

Closing essay BDW

FROM BLOCKED MOBILITY TO BLOCKED DEMOCRACY

Anyone who reads *Onvoltooid Vlaanderen* (An Incomplete Flanders) will get an overview of the Flemish Movement's achievements following nearly two centuries of their struggle for emancipation. Without too much aplomb, this can be called an impressive record. It represents the labour of thousands of anonymous pro-Flemish individuals, flamingants, nationalists, or any other name by which they were called. Men and women who selflessly - and more often than not at great personal risk - strived to make Flanders more independent. Without their commitment any talk of Flanders would have ceased to exist, with the exception of a memory of a vaguely indefinable place hearkening back to a bygone era. We owe these people an immense debt of gratitude.

However, the Flemish Movement and Flemish nationalism have also undergone considerable evolution in the past 200 years. Contemporary Flemish nationalism is no longer dictated by a sense of historical revenge for 'sufferings inflicted' in the past. Those Flemish who act as though they are oppressed today delude themselves. Nor is it a reaction to the alleged cultural dominance of French-speaking Belgium or the disadvantages suffered by the Flemish population. With the exception of the Flemish periphery of Brussels and along the linguistic border, those motives no longer play a role. A young Flemish person feels that his or her origins hold him or her back very little, if at all.

Obstructed mobility - the idea that your social mobility is hindered because of who you are - is the most powerful engine of a national or emancipatory movement. If generations of Flemish people became part of the Flemish Movement, then this was because at work or in government promotions could not be had unless they spoke French, and because they were confronted with concepts like '*Flamand de service*' or because they heard things like "*et pour les Flamands la meme chose*".

This was replaced by an entirely different factor of mobilisation. Today's Flemish struggle for autonomy is driven by the desire for a community that sees itself as a political entity - a nation - to organise decisions about its future as democratically as possible. However, Flanders is ensnared by a political warren that lacks all transparency, is limited by all kinds of locks and mechanisms developed at one point to protect the communities of this country, but today are primarily used to curb the most basic democratic rights. The Belgian state has been reduced to the sum of two democracies. It is a counter federation, in which both democracies obstruct the other. It is a *blocked democracy*.

We are no longer blocked in our social and cultural progress, but in our democratic rights *and* in our economic development. That is because this blocked democracy has also ensured that it is no longer possible in Belgium to make fundamental socio-economic choices. The interests of both democracies are frequently diametrically opposed and the attempts to reconcile them have proven both incredibly expensive and inefficient. For that reason too, federal Belgium is not only a blocked democracy, but it is also a *blocked economy*.

The Flemish Movement seeks to reform Belgium

Belgium emerged in 1830 as a unitary state led by a French-speaking elite that was able to exercise its political dominance over the majority of non-French-speaking, poor Flemish thanks to electoral taxes imposed. The political power therefore lay with the Brussels' bourgeoisie, the landed gentry and the Frenchified urban population. Furthermore, while the Constitution enshrined linguistic freedom, the reality was that in practice the state recognised only a single language, French. In the first instance, 'linguistic freedom' meant - in the words of Minister Charles Rogier - that French-speakers would never have to learn Dutch. The levy enforced on voting and the primacy of French excluded the Flemish from the democratic process and prejudiced them to the social, economic and cultural margins.

It was in protest against this marginalised position that, not long after Belgium was founded, the Flemish Movement was established as a *reform movement*. It was not the goal of the young Flemish Movement to create an independent Flanders. Quite the contrary, in fact. They wanted to redefine Belgian democracy so that the Flemish could participate as equal citizens in the democratic process. And they hoped to achieve this with a cultural revival; there was virtually no economic or political programme. The primary task was to create linguistic and sociological unity in Flanders: everyone who spoke Dutch was to be carried along in the shared, imagined destiny called Flanders.

The most significant and most famous proponent of this thinking was without a doubt, Hendrik Conscience. He was the father of not only Flemish literature, but also Flemish symbolism. The fact that we speak of 'Flanders', that we celebrate the Day of the Flemish Community on 11 July, that the Flemish national anthem is 'De Vlaamse Leeuw' (The Flemish Lion), that a clawed lion adorns our flag: all are fruits of Conscience's novel *De leeuw van Vlaanderen* (The Lion of Flanders). With this book he bestowed the Flemish Movement with the battle symbols needed to mobilise the masses.

The Battle of the Golden Spurs was a battle that would have had little relevance for contemporary Flanders outside the inner sanctum of historians, had it not been for Conscience's book. But Conscience didn't conjure that history out of thin air. It was not an academic work that he penned, rather an historical novel at a time when Flanders found itself in a state of grinding poverty. Many of the Flemish had no food, hardly any work and

no rights. It was for those - often illiterate - Flemish that Conscience wrote *De leeuw van Vlaanderen*, to awaken them to the fact that they too had rights within fledgling Belgium.

Because, let's be perfectly clear, Conscience was less interested in evoking a sense of Flemish identity than in improving the Belgian one. His aim - and that of many other flamingants - was to make it clear that space had to be created within Belgium for Dutch, for the 'Germanic culture'. Conscience's intention was to shatter the blocked mobility that held the Flemish in a position of subordination. Had they listened to Conscience - and his supporters - back then, history and Belgium would have turned out completely differently. But they didn't.

Universal suffrage: Belgium's first crack

Even during his lifetime, Conscience had to concede with great disappointment that his cultural discourse had fallen on deaf ears. Very little had come of Flanders - and its place in Belgium - as Conscience depicted it in *De leeuw van Vlaanderen*. The Flemish remained second-class citizens and the longed-for reforms failed to materialise. In desperation - and not without some bitterness - Conscience poured his vexation into a new novel, which was published over thirty years after *De leeuw van Vlaanderen*: *De kerels van Vlaanderen* (The Boys of Flanders).

This novel also created a battle symbol - the now virtually forgotten symbol of "de blauwvoet" (a family name from a family feud found in *Histoire de Flandre*) - however, the tone of the work was fundamentally different. Whereas *The Lion* still radiates with hope for the future, *The Boys* is much harsher about that future. If Flemish demands aren't met, Belgium will become untenable. That was the undertone. Just as a reminder: for Conscience this was a worst case scenario; he remained attached to the Belgium state. However, he saw beginnings of a fault line that threatened to split Belgium. Without reforms to improve the course of the Flemish community's social and cultural emancipation, the problems would take on a more structural character and Belgium would end up in a permanent state of disharmony.

The fault line eventually surfaced more than twenty years later, with the introduction of plural voting in 1893. For the first time ever, the Flemish masses took part in Belgian democracy, signalling the starting shot of the struggle to obtain equal rights and break through the linguistic - and therefore social - barriers. The new political articulation of Flemish grievances found expression in the vote for the Law of Equality in 1898.

The universal voting right and the Law of Equality laid bare the fault line running through Belgium, because the Flemish Movement failed in its attempt to redefine Belgian democracy. There has been a recurring pattern in Belgian political history from the time of the Law of Equality right up until the present day. Flemish politicians request additional

autonomy, which is denied them by the Belgian political and social elite. As a result, Flemish public opinion is radicalised, causing the elite to bow to the electoral pressure, and reforms are carried out. That soothes public opinion, but only temporarily. Because those reforms are never carried out in full, or they are half-baked and instantly warped, which leads to all manner of frustrations. And from these frustrations comes a new demand for autonomy, and then the whole process starts again.

At the beginning of the twentieth century it was this reticence among the Belgian political elite to accept reforms that led to a radicalisation of the Flemish Movement transforming it from cultural flamingantism into Flemish nationalism. For instead of creating one Belgian democracy, in which the Flemish and Walloons were united as one people, the Walloons grafted themselves onto the Belgian nation. They were, after all, afraid of becoming marginalised by the Flemish demographic majority in a single democratic space. In an attempt to counter the Flemish majority, all kinds of protectionist measures were incorporated into the state structure for the French-speaking minority. The country split into two peoples. What initially began as a movement to promote national identity became a counter-movement that cultivated its own subnational identity to counter the French-speaking, Belgian identity. "Sire, il n'y a pas de Belges" (Sire, there are no Belgians.), wrote the socialist leader Jules Destrée in 1912 in a letter to King Albert I.

From flamingantism to nationalism

On the eve of the First World War the Flemish working classes - the seed of a later elite - were politically frustrated, culturally humiliated and economically impotent. The global conflagration that erupted created the circumstances in which the future of the Flemish Movement, and thus of Belgium, would fundamentally change. A schism arose in the Flemish Movement between pacifists - who wanted to wait for the outcome of the war - and activists, who wanted to use the war situation to take steps that had previously not been possible. The latter included collaborating with the German occupiers in order to obtain the reforms they wanted, a move that discredited them in the eyes of the population. At the same time, there was a movement emerging at the front for the rights of the Flemish within the military context of trench warfare. When their - incredibly moderate - demands were swept aside by the military and civil authorities, this Front Movement also radicalised.

With the activism in occupied Belgium and the Front Movement behind the IJzer, a nationalist wing emerged within the Flemish Movement and formulated the first political demands. The result was that the Flemish Movement emerged from the war with internal divisions. The pacifists largely tried beating the Flemish drum within the conservative Catholic Party, in the hope of pushing through a number of minor reforms. The activists were socially ostracised, and united in emotional rancour against the Belgium state. And the Front Movement set up its own party, the Front party, which attempted to reform Belgium by parliamentary means. It was not destined to survive for long. The interwar years were a

period of whirling ideological polarisation and the Front party splintered into different parties because of internal disputes, with attitude towards faith being the fault line. In the meantime, across the entire country electoral associations were splitting off from the Walloon-dominated conservative Catholic Party. It was chiefly young pro-Flemish Christian Democrats who were denied the opportunity to put candidates on the electoral lists in electable seats. They formed their own small parties, with a heavy Flemish slant.

As a result, towards the end of the 1920s every district had its own Flemish national party, and some even had several. A number were right wing-authoritarian, others were Christian Democrats, and others liberal (in Belgium this meant without religious association). There were countless unsuccessful attempts to unify. Under the pressure to come up with a common project, Flemish nationalism evolved increasingly into a New Order affiliation which would culminate in the collaboration during the Second World War.

The radicalisation in the 1930s and the ensuing derailment into fascism and national-socialism led many people to bury their heads in the sand or even actively participate in the national socialist crimes. At every level, that collaboration was a terrible mistake. It set the Flemish emancipation struggle back years, and tainted the legitimate Flemish demands with the stigma of Nazism. It is a dark chapter in history that Flemish nationalism must acknowledge and never forget. The history of each person is painted in both black and white, but it is primarily grey that coats the canvas. Those who look back should choose their words carefully. However, in our collective history as a community we need to have the courage to judge. We should not be afraid to say what was right and what was wrong. Nazism was criminally wrong. There is no need for any nuance there. And although questions may be asked about the post-war repression and the consequences of this on the lives of thousands of collaborators, this should never be an appeasement.

As a consequence of the senseless political adventure in collaboration, the whole Flemish Movement emerged badly limping from the war. However, in the post-war period it very rapidly became clear how vast the rift between both communities in this country had become. The dissatisfaction concerning settlement of the legal suppression, the frustration about the curtailment of the Flemish majority in the Royal Question and annoyance about the economic rebuilding policy shaped the context in which the Flemish struggle for autonomy was reborn. The newly founded CVP (Christian People's Party) tried to unite Flemish national action under its authority, but ultimately an independent Flemish National Party was set up. After a number of false starts, the Volksunie (People's Union) was launched on 21 November 1954.

In the early days the party only had limited success but developments in society soon changed that. The School Pact of 1958 ended the 100-year school war in Belgium, as a result of which many Flemish no longer felt pressured by the church to vote for CVP, thus releasing

a reservoir of Flemish votes. And in 1960 Gaston Eyskens presented the Unitary Law, which was designed to bring the country's rising debts under control by means of an increase in taxes and far-reaching austerity measures. Suddenly, the discrepancies between the Flemish and French economic interests were laid bare. The Walloon street protests against the Unitary Law paralysed the country and led to the fall of the government. Despite their democratic majority the Flemish lost out a second time after the Royal Question. That created the setting for a conflict which united Flemish opinion in one fowl swoop, with the ambition not to draw the short straw this time round: that was the fight for Leuven Vlaams.

Leuven Vlaams: the second crack in Belgium

With the establishment of the linguistic border in 1962, Flanders became a single language Dutch-speaking terrain. Although Belgium was consequently legally divided into clearly demarcated linguistic areas, the French-speaking elite continued to entertain the illusion that Flanders could be retained as a bilingual area - albeit purely sociologically. Moreover, the idea that the linguistic border could still be tinkered with - 'la très grande Bruxelles de l'avenir' - was kept alive. Leuven Vlaams smashed these illusions so forcibly to smithereens that the Walloons, staggering from the blow, relinquished the idea of the unitary state entirely. For the Walloons the struggle for Leuven Vlaams is still in the first instance the struggle for 'Walen Buiten' (Walloons Out): a slogan that shocked the French-speaking public so much - and still arouses feelings of upset - that it was quite a traumatic experience. As a consequence, Leuven Vlaams, after the introduction of plural voting, caused the second crack in Belgium.

After all, the state reforms began with Leuven Vlaams. One by one, the unitary parties fell apart and the fabric of the Belgian elite unravelled, not least because the Flemish elite also became a real entity following the events of Leuven Vlaams. The state reforms offered a solution to blocked mobility. Flanders had the chance to blossom culturally, with its own education, own cultural institutions and own political institutions. In return, the Walloons acquired the socio-economic autonomy with which they hoped to restore their failing industries.

But the state reforms generated a new paradigm: that of the blocked democracy. Two different economies emerged - each with their own institutions, media and public opinion - and they drifted apart. Decision-making became stuck in the political articulations of opposing demands, and that blocked democracy brought a blocked economy into the bargain. Because Flemish economic prosperity was skimmed off the top to finance an inefficient country. The upcoming Flemish elite became frustrated about the fact that they had to pay, but that their voice was not heard. Their demands in the area of security, migration or socio-economic reforms were not recognised and were even ignored, because a majority in the other democracy wanted to move in the other direction.

Leuven Vlaams also had tremendous consequences for the traditional Flemish Movement. Until that moment, generation after generation of talented and promising young Flemish people were driven to the Flemish Movement because of blocked mobility. The flamingant student movement recruited among Flemish students absurdly as a matter of course. Except for the French-speaking Flemish, all Flemish were pro-Flemish; the question was only how radical they were about the cause. That stopped after Leuven Vlaams. The recruitment power of the story of stunted Flemish social mobility disappeared. And with it the source that had provided Flemish protest organisations for generations with fresh blood, also gradually dried up.

Federalism paralyses Flemish Movement

After Leuven Vlaams the Volksunie reached its zenith. However, the close of the blocked mobility paradigm also had an effect on the party. The stunted social mobility of the Flemish was no longer the driving mobilising force behind the Flemish Movement; likewise it was no longer the engine behind the party. The party had to focus on other viewpoints that contributed to the blocked democracy and blocked economy, not least because an economic crisis was brewing. There was very little consensus within the party about such social and economic stances.

The Volksunie was anything but an ideological whole. When it was founded, the party had only developed one standpoint: federalism. The party sought to convert the Belgian unitary state into a country consisting of two states. Socially and economically the party attracted a range of opinions and viewpoints. It was for this reason that the party came under pressure after Leuven Vlaams. The programmatic and electoral expansion attempts only served to sharpen these substantive contradictions, contradictions that were untenable when the party needed to share power or had to nail its colours to the community and social mast. At that point the latent conflicts became acute.

The first ones to go under were those who saw the VU as a platform for radical right-wing philosophy in the tradition of the interbellum. Many of them had already bid an intellectual farewell to the party by the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. For those radical rightist supporters the participation in government and the failure of the Egmont Pact in 1978 formed the impetus for setting up their own - radical rights based - party. But these events didn't lie at the root of the schism, rather it was the changing social climate in Flanders after Leuven Vlaams. This was diametrically opposed to the ideal that was being promoted in these groups. With the establishment of the Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block) the radical right supporters gradually disappeared from the Volksunie. What remained was mainly held together by a desire to achieve federalism in Belgium.

In 1992 when a definitive step towards federalism was taken with the Saint Michael Agreement, the internal disputes within the party became existential. In the 1995 elections

the newly elected chairman, Bert Anciaux, suggested that if weren't able to convince 300,000 voters to vote for them, they should stop trying altogether. This goal was eventually achieved, but only just. After that, the Volksunie went into decline.

However, federalisation was a crisis not only for the Volksunie, but for the entire Flemish Movement. The first direct election of the Flemish Parliament in 1995 was the symbolic starting point of a Flanders that was tentatively taking on the air of a nation. For a significant proportion of the Flemish political, social and economic elite - a Flemish elite that emerged as a result of the Flemish emancipation process - the Flemish Movement had achieved its goal: Belgium had become a federal state. For many opinion makers, the fight for Flemish autonomy and Flemish nationalism were no more than folklore, replete of any political relevance. Moreover, Vlaams Blok, which coupled a traditional Flemish-national discourse with an anti-immigration rhetoric, was becoming more successful than the Volksunie. Those party-political disputes and the diminishing capacity to attract new militants paralysed the Flemish Movement at the turn of the century.

At the same time Flanders was enjoying great economic success. The economic structure of Flanders - small-scale, family businesses - meant that it was better suited to the new reality of a globalised world economy. Wallonia, on the other hand, struggled with the conversion of a post-industrial society into a service economy. The result was a very self-conscious - bordering on self-satisfied - Flemish attitude: "What we do ourselves, we do better." With this wealth in hand, Guy Verhofstadt brought about a community peace as federal prime minister at the turn of the century. But the deeper-lying problem continued to simmer beneath the surface. When the flow of cash stagnated and successive federal governments had to make policy decisions, the fundamental disputes rose to the surface again, and led to crises.

Two democracies blocking each other

Today, Belgium is no longer a democracy. It has divided into two democracies: a Flemish and a Walloon. Each has its own parties, its own media, its own social and political consensus and - as a result of federalisation - its own political institutions. This duality is further reinforced because the political ground flows of both democracies are so distinct. In Flanders the majority believes that the role of the government should be limited in both the economy and in society, that the market and the community should do their work and that the government should simply support that work. However, in French-speaking Belgium, the majority is convinced that the government should not only play an active role in the economy and society, but that it should also regulate both, or even control them.

After federal elections these two democracies come together to negotiate the formation of a federal government, and that causes friction. The result of this clash of visions is a policy that nobody wants and that achieves far too little, a policy whereby we muddle along and never

carry through structural reforms. The result is a country with incredibly high burden of taxation and debt level, public services that leave a lot to be desired and a state structure that is very hard to unravel. The two democracies not only block each other, they also block economic reforms.

The unitary nature of the Belgium state means that powers are never transferred in their totality, but always in bits and pieces. The country had to evolve from a unitary state into a federal state, while transparent and successful federal states made precisely the opposite move: from independent states to a federation. The logic of the state reforms is that the states have to make joint decisions about what they *don't* want to do together. If one of the partners disagrees, then they continue to do it together. Successful federal states turn this logic around: the states decide what they *do* want to do together. And if there is no consensus, then they continue to do it separately. This disastrous dynamic of state reforms has turned the country into a complicated and opaque mess with a proliferation of institutions and far too many politicians.

Moreover, the socio-economic levers - the lion's share of taxation and social security - remain in federal hands, which serves to increase the complexity even further. Taxation concerning a primary residence was for example transferred to the states, but not the taxation concerning a second residence. That's because the second residence is regarded as a pension, and therefore part of social security. In addition, the consequences of the transfer of powers have constantly been mitigated in their execution. A state reform is watered down three times: once during negotiations, once during the debate on legislative texts in parliament and once in the implementation decrees. How often have development aid and foreign trade been transferred to the states?

The constitutional complexity has created a situation in which everyone has power but nobody has responsibility. And the sixth state reform has only exacerbated the problem. Flanders, for example, was given power over roads but not road legislation, although Flanders is allowed to decide on speed limits - except on motorways - and install traffic signs - except on level crossings and military roads. Yet more absurd is the policy on elderly care, which was a Flemish power. Home care is Flemish, but medical assistance is federal. If a nurse comes to your house to apply a bandage, it is a Flemish nurse. If that same nurse drops by to give you an injection, it is a federal nurse. Care homes are in turn under Flemish jurisdiction, hospitals are federal. However, Flanders was given jurisdiction over the standardisation of hospitals, but not for financing them; that's still federal. Unless it's to do with financing the building or renovation of hospitals; then it's under Flemish jurisdiction. Who can make heads or tails of it? Who benefits from all this inefficient insanity?

A new paradigm: confederalism

The solution is not to negotiate yet another state reform. There's no longer any point. After all, this complexity has created an enormous democratic deficit. The Flemish majority is constitutionally locked by special majority laws, alarm bell procedures, conflicts of interest, conflicts of power, parity on various different levels, and the list goes on. All this means that the Walloons have an actual right of veto, with which they can exclude the Flemish from politics. And because both halves of the country start from two totally different positions, the policy never delivers any solutions, or only solutions that only suit one part of the country.

The state reforms have reached a state of perpetual motion. Every new state reform heralds the next one. We go from conflict to conflict, and in the end, the Flemish have to foot the bill. In contrast to the start of the state reforms in the period after Leuven Vlaams - when the Walloons themselves called for reforms - they have been in a comfortable position since the 1990s. Meanwhile, the Walloons have become 'demandeurs de rien'. They defend their status quo and can veto every reform. As such, time is on their side. They just have to wait, while the socio-economic clock keeps ticking on. Until the pressure becomes so great, and the Flemish parties back down for 'the highest feasible' option and agree to a state reform that delivers no real autonomy, but comes at a huge cost to the Flemish.

That is the lesson I learned after the 2010 elections, and on which I established the N-VA community strategy. Never again will I enter negotiations only to exit a few months later empty-handed. There's absolutely no point. We must ensure that the Walloons themselves become 'demandeurs'. The great progress of the past was made when both parts of the country wanted something. That means we need to transfer the pressure to the Walloons, and for that we will have to use the power of the federal level. By adopting a socio-economic reform policy, we want to whet the community appetite in French-speaking Belgium. Because whichever way you look at it, we will need a two thirds majority, with a majority in every language group.

That is a long-term strategy, it is high-risk and there is no guarantee of the outcome. But it is the most realistic strategy that we have for making the shift to a new paradigm. Because, as I have said, I won't ever settle for a state reform again. If we are going to negotiate for more autonomy, then it will be in order to obtain a policy that is more relevant to our citizens, that gives us a cheaper and more efficient government, that pacifies the community problems and ensures that there are fewer institutions, fewer parliaments, fewer politicians and a better working government. And we can do that if we convert the Belgian federal state into a confederate state.

With confederalism there are still two states, Flanders and Wallonia, which have responsibility for all person and land-related issues. Brussels Capital Region acquires all land-related powers and powers of the current 19 municipalities and OCMWs, and the 6 police

zones. For the community matters every resident in Brussels is free to choose - regardless of language or origin - between Flanders and Wallonia. People living in Brussels have the choice between the Flemish or Walloon package for personal taxation, social security system, social assistance, youth protection, migration and citizenship and voting rights for the Flemish or Walloon parliament. This choice is not definitive, you can change after a waiting period.

The confederation only has the powers that are explicitly allocated by the states. In our blueprint this means defence, security, finances and foreign affairs. There is still a Belgian parliament, but we get rid of the Senate and reduce the number of MPs to 50, elected equally from the Flemish and Walloon parliament. The Belgian government consists of 4 full-time ministers and 2 state ministers each with only one advisory vote, and also jointly represented. In the Belgian Council there is permanent consultation between the prime ministers of Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels and the German-speaking territory, while in thematic minister councils, all the responsible state ministers meet to discuss a well-defined theme. In the Ministry Council of Agriculture, for instance, all state ministers for agriculture will come together. The aim of this is to prevent conflicts of interest and to coordinate standpoints at international fora. The monarchy exists purely for protocol and is completely transparent.

In the area of financing, Flanders and Wallonia determine and collect all resources from the person-related powers: personal taxation, inheritance and gift taxes, property tax and taxes equivalent to income tax. Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels determine and collect resources from land-related powers such as business taxation, gift tax and property tax. The confederation is financed by VAT and excise duties for the payment of the mandatory European contribution, interest costs and the repayment of government debt and the solidarity between the states.

And of course we make sure, as in Germany, that there is an objective, measurable, transparent and empowering solidarity mechanism. The transfers themselves are not the problem. The problem is that transfers have to be transparent, need a clear goal and must encourage improvements. That is not the case with Belgian transfers. The transfers are not transparent, they are complex and do not stimulate a region to do better economically. Because then their income is cut. Good policy is not rewarded, but punished.

Towards the future

The struggle for nationalism that occurred before Leuven Vlaams, which was primarily occupied with fistfights and cultural humiliation, lives on in an almost fossilised form. However, it is no longer the driving force behind Flemish self-awareness or the Flemish fight for autonomy. And yet, the Flemish Movement is far from dead; it has emerged in a new guise.

Flemish nationalism is - like every kind of nationalism - not an ideology. An ideology is a systematic and coherent interpretation of reality. Nationalism is unmistakably an interpretation of reality, but it is not systematic, and often is not coherent either. That sounds abstract, but ask yourself the following question: what is the human image of nationalism? Or what does nationalism think about the division of wealth? How about the role of the state? There is no clear answer to these questions.

However great the differences between socialists across borders, they at least share a number of very broad basic principles. Nationalists do not. In Europe you will find nationalists of every shape and size, from extreme right to extreme left and everything in between; from hardened 'state nationalists' to the most passionate 'folk nationalists' and even new, European nationalists of the Verhofstadt variety.

According to philosopher and sociologist Ernest Gellner, nationalism is the principle that there should be a certain degree of convergence between the political structures and the community to which people belong. The degree of convergence strived for may differ: this ranges from cultural autonomy, decentralisation, federalism, confederalism, up to and including an independent state. However, nationalism says nothing about the social ideas that a national movement uses to make its message appealing to the public.

If a nationalist movement wants to convince the people, then - as historian Miroslav Hroch said - it must provide a translation of the socio-economic needs of that population. And those differences according to the social, economic and historical context in which that population lives. It is for this reason that nationalists differ from each other in their motivations and objectives. People's nationalists in the Spanish regions are often left-wing because they had to fight against the fascist state of Franco; while Breton nationalism has more of a right-wing flavour because they had to fight against the Republican unitary state.

Flemish nationalism is a successful political movement today precisely because it has managed to translate those socio-economic needs. Like no other, Flemish nationalism understands that the blocked Belgian democracy is responsible for blocked economic progress. Flemish nationalism is alive and kicking because it is the interpretation of the social, economic and cultural desires of a voter that with every successive election becomes increasingly disillusioned about an obstructed democracy. It is Flemish nationalism that poses the pertinent question to the blocked democracy that has evolved into a blocked economy.

Every reform that the Flemish Movement has ever demanded has finally been implemented. Even though it initially seemed impossible or unrealistic...until it happened. This is how the institutional history of Flanders was written. And that will be no different with

confederalism. Nothing can stand in the way of an idea whose time has come. The next step that Flanders must take is the step to confederalism.

Not only in the interests of the Flemish, but also in the interest of the French-speaking community. Good agreements make the best neighbours. It is in Flanders' interests to cooperate well with its nearest neighbour and trading partner. And that can be done if we stop blocking each other, and give each other the freedom to make our own choices, choices that the voters of both democracies demand and desire.

The aim of Flemish nationalism today is not to humiliate the Walloons or torment them. No, the engine of modern Flemish nationalism is the fight for democratic and effective control for the Flemish *and* for the Walloons.