

# Belgian government suffers heavy losses in general election

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16 June 1999

On Sunday, a political earthquake hit Belgium when simultaneous elections were held for the regional, federal and European parliaments. The greatest shocks were felt at the federal level. Christian Democrat Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene announced his resignation from office and as party leader, ending the eight-year coalition with the Social Democrats, following both parties' disastrous showing at the polls. If the Christian Democrats go into opposition, as Dehaene hinted they might, this would end more than 40 years in office.

The Belgian government structure is extremely complex, in an attempt to strike a balance between contending political and linguistic interests. The debacle suffered by the Christian and Social Democrats in the federal vote was also reflected in the elections to Belgium's three regional legislatures in French-speaking Wallonia, Dutch-speaking Flanders and the bilingual capital, Brussels, where the parties of national government also fared badly.

Although the fall in the national vote for Dehaene's *Christelijke Volkspartij* (CVP—Christian Peoples Party) was relatively small—down from 17.2 to 14 percent—this was sufficient to push it into second place. The CVP has been central to Belgian politics for over 40 years and has formed the core of every coalition government, both at the federal and state level. Overall they have lost a quarter of their seats.

The Social Democrats, coalition partners in Dehaene's federal government, lost votes heavily. The combined losses of the Christian and Social Democrats amount to 10 percent at both the federal and state level. In some Flemish-speaking CVP strongholds, its vote dropped by over 10 percent and it only narrowly kept its place as the strongest party in the Flanders legislature.

The immediate cause for the debacle was the scandal

over the revelation that Belgian farms had been using animal feeds contaminated with dioxin, a cancer-forming agent. This information had been kept secret for months, which enraged Belgian consumers and led to an export ban on a wide range of agricultural products and processed foods. The ministers of Health and Agriculture were forced to resign, but this failed to stem popular outrage.

Despite this, an almost cavalier indifference developed inside the leading circles of the Dehaene government preceding the election. The Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* writes, "From the party leadership of the Flemish CVP can now be heard the statement that it would only have needed another few days to get the dioxin matter under control."

CVP President Van Peel is reported to have said that their poor election result was because voters were ungrateful and had allowed their panic (concerning the dioxin scandal) to make them forget the numerous services provided by the government. On the day before the elections, the CVP arrogantly posed the choice to the electorate: "with or without Dehaene?" Their reply is now clearly "without".

The dioxin scandal was only the last in a long line that has rocked the government coalition over the past years. In 1995, NATO Secretary General Willy Claes, a member of the Socialist Party and former Belgian economics minister, was forced to resign over corruption in the Agusta helicopter scandal. This was followed by the case of Marc Dutroux a notorious paedophile and child murderer, which uncovered a sordid picture of judicial and political corruption implicating the highest levels of Belgian society. The general outrage with the political system this produced found its expression in a series of mass "white marches" (so-called because of the white ribbons

participants wore in memory of Dutroux's victims).

The French and Dutch-speaking Liberals elevation to first place nationally was more by default than due to the modest increases in their vote.

The biggest winners were ECOLO, the French-speaking Greens, and their Flemish counterparts AGALEV, whose vote doubled in the European elections and rose significantly in the national and regional polls. The Greens are now the third strongest party in the federal parliament, and second in Brussels.

The fascist Vlaams Blok, who advocate Flemish separatism and the repatriation of all immigrants, also saw their vote increase. In some urban districts in Flanders they were the largest party, with a 20 or 25 percent share. However, the breakthrough they had hoped for in Brussels did not materialise.

Guy Verhofstadt, the Liberal leader, could be called upon to try and form the next government. This is always a protracted process and took 78 days last time. Creating a working federal coalition without the CVP will be even more difficult, as the Liberals have shown little desire for a coalition with the Greens or Social Democrats. If the CVP is included, this may only further hasten their demise if voters continue to give them the cold shoulder and some of their deputies favour a “time in the wilderness”.

Whatever the final composition, the period ahead will be marked by instability and division. Despite the insistence of all the other bourgeois parties to maintain their *cordon sanitaire* and exclude the Vlaams Blok from holding office, increased support for Flemish separation from the poorer south of the country also points to stormy times ahead.



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