Brussels: We the People

Philippe VAN PARIJS,
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Where were you in 1989?
I was living in Louvain-la-Neuve and preparing to spend a year in Florence.

**Why do you think the creation of the Brussels Region 25 years ago was important?**
For two reasons. First, it enabled Brusselers to take decisions that are best left to Brusselers. This had the effect of helping Brussels become more of a place where people take pleasure in living and less of a space which residents of Flanders and Wallonia need to cross as fast as they can to reach their offices and rush back home. Secondly, the operation of democratic institutions at the Brussels level helped strengthen a distinct Brussels identity, slowly but irreversibly. This identity could less than ever be cemented by common origins, a common religion or a common language. It could only emerge from the need to take decisions together and thereby shape a common future.

**How do you think Brussels compares to satellite European cities?**
What is peculiar to Brussels, especially in combination, is the amount of green and the amount of intellectual activity. The amount of green, because the Forêt de Soignes occupies a big chunk of the city and because of the number of gardens enshrined in housing blocks. Intellectual activity because of the massive presence of higher
education — the ULB, the VUB, St Louis, big segments of the UCL and the KU Leuven, etc. — but no less because of the presence of the EU institutions and all it attracts in terms of lobbies, think tanks, conferences, etc.

What should Brussels be known for?
For what it is. The unloved capital city of a strange country whose majority language is known by less than a quarter of the residents of its capital. And the unexpected capital city of an even stranger and totally unprecedented political entity which now boasts over half a billion citizens.

What could Brussels improve?
Lots of things. For a start, it should reconquer, one by one, its public spaces, shift people out of their cars onto their bikes, reduce plane traffic above its roofs, make it a pleasure to walk and play in its streets, encourage people to talk to each other and enable them to do so by making them far more multilingual than they are.

What frustrates you the most about Brussels?
How little is done to use the amazing local linguistic wealth in order to make all Brusselsers competent in French, Dutch and English.

How, if at all, does Brussels influence you?
I was born and grew up in Brussels. Afterwards, I lived in Leuven, in England and the US, in Germany and Italy, and above all in Louvain-la-Neuve. But everywhere I felt in exile. When the opportunity arose fifteen years ago, I rushed back to my roots. I suppose this counts as “influence”.

What don't you understand about Brussels?
How it more or less manages to cope with the dramatic change in population it underwent in the last decade. In ten years it lost, in net terms, 140,000 people to the rest of Belgium, mostly “Belgo-Belges”. This was far more than compensated by 240,000 immigrants, again in net terms, arriving straight from abroad, and by a net excess of births over deaths of 80,000 (compared to 60,000 in the whole of Wallonia), mostly in the poorer, immigrant areas of the city. For a city with less than a million inhabitants at the turn of the century, this is a storm that should have shattered it. It has not — so far. Amazing.

What Brussels neighbourhood best epitomises the city?
Matonge.

What Brussels neighbourhood holds the most potential?
The canal area.

If it were up to you, who would you name as Mayor of Brussels?
The current mayor, aptly named Mayeur, must not leave his seat until he has done what he promised to do, namely turn the Place de la Bourse and adjacent lanes into a
pedestrian area. If he does this, as he said he would by the end of this legislature, he will have made the heart of our city a place we can start being proud of. If he does this, he will deserve (after his death) having his name featuring next to his predecessors Anspach, de Brouckère and Fontainas. With the stock exchange automated out of existence, the Place de la Bourse can then be called Place Mayeur.

Name three Brussels personalities that embody the city's spirit
Vincent Kompany, Dyab Abou Jahjah, Philippe de Marnix de Ste Aldegonde.

Name three Brussels places that characterises the Brussels landscape
Basilique de Koekelberg, Rond-Point Schuman, Place Bethléem.

List one memorable moment which marks your recollection/your life in Brussels
When the Picnic the Streets movement sat down in the middle of Boulevard Anspach sharp at noon on 10 June 2012.