

Bye bye Belgium? - Print Version - International Herald Tribune
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Wednesday, December 20, 2006

On Wednesday night last week, Belgium's French-speaking public television network created a stir with a surprise 90-minute broadcast that began with a news flash that Flanders had declared independence and that the Belgian state was breaking apart. The broadcast was inspired by Orson Welles's 1938 radio adaptation of H.G. Wells's "War of the Worlds," but touched upon a possibility less fanciful than an invasion from Mars. For the reality is that Belgium's days as a united nation may indeed be numbered.

Belgium only became a nation in 1830 and its union of Dutch-speaking Flemings in the north and French-speaking Walloons in south was never a love match. Instead, it was a marriage arranged by the great powers bent on creating a neutral buffer state.

Although Flemings always outnumbered French- speakers, Francophone Belgians dominated the new country economically, culturally and politically. French was the sole official language. The Francophone Belgian elite (which included the Flemish bourgeoisie) viewed the Flemish majority who could not speak proper French as backward peasants, suited to manual labor but little else. There was rampant social and economic discrimination.

A Flemish movement eventually emerged, pressing for language and cultural rights. In the 1930s, legislation established a regime of dual monolingualism based on a language frontier that divides the country today. In Flanders, Dutch is the only official language; in the Walloon region, French. Only Brussels is officially bilingual.

For most of Belgium's history, Wallonia was much richer than rural Flanders, and the country had a strong unitary parliamentary government that centralized power and authority. Neither is any longer true. Today the per capita gross domestic product of Flanders exceeds those of Germany, France and Britain, while that of the Walloon region is similar to the level of the poorer regions in France and Italy.

Since 1970, five constitutional reforms have radically transformed the government into a federal structure of mind-boggling complexity. This new structure both reflects and reinforces the organization of political, social and cultural life on the basis of language.

The good news is that these changes came about without any bloodshed or mass violence. The bad news is that the new structure has exacerbated centrifugal forces. Belgium is now organized entirely along language lines. There is no political party, newspaper, radio or television station that operates in both Flanders and Wallonia. Residential and workplace segregation is pervasive. The terms of the debate over demands for Flemish independence were crystallized by a "Manifesto for an Independent Flanders Within Europe" issued at the end of 2005. Neither shrill nor highly rhetorical, it was not the product of the Vlaams Belang, a xenophobic extreme right-wing Flemish nationalist party that has long

called for Flemish independence, but of 65 members of the Flemish business and academic establishment.

The manifesto argues that Flanders and Wallonia have divergent needs and goals because of profound political, economic, social and cultural differences. It claims the present federal structure, with antimajoritarian restrictions, leads to bad compromises at the national level and "exorbitant and inefficient" financial transfers from Flanders to Wallonia and Brussels.

Most Flemings probably agree with the manifesto's analysis but are not ready to press for Flemish independence. Polls suggest a substantial majority in Flanders would favor transferring still more authority to the regions; many would create a confederal state, with very limited powers at the national level. Brussels probably provides the most important glue that may hold the nation together, at least for a while. Although Brussels is located within Flanders, it is highly unlikely that a majority of this overwhelming Francophone city would elect to become part of a new Flemish state.

Like a father who never files for divorce because he is unwilling to give up custody of a child, many Flemings ? who might otherwise favor independence ? would, we suspect, prefer to stay in an unsatisfying Belgian marriage, where the spouses are leading separate lives, than give up Brussels.

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