Towards the end of ethnic parties in the capital of Europe?

You may not have noticed it, but something quite bizarre happened for the first time in Brussels during the recent electoral campaign. Instead of sticking to their own turf, all the main Flemish parties enthusiastically campaigned in French as well as in Dutch.

Why is this bizarre? Since the 1970s, Belgium's political system has consisted of two distinct sets of parties competing for two linguistically distinct electorates under a system of proportional representation. At the regional elections, the Flemish parties field candidates in Flanders and in the Dutch-language electoral college of the Brussels Region. Out of the 89 seats in the Brussels regional Parliament, 17 are allocated to politicians from Flemish parties. The Francophone candidates field candidates in Wallonia and in Brussels' French-language college, which is composed of the remaining 72 seats. On polling day, Brussels citizens have to cast their vote for one of these two colleges. In the past, only the Flemish extreme right party Vlaams Belang tried to attract Francophone votes in Brussels. Now practically all Flemish parties do.

And indeed why not? If native speakers of Turkish, Arabic or Lingala (all conspicuously present on the electoral lists of several parties) bothered to canvass only among people who shared their mother tongue, most Belgians would express great concern. But if they disapprove of this sort of 'ethnic' vote, why are they so complacent when their own two national ethnic groups are involved? Why not applaud when they see Flemish candidates taking the trouble to woo...

Philippe Van Parijs
UCLouvain and Harvard University

Why not applaud Flemish candidates who woo French-speaking voters, or vice versa?
the French-speaking voters, or vice versa? In Flanders, the
Flemish Socialist party, for example, wants to gather all
those who share Socialist views. The Francophone Socialist
party PS tries to do the same in Wallonia. In Flanders and
Wallonia, those parties are not ethnic parties. In Brussels,
they are.

Is there any prospect of this changing? It seems so. Inspired
by the December 2000 trilingual appeal signed by 10,000
Brussels (Nous existons/nou

 Brussels citizens’ Forum recently held a
series of well attended talks on
the main challenges faced by the
city (www.citoyennetudebruss
elles.be). At the closing plenary
session, the leaders of the four
most significant parties from
each language group were asked
the following question: “You are
standing next to someone who
lives in the same city and belongs
to the same political family as yourself. And yet you do not
belong to the same political party. Don’t you think it would
be better if you did?”

Settle on a common vision of the city

The two Green parties mustered the most enthusiasm; their
party manifesto for the regional elections was the same, and
the constraint of the separate electoral colleges pre
vented them from standing together. While emphasising
that they had stood on common lists for municipal elections,
the two Christian Democrat leaders, Steven Vanackere and
Benoit Cerenne, were the least enthusiastic, owing to their
divergences on linguistically sensitive issues. The Socialist
leaders Charles Pique and Pascal Smet, and the Liberal
leaders Armand De Decker and Sven Gatz fell somewhere
in between. In their view, a common ideology or a common
vision of the future of the city, and not a common native lan
guage, should gather Brussels’ citizens into the same party; and
at least some of them did not rule out that this would come to
prevail before the end of their political careers.

Should we conclude that Brussels’ ethnic parties are on
the way out? This would be premature. Words do not always
easily convert into deeds, especially when anticipated struc
tures stand in the way, like those surrealistic electoral colleges
which are meant to keep our two Belgian ethnic groups neatly
separate in a city where 56 percent of the residents are either
foreign nationals or of recent foreign origin. What we need
and what the polls show most Brussels’ want is to modify the
electoral system to allow bilingual lists. This is perfectly
feasible while preserving a guaranteed representation for the
minority of Dutch-speakers.

Introduce universal suffrage

Even more crucial than the merger of the two ethnic colleges
is the introduction of universal suffrage. Non-Belgians cannot
vote at regional elections. That is not too serious in Flanders
where fewer than 6 percent are foreign citizens, and hardly
more serious in Wallonia where it’s 9 percent. But it has
become a major democratic deficit in Brussels where foreign
citizens now approach 30 percent of the officially registered
population, most of them from other European countries.

All EU citizens living in Scotland can vote for the Scottish
Assembly. But for the parliament of the capital of the Europe,
only citizens of one of its member states are entitled to vote.
Given that the Brussels’ Region only comprises a city, this
situation is in gross contradiction with the spirit of the Treaty
of Amsterdam, which gives every EU citizen the right to vote in local
elections. It discredits Brussels’ claim of being Europe’s capital.
And it works against the interest of the Brussels Region, which should
take full advantage of the skills and goodwill of all its permanent resi
dents instead of reducing some of them to second-class citizens.

Perhaps the Belgian presidency will provide a good opportunity to put an end to this blan
tant anomaly. Once this is done, it will not take long before Brussels’ citizens of all origins — be that Polish or Portuguese,
Flemish or Wallonian, Moroccans or Swedes — but with similar
political convictions will band together in truly Brussels par
ties. Only then will we be freed from what looks like a petty
rivalry between two pathetic tribes doomed by fear and
distrust, one dreaming of Francophone supremacy, the other
of Flemish re-conquest. Only then will the Brussels Region
have escaped from the destructive grip of bi-communitaire
Belgium in which too many of its politicians are still caught.
Twenty years after the creation of the Region, there are now
many signs that a new beginning is on the horizon.