

Belgium: Leterme government lurches from crisis to crisis

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It took Belgian Prime Minister Yves Leterme nearly nine months to establish his coalition government after last summer's general election. It has taken barely two months to prove that it cannot resolve any of the political problems facing Belgium. Leterme managed to stave off an immediate crisis two weeks ago, whilst setting up further confrontations between the country's regions.

Belgium has been in political turmoil since last June's elections. Leterme's right-wing Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) won in alliance with the moderate Flemish nationalist New Flemish Alliance (NVA), defeating the Flemish Liberal Party (Open VLD) of sitting Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt.

Leterme had campaigned on extending regional autonomy. In practice, this means cutting the richer Dutch-speaking north of the country, Flanders, from the poorer French-speaking south, Wallonie, as demanded by Flemish nationalists. Such constitutional changes would require a two-thirds majority, which Leterme did not have. Because of these proposals, Leterme was unable to build a coalition among Walloon Liberals and Christian Democrats. They saw it as a step towards secession, which would have devastating economic consequences in the francophone region.

Emboldened by Leterme's proposals and the chaos surrounding the coalition negotiations, Flemish nationalists became more intransigent in their demands for greater autonomous powers. In the absence of an agreement, King Albert II called on the ousted Verhofstadt to form an interim government.

The dispute ran on until this March. There was increased urgency to form a government in order to agree a new budget under difficult economic conditions. Verhofstadt, in his capacity as interim premier, announced that there was no money in the public purse for any new budget initiatives. Public debt ran at 87 percent of GDP in the last full year of Verhofstadt's premiership. A new government was required constitutionally to pass the new budget, but the interim government conducted budget talks ahead of the coalition being established.

To achieve a coalition, Leterme had to manoeuvre on constitutional questions. He referred the question of regional reform to a special parliamentary panel, which will report in July. This removed the contentious discussion from the immediate coalition negotiations, but has not satisfied any of the parties.

Francophone politicians are still anxious about further extensions of regional autonomy, which could drastically cut Wallonie's income from federal taxation. Flemish nationalists are unhappy at

what they see as a retreat from the regionalist agenda. Gerolf Annemans of the extreme-right separatist Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest—formerly Vlaams Blok) accused Leterme of setting demands for Flanders and then dropping them. Where previously VB had been treated as an extremist pariah, their positions are increasingly part of the mainstream of Flemish regional politics. Bart de Wever of the NVA said, "We will see in July whether enough has been done," a position also being taken by Leterme's own party. Walloon parties have expressed unhappiness at levels of representation within the Cabinet.

The NVA, the other big winner last June, withdrew from the coalition. Leterme was eventually able to obtain a majority vote of confidence with a five-party coalition. The CD&V was joined by its Walloon sister party the CDH, the Francophone Socialist Party (PS), the Open VLD, and their Walloon sister party the MR. The fact that Leterme has brought back into government the very party voted out of office in June indicates the desperation of the Belgian ruling class, while the mutterings of discontent even during the vote of confidence underscore the instability of the coalition. The debate on the budget, which was supposed to be facilitated by the coalition, has merely exacerbated the political tensions.

Leterme pledged to raise pensions and cut taxes to the lowest paid, promising investment in health care, the environment, and security. The agreement on Leterme's proposals for examining constitutional reform enabled the budget talks to be concluded. The budget includes €340 million for new measures, including raising the lowest pensions by two percent, guaranteeing income for the elderly, and raising the income ceiling for the retired. It is unclear how much of this is actually affordable, given Verhofstadt's warning and recent criticisms that the interim government did not reserve sufficient funds to finance the costs of an ageing population.

The budget was calculated on forecasts of three percent inflation. The Central Bank forecast inflation of 2.9 percent, but finance minister Didier Reynders has this week said inflation could hit 3.5 percent with rising prices domestically and across the Euro zone. Reynders warned that rising food prices globally, and its impact on poorer citizens, would affect budgets, and he predicted "revisions of budget targets for 2008" in many countries. He also said that the credit crunch would start to bite in the Euro zone in the second half of 2008, as the crisis spread internationally. "We have seen a distribution of risk from the US to the entire world," he said.

It is against this economic background that Flemish nationalists

are seeking to cut themselves loose from subsidising the poorer Wallonie.

Belgium's delicately-balanced state structure is organised into Regions and Communities. There are three Regions: Flanders, Wallonie, and the Brussels Capital Region. There are three Communities: Dutch, French, and German-speaking. Brussels is a predominantly French-speaking city close to the language border, and within the Dutch-speaking province of Brabant. Around Brussels is a bilingual electoral district, Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde/Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvorde (BHV).

Constitutionally, each region is administered by one language group, so people living in Flanders vote only for Dutch-language parties. In BHV, however, voters have the option of voting for candidates from either language group. For the last 18 months Flemish politicians have been demanding an end to this situation. Their calls for BHV to be split into two would break Brussels' links with Wallonie, and deny the substantial minority of tens of thousands of francophone voters there the possibility of voting for francophone parties or using French in any official context.

The dispute has been getting more and more acrimonious. In January 2007 the Flemish regional authorities refused to appoint francophone mayors in the wealthy municipalities of Linkebeek, Wezembeek-Oppem and Kraainem. Although the municipalities have francophone majorities they are in Flanders, and the regional authorities insist that Dutch should be used for official business. Of Linkebeek's 5,000 inhabitants, 86 percent are francophone. The town hall was bricked up in the dispute. Bilingual road signs are regularly being defaced. The Council of Europe has recently sent envoys to investigate local rights to participate in local autonomy.

In Liedekerke, a furore arose over the town council's insistence on the "Flemish nature" of the town. Not only must all business and schooling take place in Dutch, but children who cannot speak the language can be barred from school outings such as swimming classes. Local VB councillor Johan Daelman has used this as an argument against francophone African immigrants.

It is no surprise that the separatist Daelman draws the conclusion that "the best answer is to divide the country." All of the Flemish parties have adapted to VB's separatism. Flemish interior minister Marino Keulen of the Open VLD was quick to annul the Liedekerke decision on school outings, but he has also expressed annoyance at Flemish subsidies to Wallonie. As Marc Mertens, Liedekerke's secretary, pointed out, the regional authority-controlled sports association Bloso can also send home children who do not understand Dutch. One of Keulen's officers, Steven Vansteenkiste, was widely quoted complaining about a francophone veto, and the amount of money going from north to south.

Brussels is critical for all regionalist political agendas. Every proposal for dividing the country seeks to retain control of the capital. Even the Flemish separatists of VB propose giving it specific language status in order to maintain it as part of their claimed territory. Olivier Maingain of the Walloon nationalist Francophone Democratic Front (FDF) has said that the enlargement of Brussels and its attachment to Wallonie must be the price of any division of BHV. This echoes proposals by Joëlle

Milquet of the CDH last year that Flemish municipalities south of Brussels be added to the city's area, thus linking it to Wallonie.

Much of the impetus for the division of the country has come from Leterme's own party. The CD&V issued Leterme with an ultimatum that they would lead a vote of no confidence against him if he was unable to obtain the agreement of francophone parties to the proposals. According to some sections of the Belgian media, party leaders had been close to a deal to delay the debate in order to pass the budget, but it was opposed by the CD&V.

Two weeks ago Leterme finally won a majority in parliament to delay any further regional debate in order to pass the 2008 budget. Immediately afterwards, in the early hours of the morning, the CD&V again filed a motion to prevent French-speakers in BHV from voting for francophone parties. Francophone politicians invoked a constitutional device to put the bill on hold for 120 days. Leterme hopes to include proposals for BHV in his broader package of regional devolution, due on July 15.

There was a sigh of relief from some sections of the Belgian ruling class that, in the words of *Le Soir*, "the worst has been avoided." This seems unwontedly optimistic. Any legislation can definitely be passed by the Flemish majority in the lower house. The CD&V had not been won over by Leterme's talk of the broader package of reforms, and the MR, CDH, and PS have all promised to break Leterme's coalition should he go ahead with the division of BHV. At best Leterme has won a reprieve, but it hardly suggests he can resolve the crisis. As a headline in *De Morgen* put it, "Next crisis on July 15."

Leterme is pursuing exactly the politics that created the present crisis. There has been a rightward lurch in Belgian politics over the last period. Before the BHV vote one analyst noted that Belgian politics is now polarised. Caroline Sagesser said that "all the Flemish deputies are forming one block against all the French-speaking deputies, and we have not had this situation in federal Belgium until now." She described it as an escalation of the antagonism."

The situation is becoming increasingly volatile. Marc Mertens is not alone in believing that Belgium is finished and "will become superfluous." The BHV dispute, he believes, will come to be seen "as the start of the war between the Flemish and French-speakers."

There can be no resolution of the Belgian crisis within the existing political system, which bears direct responsibility for creating and promoting the nationalism, regionalism and inequality we see today. The crisis in Belgium emphasises the urgent necessity for a socialist programme to unite the working class internationally and combat the poisonous growth of nationalism and regionalism. Only such a programme can unite Belgian workers, not just across language barriers within Belgium, but with their class brothers and sisters across the continent in building the United Socialist States of Europe.



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