

**„The paradox of consociational federalism in Belgium: source of inspiration
or of despair?“**

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Thank you very much, it is a pleasure to be with you. I am very pleased to contribute to this reflection, with lots of modesty. I will present you with some insights from Belgium, less as a solution and more as an inspiration, hopefully.

I would like to start with a dilemma. Often, federalism and in particular consociational federalism are supposed to be a solution for a divided societies, but it is also pretty much of a despair in many cases because if we take consociational part – briefly defined as an accommodation of differences by keeping differences apart – we know that eventually it might increase the differences, which is, of course, tricky (Erk & Anderson, 2009). Federalism more generally, which is typically a mix of shared-rule and self-rule (Elazar, 1987) experiences the same tension, especially in “holding-together” federalism (Stepan, 1999). It is therefore tricky to deal with such context. And in Belgium we have experienced this dilemma (Reuchamps, Sinardet, Dodeigne, & Caluwaerts, 2017). This is because Belgium is a bipolar country, with bipolar dynamics with lots of complexity (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014a, 2020). In several instances, Belgium and Bosnia and Herzegovina are very similar, not only because they share the “B” of their name, but because of their small

number of constituent units and their similar consociational features (Niessen, Reuchamps, Stjepanović, & Habra, 2020).

What we can see when looking at consociational federalism it is that it's an elite business; it's elite-based decision-making; it's elites who are taking care of important decisions (Lijphart, 1977). This can be source of despair and perhaps a source of inspiration could possibly be a bigger role for citizens. Would it be via referendum? If we look at the experience with referendums in Belgium, the answer would be not really (Gaudin, Jacquet, Pilet, & Reuchamps, 2018a, 2018b). In Belgium there was a pan-country popular consultation in 1950's that led to political turmoil. Since then there is much reluctance to move towards more direct democracy. Thus maybe in the future it will be a solution, but at this stage it doesn't seem likely. Hence, another a source of inspiration can be found is what become known as a deliberative democracy (Van Damme, Jacquet, Schifano, & Reuchamps, 2017). Let me explained, in this short presentation, how Belgium can be a source of inspiration.

Before turning to this, we need to sketch how it would look like. There are indeed different forms of participation and deliberation (Suiter & Reuchamps, 2016). It could be using sortition to compose a chamber of representatives; it could be a mixed chamber, composed of randomly selected citizens and elected citizens; it could also be local citizens' councils or assemblies . There is a continuum of possibilities from advisory board of citizens to citizen-based decision-making (Reuchamps, 2013).

The following question is whether citizens want to give more power to citizens (Caluwaerts, Biard, Jacquet, & Reuchamps, 2018). And what about current elected representatives, i.e. those who are actually in power? We surveyed, in Belgium, both citizens and elected representatives and we got interesting result (Jacquet, Niessen,

& Reuchamps, 2020; Vandamme, Jacquet, Niessen, Pitseys, & Reuchamps, 2018). Quite a few people, including representatives, are quite willing to give the word to citizens, the floor to citizens, as long as it remains an advisory role. Does it make a difference if we think such role at the local level? Well, most elected representatives are against (Caluwaerts, Kern, Reuchamps, & Valcke, 2020), but also few citizens would like to actively participate as a councillor. Yet, overall, there is a willingness to have more citizen participation and deliberation. In Belgium, the G1000 was an important milestone in 2011-2012 (Reuchamps, Caluwaerts, et al., 2017).

The G1000 was a process in three steps. The first step was agenda setting: receiving lots of ideas online. This agenda-setting function led to the citizens' summit, which is the second step. The aim of the citizens' summit was to bring one thousand citizens from all parts of Belgium together for a one-day deliberation. But of course, when you do such a big brainstorming with so many people, you really can't go deep with the recommendations, and so came the third step, an in-depth elaboration of some of the proposals that were made by the citizens at the summit. This whole process was actually implemented in Belgium ten years ago (G1000, 2012).

But the question is: does it work, does it change anything? And the first elements I would like to share is when we look at the citizens who participated in this, we asked them before and after do they feel that citizens should take part in political decision and they said yes and actually more so after than before (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018). When we asked them six years later, in 2017, they still confirmed that they believe it is a good idea.

But let also look at the general public. Indeed those who participated were few people, and hence what about all the citizens? Well, when we ask people who did not participate, we still find that people favour citizen participation (Jacquet,

Moskovic, Caluwaerts, & Reuchamps, 2016; Jacquet et al., 2020; Jacquet & Reuchamps, 2018).

Another interesting finding for the topic of today is this one: at the G1000 citizen's summit there were three types of tables. Some tables were Dutch-speaking only, others were French-speaking only, and then you had a third type of tables where, both languages being spoken at the table with simultaneous translation. What is interesting to see is that the perception of the other group (i.e. the other language group) decreased at the unilingual tables, but stayed the same in the tables where the two groups were present (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014b). This is an important finding for deliberation in divided societies. Indeed, one could actually expect that if you bring together different linguistic groups or different religious groups, they would actually fight with one another and the perception of the other group would decrease. But this experiment from Belgium demonstrates it is actually not the case. Bringing the people in contact with one another, at least in the case of G1000, meant that the perception of the other group remained equal, whereas at unilingual tables the opinion toward the other group went down.

Yet, these deliberative experiments were one-shot events. Hence their influence might be quite limited. In order to counteract this, Belgium provides another source of inspiration. One could indeed imagine a system where citizens are involved in the decision-making process more permanently. Of course, it would be a bit more complex, but let me explain how the German-speaking Community (known as Ostbelgien) in Eastern Belgium does it. As you might know, the German-speaking Community is a very small substate of Belgium (Bouhon, Niessen, & Reuchamps, 2015), but despite its small size, it is a region with legislative powers. The Parliament set up a permanent citizen dialogue, which is a world première (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2019, 2020). At the core of this dialogue, you have the

Citizen Council . It is made of 24 randomly selected citizens, age of 16+, who live in the German-speaking community, selected for a period of 18 months with a rotation of every 6 months. And what can these citizens do? Well, they can actually organize and decide the topics for Citizen Assemblies, made also of randomly selected citizens, who will meet and discuss for three, four, five days and make propositions to the Parliament and the Government. This example shows that in a region it is possible also to imagine a permanent form of citizen participation via a body that is actually composed by citizens who are randomly selected.

Another source of inspiration from Belgium is, what we call, mixed deliberative committees, and this is also fairly new. Two regions of Belgium, the Region of Brussels-Capital and the Region of Wallonia, decided on the following (Reuchamps, 2020; Vrydagh, Bottin, Reuchamps, Bouhon, & Devillers, 2021). First, the Parliament does a permanent call for propositions or topics that needs to be discussed. Then, and this is the main element of the design, these topics are discussed by so-called deliberative committees, made of MPs, $\frac{1}{4}$ (in Brussels, 15 MPs), plus $\frac{3}{4}$ citizens (45 citizens). What we have here are elected politicians and randomly selected citizens who will be discussing together. What they do is have a common deliberation and also they write together recommendations, whose the follow-up is done by the same parliamentary committee. This means that MPs who are part of this committee can actually prepare bills with citizens. So the work of citizens and MPs could eventually become a law. On top of this design, one could imagine that one day a popular regional consultation would be set up to confirm such law prepared by mixed deliberative committees.

As a conclusion, the title of this short presentation is “The paradox of consociational federalism in Belgium: source of inspiration or of despair?” As I sought to briefly explore it, my conclusion is that it is both. Above all, and even in

divided societies, there is potential in institutionalizing deliberative democracy, like the German-speaking model, but also in bringing together elected citizens and randomly selected citizens, such as in the mixed deliberative committees.

Thank you very much.

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