governments, but did not succeed in solving the problem in 1998.

VII. The Agusta-Dassault trial

A. *The issue of the parliamentary immunity of Guy Spitaels*

Early 1998, the 'Agusta-Dassault' bribery case was highly dominated by the issue whether or not the parliamentary immunity of former PS-party leader Guy Spitaels had to be lifted. The French-speaking opposition parties (Liberals and greens) were upset by what they interpreted as a manoeuvre by the majority parties to keep Spitaels out of court. However, on 11 March 1998, the parliament of the French-speaking Community decided to lift Spitaels' immunity in both the Agusta and Dassault affair. The result of the vote was: 56 in favour, 27 against and 9 abstentions. Two weeks later, on March 25th, the vote in the Walloon regional parliament led to a similar result.

Due to the outcome of the votes, Spitaels' name was added to the list of defendants that were summoned by the Court of Cassation. This list, published on 20 January 1998, originally was composed of 12 people, which were in one way or the other involved in the Agusta and/or the Dassault affair: the industrialists Serge Dassault (Dassault) and Raffaello Teti (Agusta); the former ministers Willy Claes (SP) and Guy Coëme (PS); Johan Delanghe, Etienne Mangé and Luc Wallyn (staff members of the SP); François Pirot, Jean-Louis Mazy, Merry Hermanus and André Bastien (staff members of the PS), and the lawyer Alfons Peulinckx. They were charged with forgery and corruption.

B. *A tough verdict by the Court of Cassation*

Under an enormous international media-attention, the trial started on 2 September 1998 in the absence of Raffaello Teti, who had died of a heart attack on 22 August 1998. The trial started with a battle on procedural matters, due to which the Court on September 7th decided to suspend the trial for a period of seven days. At the restart of the trial, on 17 September 1998, most of the demands of the defence were put aside.

The central question at the trial was at which day the leaders of the SP had been informed about a possible donation to the party from the Italian helicopter company Agusta. Only if could be proved that they knew before the contract was signed on 19 December 1988, this would lead to a conviction for bribery. The then party leaders claimed that they were told of the donation for the first time on 19 January 1989 (thus being after the assignment of the contract). However,

this claim was challenged by the testimonies of both Luc Wallyn and Etienne Mangé. Wallyn and Mangé urged the possibility that the party leaders were informed before the end of 1988, as Wallyn had already obtained the guarantee that Agusta would pay on 13 October 1988. Three weeks after that day Mangé would have said that the SP was willing to accept the money. To solve the issue, three former SP party leaders (Karel Van Miert, Louis Tobback and Frank Vandembroucke) had to testify before the Court on 9 October 1998. They reconfirmed that they did not know about the donation before 19 January 1989. After the discovery of a farewell-letter written by the wife of Etienne Mangé, who committed suicide early November 1998, Luc Wallyn changed his story. For as Mangé's wife wrote that Mangé had acted on his own, when he had told Wallyn that 'the party' would accept the offer.

On 13 and 14 October 1998, the public prosecutor, Eliane Liekendael, and the first attorney general, Jean Du Jardin, delivered their closing speeches, in which they accused the former ministers Claes, Coëme and Spitaels of bribery and forgery. The fact that there was no regulation for the funding of political parties was acceptable as cause, but could not serve as a justification of what has happened, Liekendael said.

On 23 December 1998 the Court of Cassation gave judgement in the case. The verdict was very severe for the 12 accused, all of which got suspended prison sentences: Willy Claes received a suspended three-year, and Coëme and Spitaels a suspended two-year prison sentence. They were found guilty of passive corruption: Claes both in the Agusta and the Dassault affair, Coëme and Spitaels only in the latter case. On top of the suspended prison sentence, they were deprived of their civil and political rights for a period of 5 years. The Court also decided that Claes, Delanghe, Wallyn and Mangé had to pay back the bribery money (equaling some 111 million BEF). Spitaels, Coëme, Bastien, Mazy, Hermanus and Piroth had to do the same, for a smaller amount of money (some 49 million BEF).

The other politicians received suspended prison sentences varying from 3 months to 12 months for passive corruption. Bastien, Mazy and Piroth were the only ones to retain their civil and political rights. Alfons Peulinckx received a suspended two-year prison sentence for active corruption in the Agusta and Dassault affair, and for forgery in the Dassault case, while Serge Dassault received a suspended two-year prison sentence for active corruption in the latter case.

VIII. Foreign and defence policy

A. Foreign policy

Congo-Zaire - The already cool relationship between the Belgian government and the regime of president Kabila got even more troubled, following a couple of smaller incidents at the beginning of 1998 (e.g. the banning of the opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi, the dissolution of the activist movement Azadho, and charges made by the Congolese state television that Belgian diplomats had smuggled guns into the country).

In August 1998 Kabila's regime was put under strong pressure by rebel forces. The Belgian government sent some airplanes to Kinshasha, in order to evacuate several hundreds of Belgian and other European citizens. During the civil war, the government did not choose a side, as they wanted to stay neutral in the

conflict. In an attempt to get financial and political backing, president Kabila paid a visit to Brussels on November 24-26, 1998. Kabila met King Albert, prime minister Dehaene and minister of Foreign Affairs Eric Derycke, but did receive a cold welcome, and left empty handed.

Rwanda - As an implementation of the recommendations made by the special committee of the Senate on Rwanda (see 1997-review), the government passed a special report on 23 January 1998. The report put some constraints on the future involvement of Belgian forces in missions of the UN and the OSCE. Especially in case a UN-mission was to be set up in a former colonial state, the Belgian participation would be limited to logistic or communicative support.

Paul Kagame, vice-president, minister of Defence and 'strong man' of Rwanda, paid a visit to Brussels on 20-21 January 1998. It was the first official visit of a Rwandese minister after the killing of 10 Belgian soldiers in Rwanda in April 1994.

With respect to the latter event, the government decided to make April 7th a national day of commemoration for all Belgian soldiers who died in peacekeeping operations. On 7 December 1998, chief commander Willy Herteleer handed over his report on the involvement of the general staff in the incident of April 7th, 1994, to the minister of defence. Herteleer deemed the then general staff was not to blame for the death of the soldiers. Therefore, he advised to the minister not to take any sanctions against the members of the general staff. This report led to very negative reactions among the members of the former special committee on the Rwanda case.

Ex-Yugoslavia - On 29 March 1998 a ceremony was organised at the King Baudouin stadium in Brussels, to honour more than 8.000 Belgian soldiers who had participated at several UN-peacekeeping missions in former Yugoslavia. Eight of them had died in office.

With regard to the situation in Bosnia, the government decided on 2 April 1998 to put some 500 soldiers at the disposal of the post-SFOR-peacekeeping mission of the UN. On 9 October 1998 the government agreed to participate at a possible NATO-air offensive in Kosovo.

B. *Defence policy*

The budget of the ministry of defence was increased with 500 million BEF in 1998, after five years in which the defence budget had been fixed at 98 billion BEF. Besides this raise of the budget, the ministry got some extra funding by selling old equipment (3.1 billion BEF) and military territories (340 million BEF), and by collecting pay backs from the UN (500 million BEF).

Furthermore, the government invested in four extra minesweepers (220 million BEF), in the modernisation of another eighteen F16-combat airplanes (1.32 billion BEF) and a new anti-tank-system for the groundforces (6.3 billion BEF). On 10 December 1998, the government decided to buy 18 pilotless Hunter-spotters (for a total of 2.5 billion BEF).

At the end of 1998, the Belgian army was composed of 42.850 soldiers and 3.200 civilians.

In March 1998 operation 'Vision 2015' started. It was a strategic plan of the general staff, which aimed at defining the future role of the Belgian army and the

Belgian security and defence policy until the year 2015. The project should be finished by the year 2000.

IX. Other events and developments

Cabinet reshuffle - The election of deputy prime minister and minister of Finances, Philippe Maystadt as party leader of the PSC on 17 June 1998, caused a small reshuffle of the federal government. Jean-Jacques Viseur (PSC) was sworn in as new minister of Finances, while the minister of Defence, Jean-Pol Poncelet, was promoted to the rank of deputy prime minister.

Ministers of State - At a ceremony to celebrate the 30th anniversary of his entry in the Chamber of Representatives, former minister Herman De Croo (VLD) was nominated Minister of State on 3 June 1998. On the occasion of the Belgian national day (July 21st), Philippe Maystadt (PSC), Gaston Geens (CVP), Robert Urbain (PS), François-Xavier de Donnée (PRL) and Antoine Duquesne (PRL) received the honorary title of Minister of State. In the autumn, on 18 November 1998, former prime minister Mark Eyskens (CVP) was nominated Minister of State as well.

Muslim Executive - On 13 December 1998 the Muslim community in Belgium organised an election for an executive board, which would advise the government on issues related to the Muslim community. Out of a total of some 300.000 Muslim, 90.000 persons could cast their vote. Some 45.000 actually did vote. A 'Constitutional Body' was set up, composed of 51 directly elected representatives and 17 co-opted members. Out of these 68 members, 17 had to be chosen to form the 'Executive of the Muslim Community in Belgium'.

Judicial reforms - The law of 5 March 1998 modified the rules for early releases of prisoners. This law was an outcome of the debates after the Dutroux case. Based on a law of 1888, Marc Dutroux had benefited from the system of early release, and therefore the whole system was under scrutiny. The new law imposes that it is no longer the minister of Justice who has to decide whether or not an individual will be granted early release. Instead, the decision is laid in the hands of a commission of experts.

The passing of the so-called Franchimont-bill (12 March 1998) was another important outcome of the committee 'Dutroux', and made a significant change to the judiciary system. From now on, the role of the magistrature in the investigation-proces was enhanced, and victims were enabled the right to consult the judicial file on their case.

Provinces - On 9 April 1998 Raymonde Dury (PS), member of the European parliament, was sworn in as governor of the district Brussels-capital. She resigned on November 11th, after a conflict with the interior minister Luc Van Den Bossche on a possible prohibition of a meeting of the extreme right party Vlaams Blok. Dury was succeeded by Véronique Paulus de Châtelet, who was sworn in on 18 December 1998.

Organised Crime - On 17 December 1998 the Senate agreed on a report of a special parliamentary committee on organised crime in Belgium. In the report, the committee warned both the political and the judicial world not to underes-

time the possible threats of organised criminals. Especially in the sectors of oil and diamonds the mafia was reigning, the report said.

National Bank - Due to the forthcoming European System of Central Banks, the statutes of the National Bank of Belgium had to be modified. This happened on 22 February 1998. At the same time the number of directors was raised from six to seven. The opposition parties were furious, as they interpreted this raise of director seats as a political manoeuvre to rapidly nominate a CVP-affiliated person.

Cools murder case - On 2 June 1998, Ben Almi Abdelmajid Ben Lamin and Ben Brahim Abdeljelil Ben Regeb were judged in Tunis (Tunisia). The assassins received a 20-year prison sentence for their involvement in the murder of André Cools (18 July 1991). At the end of 1998 it was still unknown who had commissioned the assassination.

X. The evolutions in the political parties

The conflict in the PSC between the current party leaders and their former president, Gerard Deprez, continued in 1998. The conflict rose in 1997 when Deprez set up a movement for renewal in the party (Mouvement des Citoyens pour le Changement, MCC).

After the publication of an article on 7 January 1998, in which Deprez pleaded for an alliance of PRL, FDF and PSC, PSC-party leader Nothomb said that Deprez had put himself out of the party. On January 12th, Nothomb was backed in his decision by the Comité Directeur of the party (by 34 votes in favour, 6 against and 2 abstentions). The verdict was that Deprez had put himself out of the party because of the strategic choices that he had made, and that he therefore no longer was a member of the PSC.

Because of the continuous turmoil in the party and the negative results in opinion polls, party leader Nothomb announced on 28 March 1998 that he would soon resign from office. By mid-May 1998 the newly installed 'national bureau' was put in charge of finding a consensus-candidate for the party leadership. Rapidly they found a successor in Philippe Maystadt. Although Maystadt preferred to stay in the government, he accepted to lead the party until after the parliamentary elections of June 1999. Maystadt was put under heavy pressure by prime minister Dehaene to accept the new post. Apparently, the CVP was afraid of a bad electoral result for the PSC, which would affect their own position as well.

In the period June 4th-19th, all members of the PSC could cast their vote for the party leadership elections. As there were no other candidates, the ticket Philippe Maystadt - Joëlle Milquet (who would possibly succeed to Maystadt after the 1999-elections) received 90,2 % of the votes.

On 24 October 1998, the MCC became a permanent organisation. Former PSC-deputy Nathalie de 't Serclaes was elected party leader, and Gerard Deprez was elected chairman of the 'Executive body'. Soon negotiations were started with the PRL-FDF to form an electoral alliance. These talks resulted in an agreement, signed on 1 December 1998.

Louis Tobback resigned as party leader of the Flemish Socialist Party, when he was sworn in as deputy prime minister and interior minister, on April 24th. Sen-

ator Fred Erdman was appointed interim party leader. Six months later, the party congress of 10 October 1998 confirmed Fred Erdman in his position. Erdman was the only candidate for the party leadership and obtained 98 % of the votes. Johan Van de Lanotte, one of the two other candidates supposedly suited for the job, was put in charge of the campaign for the 1999-elections.

On May 16-17, the SP organised an ideological congress. On this so-called 'Congress of the Future' the Flemish socialists aimed at becoming a "red-green and radical-democratic party of values". The congress dropped the article in the party programme in which the SP declared to strive for "anti-capitalist structural reforms". It acknowledged the role of the free market as motor of economic development. Regarding the possible further reform of the state, a compromise was settled between the 'unionists' of Freddy Willockx and the 'autonomists' of Norbert De Batselier.

For the VLD, 1998 was to a large extent dominated by a dispute between party leader Guy Verhofstadt and Marc Verwilghen, the chairman of the committee 'Dutroux'. Verhofstadt wanted to exploit Verwilghen's popularity at the general elections of 1999 in a big constituency (Antwerp or Brussels), while Verwilghen preferred to be candidate in his own constituency Dendermonde, or else to run for the Senate. It might well be that Verhofstadt, as party leader almost automatically predestined to stand for the Senate, feared a loss of personal votes if Verwilghen would feature on the same list. It would take until 1999 before a compromise was found.

In the meanwhile, the VLD had organised a party congress, entitled "Foundations for a change" (Ghent, April 24th-26th), in which important decisions for a future participation in government were taken. The congress however, was largely overshadowed by the brief escape of Dutroux (April 23rd).

On 9 January 1998, Bert Anciaux, former party leader of the Volksunie, declared that 'ID21' would be the name of the movement for political renewal he was working at. Some evolutions within 'ID21' (e.g. the fact that most of its members showed some reluctance towards the intended merger between ID21 and the Volksunie, and also towards the confederal ideas of the VU) caused some agitation among Volksunie members. Actually, the relationship between ID21 and Volksunie remained unclear, even after an agreement was reached to form an alliance for the general elections of June 1999. This agreement had been supported by 16 out of the 22 members of the party directorate of the Volksunie on 31 August 1998. The party council of 12 September 1998 confirmed this vote (97 in favour, 25 against and 5 abstentions), and Bert Anciaux was elected president of the alliance. On 14 October 1998 Patrik Vankrunkelsven was re-elected as party leader of the Volksunie. He was the only candidate and obtained 88 % of the votes.

The green party Agalev modified its 'green ideology' to the needs of the 21st century on a special congress, held in Leuven on 25 April 1998. The six MPs who, due to the rotation-principle, would no longer be able to run at the general elections of 1999, obtained an exception to this rule, by a two thirds majority of the congress.

On 24 July 1998, Wilfried Bervoets, the political secretary of the party (and thus the actual leader of the party) died. He was succeeded by Jos Geysels, the leader of the parliamentary group in the Flemish parliament.

The 'Assemblée générale' of the French-speaking green party Ecolo re-elected Isabelle Durant, Jacky Moraël and Jean-Luc Roland as secretary-generals for another four years, on 29 March 1998. Like Agalev, Ecolo granted an exception to the rotation-principle for the eight MPs concerned.

Because of the proximity of the general elections of June 1999 and the local elections of October 2000, the party council of the Vlaams Blok decided on 10 January 1998 to prolong the party leadership of Frank Van Hecke until the end of the year 2000. Normally, the renewal of his mandate was due in June 1999, in the midst of an electoral campaign.

On 24 February 1998 the Vlaams Blok announced that Johan Demol would be the head of list for the general elections in the Brussels constituency. Demol used to be the chief of the local police in the Brussels community of Schaarbeek, until he was fired by the minister of Interior Johan Vande Lanotte on 27 January 1998. Demol, well-known for his tough policy on crime, was the perfect figurehead for the Vlaams Blok-campaign for more security.

On 7 November 1998 the Vlaams Blok organised a meeting in Brussels, which caused a lot of political turmoil. Both minister Yvan Ylief (PS) and the mayor of Brussels, François-Xavier de Donnée (PRL) tried - in vain - to prevent that the meeting would take place. The events led to the resignation of the governor of the Brussels-district (Raymonde Dury), and to a modification of the law on party financing.

On 14 January 1998, Paul Marchal, the father of An who fell victim of Marc Dutroux, announced that he would set up a new political party "to defend the weak in the society". The party was called PNPb (Party for New Politics in Belgium), and was officially founded on 14 October 1998. Soon, internal rivalries led to a split in the party. Even Marc Similon, Marchal's lawyer and close friend, who had been elected party leader, would leave the party in 1999 after a dispute with Marchal.