

# This oddity of an election

If you thought the June general election perplexing, you are not alone. **Peter Philp** gets an expert view on the reasons for its oddness, and talks to two Flemish Liberal politicians who are themselves an odd couple

**T**o understand Belgium you have to have lived here for three centuries," says Mark Eyskens, a former prime minister. Even to the curious and politically aware foreigner, the June 10 national election was perplexing.

At first glance, the system of proportional representation, used in several other European countries, is straightforward. Throw in 177 years of Belgian history, however, and things get blurred – "Elections in Belgium are but a prelude to horse trading," concluded an *Economist* article on the latest round.

Likely-to-be Prime Minister Yves Leterme won the election. Fair enough. But this is a Fleming who infamously said that French-speakers were "not intelligent enough" to learn Dutch and that the country is an "accident of history", heresy to many Walloons. Polls to the south reflected his arrogance: just

before the elections, he had only 3.8 percent support in Wallonia and 5.1 percent in bilingual Brussels. A nation-wide poll by *La Libre Belgique* on the eve of the election found that 31 percent of all Belgians wanted the incumbent prime minister Guy Verhofstadt to stay in the job. Only 18 percent wanted Leterme.

Leterme's apparent gaffes were apparently shrewdly calculated. Because 60 percent of the population speaks Dutch, it has become an unwritten tenet that the prime minister should be Flemish, as has been the case for the past 30 years. Also, since the main political parties split along linguistic lines almost 40 years ago, there is no cross-region campaigning by any party, save in an extended Brussels constituency where all parties appear on the ballot. The effect is that no Francophone parties appear on the ballots in Flanders and no Flemish ones in Wallonia.

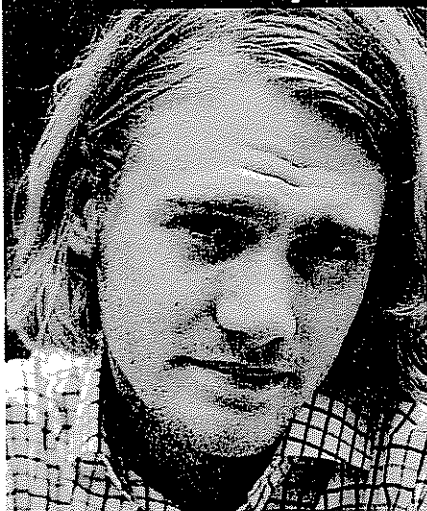
This means that no prime minister in

the past 30 years has appeared on a Walloon ballot, which represents a third of the population. Leterme correctly bet that as long as you win Flanders, in his case by pandering to Flemish nationalistic sentiment, you win the country.

No wonder 36 percent of voters wouldn't go to the polls if it wasn't compulsory: *La Libre Belgique* poll, again. The obvious lack of democratic process has, of course, been noted, but it is drowned out by the perpetual debate of further splitting the country along linguistic lines which hijacks every national election.

"It's extraordinary to observe how the debate in one half of the country completely ignores the goings on in the other half," says Pascal Delwit, political scientist at Brussels Free University (ULB). "It's like having two parallel campaigns." He cites the example of the Dutch state broadcaster VRT whose election website only featured the Flemish constituencies plus Brussels, and then only the Flemish

## Our future – by the novice



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He has just been elected to the Senate at the age of 23. At a time when many students are still chasing down cheap beer or figuring how the washing machine works, Jean-Jacques De Gucht has big things on his mind.

Sporting long hair, jeans and leather armbands, he took an hour out of valuable study time to talk to *The Bulletin*. After just wrapping up his finals at Brussels Free University (VUB), he's on the fast-track to a career as senator in the Belgian Parliament, the youngest ever. If the name rings a bell, it should. He is the son of respected outgoing Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht.

Young De Gucht is about to graduate in socio-cultural agology, which is about social change based on sociology, psychology and philosophy combined with art – a field particular to the VUB. "Trying to bring people together through art," he explains in eloquent English.

Like his father, he is a Flemish Liberal (Open VLD), opposed to direct subsidies for cultural activities. Instead, he favours tax shelters to encourage corporate investment, a concession that has benefited the Belgian film industry. "The leftovers," he says, could go to alternative art that does not have the commercial appeal of

parties. There is no legal obstacle for parties to campaign across the regions – they simply don't. Except for a few fringe groups and the two green parties who join forces once elected, there are no national political parties.

But doesn't this disenfranchisement constitute a breach of European principles? Not according to the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, which advises on constitutional law. "The issues may be problematic from a political point of view but do not result in an infringement of the principles of the European electoral heritage," says Pierre Garrone, head of division. As for the language issue, there would only be a problem if candidates were forbidden to campaign in a given language. Although that does happen in a few volatile border areas, this is largely due to renegade burgomasters acting illegally but who are not prosecuted.

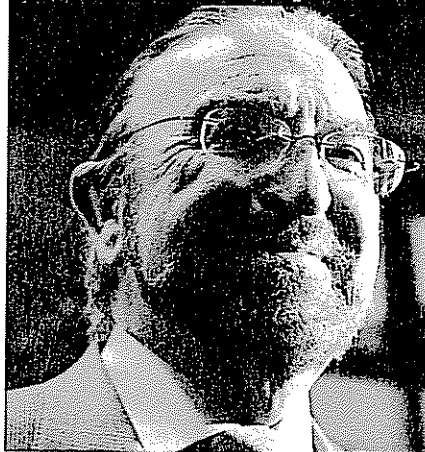
One solution would be to abolish the existing 11 voting districts and replace them by a single national one, meaning that all parties would appear everywhere. But this is unlikely to change the political landscape much as people are likely to stick to their traditional parties.

Another solution, promoted by academics from universities across the divide calling themselves the Pavia Group, would be to give every voter two votes, one for each language group. That would force each person to take a position vis-à-vis Flemish and Francophone parties. To make the idea acceptable, only 15 seats of a total of 150 would initially be chosen this way. But until that happens the democratic deficit continues. ■

the mainstream. With tax breaks, he argues, "money would pour into the arts."

The main challenge for this De Gucht over the next four years in Parliament will be to get recognised as a politician to watch and, he hopes, to get elected again. "I didn't expect to get elected the first time," he says. "It was a surprise, but the citizens of Flanders wanted me to represent them, so I'll do my best to do that." There was a little help from De Gucht senior: his name appeared on all of his father's campaign posters.

## Our future – by the veteran



BELGA

of respect for elder statesmen. You have to be really active – catch the ball every time."

Although mild-mannered in person, the man from Brakel, East Flanders, is a flamboyant public figure. Turning down an official meeting with visiting Iranian officials who demanded that no alcohol be served earned him worldwide headlines in 2005. "Even for someone as tolerant as Herman De Croo, that's going a bit far," he said at the time.

De Croo is a staunch supporter of the monarchy and Belgian unity. He appeared in last year's spoof documentary announcing the end of Belgium on RTBF, an idea that is "far more glamorous" than the real thing. But he says the federal state is being bled dry: the regions and communities only raise 20 percent of their own budget and rely on federal subsidies for the rest. "[The state] can't bear the cost of social security, the army, foreign affairs, healthcare. Constitutional debate is needed, but not about giving more power to the entities but to ask them to pay for the exercise. Devolution without changing the pay mechanism will kill the federal state."

There is little sympathy for the right-wing tendencies of the north. About suggestions of entering a coalition with the extreme-right he once exclaimed: "I haven't fought my whole life for humanism and tolerance to drown myself in the brown swamp of these para-fascists!"

De Croo says we need "civilisation insurance". Just as everyone insures their cars and houses, Belgians should insure their own prosperity by paying premiums to the poor. The unity of Belgium would benefit, with continued north-south transfers to ensure a stable neighbourhood, as well as the third world.

During the next five years he wants to see "more openness" to the Republic of Congo and other underdeveloped countries. "We are too egoistic. We won't survive in front of the waves of poverty and misery."

As for retiring: "I'll stay in the Chamber until my death – and then I'll move to the Senate."

Herman De Croo makes no secret of his success. A month short of 70, the oldest member of the Belgian Parliament attributes his 40 years in national politics to staying alive and getting re-elected. Over the decades, he has filled many a government post: head of party, minister of education, pensions, communications, mobility, trade, as well as burgomaster and president of countless committees.

In his successful campaign in the June 10 election he intentionally put his name last on his party list as a "provocation", for he was the second-most-popular Flemish Liberal (Open VLD) candidate in his East Flanders constituency. In the previous parliament he was the Speaker (president) of the House, a job he has had to relinquish now that his party has been ousted by the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V).

In his grand office at 10 Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat, next door to the Parliament, De Croo puts aside a stack of paperwork and launches unprompted into the interview. The voice is hoarse. He's just out of hospital after recovering from exhaustion. Insomnia got the better of him during the last two months of campaigning – not surprising, as he admits to 40 years without a holiday or weekend.

However, his trademark *decrooïsme* – the verbal stream of consciousness worthy of Virginia Woolf and just as impenetrable – hasn't suffered. Neither has his near-perfect English.

"You have to rely on the strength of your party and your popularity in your constituency. There's no system