

Belgium

Representation Tested

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Introduction

1

BELGIUM IS A COMPLEX COUNTRY. Some people even joke about how, since the last constitutional reforms which turned Belgium into a complicated federation, the country has ceased to be. The federal structure of Belgium is the answer to the sharp socio-cultural difference between the French-speaking (Walloon) community and the Dutch-speaking (Flemish) community. This socio-cultural difference, which has led to serious political and social unrest only a few decades ago, still smoulders beneath the surface of present-day political life and makes a federal government structure necessary. Apart from the Flemish-Walloon controversy, the presence of a small German-speaking community on the eastern border and the bi-lingual status of Brussels, the capital of Belgium, add to the complexity.

It is not our intention to discuss the nature of Belgian federalism here. However, the federal nature of the Belgian governmental system, and the underlying cultural differences are not without consequences for our research. Following the lines of Peters and Loughlin, we selected Belgium as one of the countries with a continental European state tradition. But this description does not fit Belgium as a whole. It is the Flemish part of the country that is supposed to fit this tradition best. For this reason, we focus on Flanders, where we studied Antwerp and Genk.

These two very dissimilar cities, where our respondents described very different situations, experiences and policies, will be portrayed separately in this chapter. The result of this chapter will therefore not be an integrated description of Belgium, but rather one of two specific cases.

But first, we will pay some attention to more general characteristics of Belgian local government.

Local government in Belgium 2

State tradition and the system of sub-national government 2.1

In the last decades, Belgium's political structure has changed rapidly. Four institutional reforms have taken place, in 1970, 1980, 1988/1989 and 1993/1994. These changes have transformed Belgium into the federal state it is today (Belgian Government, 2000).

The first change of the structure of the state concerned the creation of the three Cultural Communities in 1970, which can be considered the beginning of the reform process. The 1970 reform was the result of a number of social movements: the strive for cultural autonomy by the Flemish, for a separate region by the Walloons, and for economic autonomy for Walloon provinces and for a French-speaking Community for Brussels (OECD, 1997:106). The creation of the Communities meant greater autonomy regarding cultural matters, although the competency of the communities was still limited. This reform also marked the beginning of the creation of the Regions with their own territory for activities, in particular at the economic level. In the second Constitutional reform (1980) each communities was given its own council (parliament) and government. Also, the Flemish and Walloon Regions were established, each with their own council and government.

The third reform in 1988/1989 saw the establishment of the Brussels-Capital Region, also with its own council, which decides about regulations, as well as a government with executive, regulatory powers. The competency of both the Communities and the Regions was extended. The Communities got responsibilities regarding education, while the Regions were given more responsibilities in transport and public works (OECD, 1997:106).

In 1993/1994, reforms assigned the Communities and Regions their current competency. On 14 July 1993, the Belgium Parliament concluded the reforms with Belgium emerging as a Federal State and with a Constitution that began with the following statement (translation: HD/AR): “Belgium is a federal state, composed of communities and regions” (translation: HD/AR).

Belgium has a complex multi-tier system of government. At the highest level, the so-called federate level, we find the federal government, together with the regions and communities. The mid-level is formed by the provinces. The lowest level consists of the municipalities (OECD, 1992: 37).

Belgium is divided into 10 provinces. Each province has the responsibility to look after provincial interests. This is a substantial task, since it can include everything that is not reserved for the federal state, the communities and the regions. A significant exception is the Brussels Region. This region does not fall under the jurisdiction of any province. Provinces have considerable competency in the policy sectors of education, social and cultural infrastructure, which include training centres, rest homes, preventive medicine and social policy. Other sectors they are involved in are the environment, roads and waterways, economics, transport, public works, housing, language usage and assistance to individuals (the latter which includes disability pensions, entrepreneurial assistance, and the like). This suggests there is a provincial layer with quite substantial tasks, which are not only supervisory, but also concern active formation and implementation of policies. In addition to this, provinces have the task to certify the results of municipal elections, to recommend of appellate court counsellors and associate justices of courts of first instance, and to adjust certain territorial boundaries (OECD, 1997:100).

Local government tasks

2.2

Municipalities existed long before Belgium became an independent state. In 1830, there were approximately 2,739 municipalities. Amalgamations have reduced this number to 589 municipalities, of which there are 262 in the Walloon Region, 308 in the Flemish Region and 19 in the Brussels-Capital Region (OECD, 1997:95). On average, municipalities have 16,500 inhabitants. Only 8 municipalities count more than 100,000 inhabitants. Examples of the latter are Antwerp, Brussels, Charleroi and Namur.

In 1976 and 1988 legal and constitutional measures were taken, that realised 'municipal autonomy' in Belgium and gave the local authorities more opportunity to improve local governance and local administration. This does not imply that the Council can now do whatever it wants to do, nor that municipalities are sovereign. Municipalities remain under the supervision of the federal state, the regions, the communities and the provinces (Belgian Government, 2000).

The competence of the municipalities is wide-ranging and covers every issue that concerns the collective interest of the local community. In theory, it could be stated that the municipality can do anything that has not been prohibited by the federal state, the communities, the regions and the provinces. In practice, the municipalities are responsible for public works, social assistance, maintaining law and order, housing, and education (OECD, 1997:100; OECD, 1992:46, Belgian Government, 2000). During our interviews, however, some of our respondents indicated some doubt as to the actual level of autonomy, which they considered to be less comprehensive than the level of autonomy of Dutch or Scandinavian municipalities. In addition, the higher levels of government can also charge municipalities with other tasks such as the use of the police force and the keeping of population registers.

In reality, the decentralisation of tasks to local governments is often coupled with supervision. Whenever the federal or regional levels of government consider certain issues relevant to national or regional interests they may intervene. Such control by higher levels of government is carried out through 'administrative supervision'. This supervision is meant to prevent contradictions between policies generated at different levels of government. In 1994, the authority to organise and exercise administrative supervision was transferred from the federal state to the regions. The federal state and the community are now allowed to intervene only in exceptional circumstances (OECD, 1997:99).

The local political and administrative structure

2.3

Each municipality is governed by a directly elected municipal council. The elections take place according to a system of proportional representation every six years. It is interesting to observe that Belgium still has a compulsory voting system; as a result, voter turnout is very high. The size of the council varies between a minimum of 7 and a maximum of 55 members, depending on the size of the municipality. In the cities we visited, Genk and Antwerp, national parties (i.e.

their Flemish branches) dominate the local campaigns. This seems to be the general situation in Belgium.

The municipal council chooses from among its members an executive body, consisting of a mayor and some aldermen. The mayor (usually the leader of the largest party in the council) is chosen by the council and formally appointed by the King. He represents the central government. The selection of aldermen is dependent on the relative size of the parties on the council. It is normal that the Board of Mayor and Aldermen can count on a workable majority in the council. Usually coalitions are needed to form such a majority.

The Board of Mayor and Aldermen is the strongest political player in most Belgian communities. Our interviews made clear that this board, which meets frequently and consists of full-time politicians (at least in the somewhat bigger cities), is the centre of political decision-making, while the council, meeting on a less frequent basis and consisting of 'amateur-politicians', usually limits itself to discussing policy proposals of the board, monitoring the board's executive acts, and addressing general topics. Decision-making by the council usually results in accepting the board's proposals (the board has a majority in the council). This dominance of the executive over the representative body is, of course, not typical of Belgium and can be found in many modern democracies.

To complete the picture, the local council is advised by a number of committees of mixed composition, half of the members of which belong to the council itself and the other half which represent organised society (such as local organisations for sport, culture, education, environment, welfare and youth).

The local civil service is headed by a secretary, who supervises an administrative body, which reflects elements of both professionalism and group representation. Of course civil servants are selected on the basis of their professional capacities, but group membership is kept in mind. Especially party membership plays an important role, but so does –in multi-lingual communities- the language and other links, for example with trade-unions or social organisations. A careful balance is kept between political and other groups. This system may result in what one might call a representative bureaucracy, which is well able to monitor what is going on in society. Of course there is also the risk of corruption and political favouritism.

Belgian local administration follows very much the culture that can be found all around Europe: New Public Management is a fashionable theme. As a result, new administrative practices seem to focus on fairly direct links with the local community, on decentralisation to the neighbourhood level, where pragmatism and social engagement are easily combined, and on efforts to 'stimulate' politicians to focus on 'main points'.

Relationship between citizens and local government 2.4

The way we see it, three aspects give colour to the nature of the relationship between citizens and their local government in Belgium: (1) the tradition of political clientelism, (2) the role of civil society and (3) the influence of New Public Management.

The role of the political parties in the relationship between citizens and local government is strong. One of the traditional instruments for citizen participation in policy-making is the committee. These committees consist of members of the municipal council and representatives of the citizens,- organised citizens, to be precise. In the following sections, we shall see how in the city of Genk the representative system and its incumbents do actually function as a link between the citizens and local government. But we shall also see what happens if the political parties fail to bridge the gap between local government and the citizens, as happened in Antwerp. In Antwerp, the Vlaams Blok (an extreme-right party) filled this gap. Technically speaking, they did very well: whereas the other parties neglected the link with the citizens, they made 'all the right moves' and invested heavily in (populist) contacting strategies.

These very different cases, Genk and Antwerp, seem to illustrate the relevance of a well-functioning representative system and what can happen, if this is neglected. The fact that voting is compulsory in Belgium implies that there is no early-warning system that informs the political elite of possible disfunctioning of the party system. Whereas in other countries dissatisfaction with political parties may translate itself into a decline in voter turn-out, in Belgium the voters, obliged to go to the polling station, have used their (protest-)votes to put the Vlaams Blok in the saddle.

The second aspect we distinguished is civil society. Belgium is a country where the involvement of organised society is a deeply rooted phenomenon. The committees, we mentioned earlier, guarantee organised society entrance into the policy-making system. Also, the well developed linkages between leaders of the civil society and the political and administrative system were mentioned by almost all of our respondents. Obviously, this is in line with the consensual character attributed to the Belgian state tradition.

Lastly, the influence of New Public Management deserves a mention. Processes of change in both Genk and Antwerp, are heavily influenced by the NPM-ideology, at least as far as the functioning of the local civil service is concerned. Techniques like one-stop shops, decentralisation, responsive bureaucracy, networking and ICT are frequently mentioned and tested in practice.

The result of all this is a form of local governance that is well-equipped to understand the wishes of (organised) citizens. If the representative system functions well, a balance between a continuously strengthening civil service and the political system can be found, which seems to be the case in Genk. If the representative system fails (as in Antwerp), the civil service is the dominant actor in maintaining a viable relationship with the citizens.

Conclusion

2.5

The Belgian local system of local government resembles that of other continental European countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany. We can observe the existence of a professional civil service, supervised by a political executive based on a majority in the council. The political system is dominated by the local branches of national parties. Regarding policy formation, there is a strong tendency to co-operate with organised civil society. Also, the civil service displays an inclination to follow the lead of Osborne and Gaebler's New Public Management. As in many other municipalities, this flirtation with NMP sometimes seems to lead to a loss of function of political parties (at least in the domain of policy formation).

Yet Belgian local government has a quality of its own. The tendency for co-operation with civil society is deeply rooted in a history in which cleavages of a political and linguistic nature have divided the country into sometimes hostile factions. Careful balancing of group interests in structuring the civil service, co-operation with civil society

(or rather representation of group interests) in all matters of governance, together with a carefully designed and rather complex federal structure, can be seen as a safeguard against this basic instability in the Belgian politico-administrative culture.

We visited two cities in Belgium: Genk and Antwerp. These are two very dissimilar cities, as our report will show. The differences are so extensive that generalising our findings would be unwise. Nevertheless, the two different experiences may shed some light on the discourse of democratic reform in Belgium or, more specific, Flanders.

Genk: representative democracy stretched to its limits 3

Genk is a city of more than 60,000 inhabitants situated in the north-eastern part of Belgium. A small village at the beginning of the twentieth century, it developed quickly thereafter. The coal mines made it the industrial city that it still is today. The mines attracted a lot of people from other European countries, in particular from Italy and Poland. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the mines were closed. New employment was stimulated by plans to restructure the regional economy. Since then, many workers have found employment in the car industry. The Ford plant is nowadays the dominant industry, giving work to some 20,000 people. The new chances of employment attracted a new wave of immigrant workers, this time mainly from Mediterranean countries. At present, immigrants form a substantial part of the population.

We talked with three officials, the mayor, Jef Gabriëls, the city secretary, Rudi Haeck and the young leader of the Christian-Democrats in the local council, Wim Dries. This specific selection of respondents may have influenced our impressions of Genk. We have not spoken to members of the opposition. Nevertheless, our impression of Genk seems to confirm the opinion of our advisor, when he suggested us to study Genk (see appendix D).

The city has been run for a long time by the Christian-Democrats (CVP). This party has held the majority in the local council for some decades. This is surprising for an industrial city with a rather large labour class, but can be explained by the intensive inter-relations between the CVP and societal organisations and neighbourhoods. We will come back to this later.

The mayor, chosen by the local council, has been in office for 12 years. After the local elections of October 8, 2000, he was re-elected for another six years. The board of aldermen consists of nine persons, all of whom belong to the CVP. The mayor appears to be a true 'localist'. His reputation among Belgian administrators and politicians is very good; he must have a good chance of an appointment to a higher public position. In the interview he strongly stressed that he was determined to stay on as mayor of 'his' city, however.

When asked about a possible gap between citizens and local government in Genk, all three interviewees expressed the same opinion: there is no distance between local government and the citizens, not in the citizen's role of voters, nor in their role of clients and co-producers of decisions. The problem that Genk is trying to solve is not how to bridge the gap between the citizens and local authorities, but rather how the existing quality of the relationship can be maintained under modern conditions. We will see that the authorities of Genk, in doing so, stay close to the traditional principles of representative democracy.

Our respondents attributed the remarkable absence of distance between the citizens and local authorities to several factors. First, it is a question of culture. In the small coalminers village, "everybody was black", as one of the interviewees expressed it. The result was a strong feeling of solidarity, deeply embedded in the local community, such as can be found in many mining towns all over the world. This culture made it also easier for minorities from other countries to integrate into the local community. Extreme right-wing parties like the Vlaams Blok have only limited electoral success, as compared to other Flemish cities.

Second, societal organisation is strong in Genk, especially in the fields of sport, culture and social welfare. Also, in the different parts of the city neighbourhood organisations are well developed. In these societal and neighbourhood organisations the Christian-Democrats, the dominant political party in Genk, are very active. This rather strong civil society forms a solid base for incorporating the (organised) citizen into the process of public governance. The individual citizen, however, is seen primarily as a voter or a client of public services.

From the end of the 1970s on, local government was confronted with a new type of citizens: well educated, emancipated and more critical. It became more vital and important to actively inform citizens about what was going on in town hall and in the city. The emancipated citizens did not limit themselves to listening to the

information offered, of course, but talked back. In response to this, the city started to organise and stimulate citizen participation, enabling citizens to voice their opinions on proposals made by the city government.

The 1980s brought city government in Genk to a new stage. More and more the citizen was seen as a client. In line with the ideology of New Public Management that swept through almost all western democracies, local authorities invested in various efforts to 'satisfy the customer'. Several instruments were used to stay informed about client satisfaction, surveys being one of them. More recently, the digital revolution has led to the setting-up of a central data bank, in which complaints, signals and reports are gathered. Citizens are able to reach the system electronically as well as by other means.

Nowadays, a focus on adequate service delivery and an open and informed style of representative government are advocated in Genk. There is a feeling that local government is on a mission. The local authorities are intensively looking for instruments to strengthen their relationship with the citizens. Local representatives have the feeling they are marching ahead of other Belgian municipalities, they are proud of this, and are determined to stay ahead.

This determination is reflected in the rather open attitude of local officials toward the public. The mayor and the aldermen, for example, have open office hours every week. More over, every three years the mayor visits people in their homes and asks them to inform him about their problems. Because he has been in office for a long time, the mayor is well-known. People recognise him from regional newspapers and television and he seems easily accessible. Of course more modern techniques, like surveys and ICT, are used too.

Aldermen and members of the local council have strong ties with their neighbourhoods. The ruling party, the CVP, organises its list of candidates in such a way that future members of the local council represent all the neighbourhoods of the city. In addition, representatives try to maintain intensive relationships with their neighbourhood.

However, our respondents were less convinced of the value of another traditionally Belgian technique of involving citizens in the policy process, namely the advisory committees. Since the 1970s municipalities have been obliged by law to organise committees that are to advise local councils on all kind of local subjects.

Half of the members of these committees consists of members of the local council. The other half are representatives of societal organisations active in the relevant field. Examples are the committees on youth or culture or education. The opinions about this committee system range from "... a system that has survived itself..." to "... important advisory bodies that play an crucial role in the decision-making of the local council...". The system is criticised because of the double role the members of the local council play. Also the question is raised what the representatives of local organisations do actually represent.

In summary, Genk shows a rather traditional picture of an integrated local society. The picture is that of the city as a social organism. There are intensive relationships between the local government and the organised city. This is, it seems, influenced by the strong linkages between the ruling party (CVP) and organised society in Genk. The citizen is seen as a respected voter, a client of public services and as a member of organised groups. The dominating characteristics of the style of local government are New Public Management and a strong will to strive for perfection of representative democracy at the local level. This has not been without success: commentators on Belgian local government seem to consider Genk a city that is remarkably successful in achieving its mission to modernise traditional representative democracy.

Antwerp has a problem

4

The elections of October 2000 were a slap in the face of the established parties in Antwerp. The ultra-right party the Vlaams Blok came out as the biggest party in the local council. Warned by the earlier success of this party, the other parties had tried to counter the trend but, clearly, they have not succeeded. On the contrary, the Vlaams Blok won again.

This 'political catastrophe' dominated all our interviews. Our respondents reacted to the success of extreme right by stating that it could be explained by the wide gap between local government and the citizens. This is the problem that local authorities in Antwerp have to solve. They do not seem to have found the solution yet. Of course, modernising administration will help, but the necessity to revitalise politics confronts them with an ugly dilemma: every measure that stimulates the position of local politicians and parties is a measure from which the extreme right can profit as well. In the following, we will, amongst others, try to reconstruct their argument.

We interviewed the mayor, Leona Detiège (Social-Democrat), alderman Dick Geldof (AGALEV, a Green party), Paul Thewissen, director Civil Affairs, and Roel Verhaert, director Information and District-activities.

In response to our questions about the position of extreme right in Antwerp, our respondents first pointed on the recent political history. Antwerp was ruled for decades by a coalition of Christian-Democrats and Social-Democrats (CVP and SP). What developed was politics in the 'Belgian style'. Positions in and outside the municipal organisation were distributed among political friends, allies and favourites. More and more, the coalition partners grew accustomed to listening to only each other, rather than to the voice of the common people who personally experience the growing problems of the city. In a number of cases, political corruption was brought to light. It is precisely this style of governing that gives the Vlaams Blok ammunition for its attack on the existing political system: politicians were said to be filling their pockets, corrupt, and not to be trusted. The earlier electoral success of the Vlaams Blok in 1995 prevented a renewal of the old, traditional coalition. The old coalition of Christian-democrats and Social-democrats had to be strengthened with other parties, such as the Liberals and the Green Party, in order to prevent the Vlaams Blok from rising to power. In this, Antwerp followed a strategy used in the whole of Flanders: a 'cordon sanitaire' of all established political parties was created in order to keep the extreme right from the daily governance of the municipalities.

The second explanation of the gap between citizens and local authorities can be found in the big amalgamation of 1982-1983. Six years later than in most other regions in Belgium, local government in Antwerp and its surroundings was reformed. Nine municipalities were joined together in the new city of Antwerp, which doubled its number of inhabitants. This fusion was done in 'Belgian style': the municipalities to be added to the city of Antwerp were chosen in such a way that the equilibrium between Social-Democrats and Christian-Democrats could be maintained. But up to this moment, many inhabitants of Antwerp are not happy with this amalgamation. As a result of this, the distance between local politicians and inhabitants has increased.

A third reason mentioned is also related to the amalgamation. The new city started with an enormous debt, which was three times its annual budget. In the 1970s municipalities were compensated by the national government for financial problems that resulted from fusion processes. In the 1980s the picture changed. The national

government itself was confronted with large budget deficits and decided to let Antwerp solve its own problems. The consequences were grave. A substantial number of local officials had to be fired. The city was unable to solve societal problems in an adequate way. In addition, as one of our respondents said, the traditional style of “buying the support” from special groups by making favourable decisions was no longer possible.

The result of all this is a constantly diminishing trust of the citizens in what politics can do. The problem has been recognised by the local authorities in Antwerp. From 1995 onwards, different strategies have been followed. We can divide these into (a) political renewal, (b) better communication, (c) neighbourhood work and (d) the introduction of new public management. Let us look at political renewal first.

Political renewal

4.1

In 1995 the new local council decided to transfer a substantial part of political decision-making to the so-called districts of the city. The boundaries of these districts followed to an important extent those of the former municipalities, before the amalgamation. Thus, this strategy was, first and foremost, a recognition of the problems created by the controversial amalgamation in 1983. The creation of these districts, however, required a change of the Municipal Law, which took almost the whole legislative period to be completed. The municipal elections of October 2000 were also elections for the district councils of Antwerp. In January 2001, the new district councils will come into office. Their responsibilities are, however, limited and they have only a small budget. Some of our interviewees have their doubts about enlarging the tasks of the districts. In their view, there is a chance that the Vlaams Blok will gain the majority in one of the districts, which will enable the party to come into power. This is the dilemma which with the new strategy is confronted. Decentralisation of government will also offer the Vlaams Blok a chance. Others respondents are inclined to run that risk.

Improving communication

4.2

The second strategy is better communication. From 1995 on, the city government has tried to improve its communication with citizens. The department for information has been professionalised and the city invests in improving its

communication media. This is done not without problems, however. A remarkable example of what problems can arise is the cities monthly information magazine which is distributed to every household. Because of the mutual distrust between political parties, politicians are not supposed to get any publicity in this monthly, – this to prevent them from getting accused of using public money for their own cause. Thus, mainly civil servants appear in this medium. As a result, the monthly does not make the politicians and their work more visible, nor does it contribute to the necessary improvement of the image of government and politics. Some respondents claim that this policy has to be changed in the near future.

Neighbourhood work

4.3

The third strategy, neighbourhood work, is not just an attempt to improve the relationship between government and the citizens. It is also an attack on the source of the success of extreme right. The rise of the Vlaams Blok is perceived as a symptom. The party's racist slogans refer to the multi-cultural composition of the city of Antwerp. As always in big cities, people of foreign descent are concentrated in some neighbourhoods. In these neighbourhoods, the most serious problems tend to concentrate, thus forming a hotbed of racist and xenophobic sentiments. Solving social problems in these neighbourhoods can be seen as an instrument to take these undesired sentiments away.

The city government has developed a number of activities in the problem areas. Firstly, the city government tries to make use of existing neighbourhood networks for gathering information about what has to be done in a specific part of the city and about the plans of the local authorities. The neighbourhood level also offers possibilities for the co-ordination of the activities of all kind of municipal organisations. Most importantly, the neighbourhood approach results in facilities for meeting people from the neighbourhood and for developing an 'antenna' for the early recognition of newly arising problems.

Secondly, neighbourhood development plans are being made. The basis for these plans is created by interviewing inhabitants of the neighbourhood. The plans themselves are discussed in meetings of the neighbourhoods consultation group (an advisory body, consisting of decentralised civil servants and representatives of organisations active in the neighbourhood, and relevant neighbourhood networks).

In addition, the neighbourhood centres function as information nodes, offering easily accessible data on city regulations and plans. The centres also initiate specific activities, such as, for instance, neighbourhood cleaning actions done by the citizens themselves (*opsignoren*), an initiative that was copied from the Dutch city Rotterdam, where it was adopted as an instrument to revitalise neighbourhoods as social organisms.

Recently, another activity has been added to the neighbourhood approach, namely the use of 'citizens charters'. In such charters an agreement between a neighbourhood and the city government is made, which obliges the city government to deliver goods and services of a certain quality to the neighbourhood.

As a consequence of this approach, a substantial number of local civil servants is working at decentralised level. This, however, is also a cause of some frustration. As it turns out, besides the gap between the city government and the citizens, a new gap is appearing: the gap between decentralised officials at the implementation level and the officials in City Hall operating at a more general level of policy formulation. In the view of some of our respondents, City Hall is rather late and reluctant in reacting to the proposals of the neighbourhood offices. These problems in the Antwerp governmental system can have a frustrating effect on the decentralised neighbourhood civil servants. In combination with the uncertainty they experience about the future of their jobs, this results in uneasy feelings of decentralised officials about their work situation.

Conclusion

4.4

Antwerp has not yet found the answer to its problems. Of course, the city administration shows all the outer characteristics of a modern local administration, and practises the techniques of New Public Management. Sometimes this may lead to reactions which almost seem to imply that politicians are superfluous. Reactions like these, understandable as they may be in the specific political context of Antwerp, offer no prospect of a solution to the problem. Antwerp does not have an administrative problem, but a problem of political credibility. The failure of the representative system, caused by a tired coalition which has been sitting too long in the comfortable cushions of power, deserves answers that go far beyond the implementation of new management techniques. Of course these techniques are

important and may have a substantial influence, but only after Antwerp has reached clarity on a convincing strategy to revitalise its political system.

Conclusion

5

Belgium has presented with us two very different stories. The first is that of successful application of the traditional representative system by using its possibilities to the full. Perfecting the representative system seems the recipe in Genk. The city is assisted in implementing this strategy by the communicative qualities of its local leadership and its determination to do a proper job. The size of the city may also be of influence. Genk is not really a big city; social relations still show the characteristics of life in a smaller provincial city with a strong civil society and with ample opportunity for people to stay in touch with each other and with their governors. To be sure, Genk is in no way old fashioned in its administrative techniques. Innovation of local public administration has a high priority. Yet this is done in a clear context, the context of trust in the possibilities of classical political representation.

Antwerp offers us an interesting view on the problems of local government in metropolitan situations. The problems of Antwerp may seem unique, but they are not. Antwerp is not to be viewed as the black sheep of European local democracy, but as the victim of a concentration of social problems, aggravated by 'chance' factors, such as a publicly rejected amalgamation and the presence of an effectively operating right-wing party. Many of these problems are experienced, in other forms and to different degrees, by other cities in Europe. What we can learn from Antwerp is that parts of the answer are to be found in efforts to re-integrate the citizen into the process of public governance. Antwerp seems to choose decentralisation, for instance by neighbourhood work, as an instrument for this. Clearly this means that participatory strategies will be tested in Antwerp. This is a choice that looks promising, since it focuses on the source of many of the problems the city experiences. Of course, Antwerp is not unique in making this choice.

However, in Belgium as a whole, where party politics is so important, it can be expected that this participatory strategy is likely to be seen as 'just' an addition to traditional representation. This means that Antwerp still needs to find a solution for the weaknesses in the functioning of representative (i.e. party) politics.

The Antwerp case teaches us another lesson of a more general nature: the answer to the problems of metropolitan governance is not to be found in perfecting administrative techniques alone. Administrative reform will only yield its profits to the full if a vital political system gives guidance and legitimacy.

