

The Belgian compromise: An example of three peoples living together  
with a brief look at Malaysia  
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**ABSTRACT**

Belgium is well-known at least inside country for what is call *compromis a la Belge* or *compromis belge*. This compromise, it sounds better in French, was or is the way by which all three peoples in Belgium: the Dutch-speaking Flemish, the French-speaking Walloons and the small minority of German-speakers live together in relative harmony even if politically disputes do surface between politicians and political parties but in an absence of violence of any kind. One consequence of this is that Belgium has three national languages.

To achieve this meant Belgium from a unitary state has become a federal state which included handing over state responsibilities from the centre in the unitary State to what is called the government of the three communities and to three geographically determined regional governments. However, the Federal Government has also retained certain responsibilities like foreign policy and defence and a few others like national taxation and social security.

What is to be noted is the willingness not to insist on a unitary State and that the only way to live in peace is to allow its different peoples each to govern themselves in state responsibilities which were negotiated as equal partners. About 60 to 65% of the population are Flemish but they did not insist on having privileges, on their culture as the national culture, on setting the standards etc.. The minority German community has rights, its own government which is unthinkable perhaps in other countries. This willingness to negotiate and make compromises has marked Belgian political life. With this attitude one cannot categorically state that there will not be further constitutional changes in Belgium. The future is open.

Hence the focus of the paper is really how is Belgium constituted which satisfy its different peoples and their aspirations.

As Malaysia, while officially a Federation of 13 States in practice it is more like a unitary State because it is highly centralized. It is not the case of its multi-ethnic communities

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circumscribed territorially. It is a country of autochthons sharing the country with past migrations who now see Malaysia as home. This multi-ethnicity propagated as living in peace and harmony but in reality there is tensions below the surface which observers say. These tensions, the State has not been able to prevent while the government has to play a balancing act appeasing, accommodating and compromising the demands of the different ethnic communities. Only economic development and the goods delivered which has kept the lid on ethnic tensions. In bad economic times these tensions tend to surface.

## PREAMBLE

There are Sri Lankans among you who have lived in Belgium, observed and experienced Belgian political life and daily life and I wonder whether these people back here have ever looked upon Belgium as a case to learn from for Sri Lanka not that the circumstances are similiar. Perhaps you need a non-Sri Lankan to get a hearing on Belgium.

I do not know if Belgium has any relevance for peace in Sri Lanka, for some kind of restructuring of the Sri Lankan State which will result in peaceful co-existence between the different ethnic groups or communities not to speak of socializing across ethnic barriers. Belgium is not a country which goes around trumpeting its success in bringing about peace and the living together of its three peoples. However, somehow there has been spotlight on her as to how it has arrived at arrangements to live in peace. How Belgium is organised has also the interest of the Burmese community in exile in particular. What Burma shares or what Sri Lanka shares with Belgium is that the ethnic communities have each their territory. In the Belgium, the Flemish are in the North, Walloons in the South and the small German community in the East while there are pockets if I can call it of each people in the other's territory.

## BELGIUM

### 1. Introduction

I do not know if there are Belgians here in the audience who could give me a helping hand because I am no expert on Belgium. More often when I am invited to speak it is about the European Union. This is the second time I am speaking of Belgium. I was asked to speak on the same subject in Malaysia.

Let's look at the overheads. First, an idea of the country: population of just over 10 million in a country size of about 32,000 square km. What is the size of Sri Lanka to give you an idea of situating Belgium? Maximum distance between two points is 280 kms and the population density is 315 inhabitants per square km. Inside such a small country you also have problems between peoples.

Turn now to the second overhead, the map of Belgium. Note where Belgium is situated, the countries around it and note the darker line which is known in Belgium as the

linguistic border, north of which is Dutch-speaking and south of it is French-speaking. The German-speakers numbering only around 300,000 is in the East next to the German border in the province of Liege. From the map, it appears that south of the linguistic border which is called Wallonia in English is larger geographically than north of the border which is Flanders. However, the population of the north is about 65% or about 6 million of the total population and so are the majority.

Ethnically, I never had a clear answer on what their origins are. Some say we are the same people, others say the Flemish have Germanic roots and the Walloons some celtic/gaelic roots. Question is how far you want to go. What is important is that you can really say in Belgium you have three peoples marked with three languages and cultures and occupying three different territories even territorial disputes. Can you imagine this happening in such a small country and they have managed to live together in peace. How did they do it? A lot of compromises resulting from negotiations between the leaders of three peoples based on pragmatism, respect for one another, equality... 300,000 Germans as an equal partner in negotiations.

## 2. Languages, Cultures and Religion

Today Belgium is no more a unitary state but a federal state and is not a nation-state (one people, one culture, one language, one religion etc.) but a multi-ethnic you could call it. There is no attempt to make the culture and language of the majority people, the Flemish, the national culture, the national language. There are three national languages, Dutch, French and German. Can you imagine a German population of 300,000 having their language also a national language? In schools, the languages of the other peoples are taught too even if you are in a school where the medium of instruction is Dutch or French or German corresponding to Flanders, Wallonia and the German cantons. In this sense, Belgium is tolerant and positive about diversity. The non-European migrants can have their mother tongues taught to their children as a subject in school even if there are only a few students. Today English is like a “must”. This especially applies to Brussels with the foreign Europeans around who communicate most often between themselves in English. One can move around Brussels in English. Universities too have degrees in English especially in the Flemish ones. In fact, undergraduate students are obliged to attend English language courses. As a small country, for economic survival, the more languages spoken are an advantage. The cultures of the three peoples flourishes and are given assistance by the state to flourish. No one language and culture is privileged over the other. Equality and pragmatism are the name of the game. Today there is therefore no Belgian nationalism of the unitary state. Belgian nationalism appears only in football, when it comes to the monarchy which holds Belgium together and there is no talk of nation-building. People identify themselves within the country either as a Walloon, a Flemish or a German. One is Belgian only vis-à-vis the foreigner. We are what we are. Pragmatism. If there is any nationalism, it is Flemish nationalism and Walloon nationalism but they do not appear to have a strong following as to want to see the break-up of the Belgian State.

It was not always like that of course. French used to be imposed on all in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries but when the Flemish got their Dutch language recognized they did not impose their language on the French speakers. That's the thing. No revenge. There was no discrimination against non-Dutch speakers. French as the only national language in the past could be traced back to Napoleonic times when Belgium did not exist. The domination of the French language had also to do with industrialization in Wallonia during this Napoleonic time which even attracted Dutch speakers in North migrating South looking for jobs. French was the language of modern industry just as English is today for technology. Wallonia became the most industrialized region in continental Europe.

To arrive at three national official languages required reforms of the State which stretched between 1873 and 1963 that means there was a movement which fought for this to happen. It was also a cultural movement, a movement to have the Flemish people, their identity, their rights recognized. This was led actually by the Flemish clergy among other actors. In 1815 that region what is today Belgium came under Dutch rule. Belgium came into existence in 1830 only. 1830 saw the revolt against Dutch rule. At this point in time, both the Walloons and the Flemish revolted against Dutch rule. Again the Catholic Church had a hand as Protestant King William I wanted to limit clerical power. There was a joining of forces with the Liberals. This much of Belgian history.

Religion: Belgium is a secular state. Both Catholic Flemish and Walloons did not turn Belgium into a Catholic State in 1830 even if the Catholic Church had its hand in the revolt against the Dutch. Today the peoples of Belgium are largely nominally Catholic. There are those who do not see themselves as Catholic. I don't know the figures for this. So, religion has never been a source of tension between its peoples in Belgium but it has not been a unifying factor as well. But it is to be noted that Islam is recognized, I think as the number 2 religion in the country and facilities are given to the Muslims to practice and learn about their religion even in school.

### 3. State Structure

Next, the State structure today is multi-level: federal government, parliament, judiciary; governments, parliaments of the Flemish, French and German communities; governments, parliaments of the three regions: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. The Germans being so small do not have their own region but are part of Wallonia. There are also the provinces and the communes (the boroughs the closest I can think of). The communes existed even before the independence of Belgium in 1830 and they evolved from villages.

Brussels was at the centre of the *compromis belge* in the reform of the Belgian State. It has a French-speaking majority while it sits on Flemish land. The Flemish are a minority in Brussels. The French speakers were not going to be governed by the Flemish. They were not going to quit Brussels and move to Wallonia. The Flemish majority of the Belgian population were not going to allow Brussels to escape their jurisdiction neither. They have their right to the land. So, the compromise was to make Brussels territorially a

region by itself not just a city with its own government of French-speaking and Dutch-speaking ministers and a parliament where both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking sat and where Dutch and French were its official languages. Along with the Brussels region, it was decided also to establish the territorial regions of Flanders and Wallonia. Flanders and Wallonia pre-existed Belgium. This partition can be traced back to Roman times to create the meeting point between the Germanic and Latin worlds. The linguistic border between the two parts corresponded more or less how far the Romans settled. Further compromise was that Brussels became also the capital of Flanders in addition to be the capital of Belgium. The French-speakers of Brussels and the Walloons chose Namur in Wallonia as their capital.

In addition, the Communities were established. The Flemish minority in Brussels could now join and be part of the larger Flemish majority in Flanders while the majority French-speakers of Brussels could join and be part of the French-speaking Walloons in Wallonia. We could speak of the Walloons and Flemish of Brussels. The Communities actually refer to peoples with their own history, cultures, language, etc. It was also recognized that the Germans have a right to their own community but they do not have their own region. They are composed of a few cantons and too small to form a region and are part of the Wallonian region. Hence, Community is not delineated by territory for otherwise the Walloons and the Flemish in Brussels will be excluded. As stated above, the Communities have their governments and parliaments.

If Brussels did not exist, Community and Regions of Flanders and Wallonia would coincide and neatly delineated. They would be statelets within the larger Belgium. Flanders as it is has fused Region and the Community into one so that there is one single parliament and a single government. This makes it like a statelet. In some sense both Flanders and Wallonia are already statelets when we consider the competences in more detail of the Federal, Regional and Communities governments below. As it is, each region has its own foreign representative to promote foreign economic relations. Every Belgian Embassy has such persons representing both regions. This is a manifestation of statelets but they are not fully independent states.

A case could be made of Brussels as an entity by itself as actually its autochthons, a disappearing lot, spoke a dialect or language of their own which one could interpret as neither French or Dutch or a some kind of mixture of both and/or rooted in older languages or dialects. *Bruxellois* are the people who live in Brussels just like *parisiens* are those who lived in Paris. I am a *Bruxellois* but the autochthons are the true *Bruxellois* for they actually distinguish themselves from the Walloons and the Flemish. Today we have *Bruxellois* who actually originate from Flanders and Wallonia.

The provinces are territorial and they were less of a problem as they were either in Flanders or Wallonia. Brussels sat in the province of Brabant which had both Walloons and Flemish. What was created are Walloon Brabant and Flemish Brabant and Brussels Region fell outside the provisional structure. It is an island on its own. Perhaps Washington DC is a comparison. This is how the *compromis belge* worked. Take Brussels out of the dispute, settle the rest and make it special.

When it comes to the communes the ones on the fringe of Brussels which are all in Flanders not Brussels Region posed a problem because they have a high population of French speakers. Being in Flanders the language of communication is Dutch and legally the Commune administrators would demand all communications with them are in Dutch. The *compromis belge* was to allow French also to be used but in reality this has not been easy.

These levels of competences are generally well defined although in some things competences do touch one another. Culture, education, language, certain aspects of health, the social like social welfare belong to the **Communities**. What is to be noted is that 300,000 Germans can have their own Community government and Parliament. The **Regions**: competences in economy, employment, agriculture, infrastructure except Belgian railways, environment, foreign trade, supervision of communes, provinces, utility companies. **Federal**: public finances, army, gendarmerie, judicial system, social security, foreign affairs, development cooperation, laws concerning the provinces and communes, public debt, monetary policy, prices and incomes policy, savings, nuclear energy, state-owned companies, obligations to NATO and the EU. **Provinces**: decisions of a general nature and votes on provincial regulations. Although they are autonomous they are supervised by the Federal State, the Communities and mainly the Regions. **Communes**: powers over public works, social welfare, maintaining public order, housing, education etc.. They are charged with the police forces, registers of births, deaths and marriages plus registers of the population. They operate the Public Centre for Social Assistance and provide social services. Under supervision of the Federal State, the provinces, the Communities and the Regions.

From the above description of competences one can see that it is a decentralized State with a few overlaps but it is clear who is in charge of what. In fact, where there has been tension is that the Flemish Community and Region had further demanded that certain portfolios be handed over to the regions and communities which the Wallonian Region and the French Community governments refused. One hypothesis is that the further transfer of Federal portfolios to the regions and communities opens the door to a confederal Belgium or to two independent States. There has also been the hypothesis of Wallonia becoming part of France and Flanders part of the Netherlands as if those countries will welcome them with open arms. Furthermore, what will they gain by being part of larger wholes? Will Wallonia want to be peripheral in France? It is not unthinkable as the years go by there will be further negotiations for the regions and communities to take on more portfolios. Belgium sees the solution of its future inside a federal Europe which in another hypothesis means that Wallonia and Flanders are two regions/states in a federal Europe.

#### 4. Living side-by-side?

Do they simply live side by side? Of course, if territorially one community is far apart from another the socialization process is difficult but at work you do have Flemish, Walloons and Germans working side by side more often in Brussels. You have

Wallonians and the Flemish living side-by-side in Brussels. As stated previously, there has been Flemish people migrating southwards to the mines in Wallonia in times past and have been integrated, assimilated into the Walloon culture, society. Work too has seen southerners going northwards. But you also have people continuing to live in their roots but travelling to Brussels to work where they meet the other communities. Of course there are people who do not meet the other people if they live and work in Flanders or Wallonia or in the German communes.

I meet people who tell me that the problems between the communities has been created by politicians, that the people left to themselves will find ways of living together. Mind you there are people with mixed parentage.

#### REFLECTIONS OR LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE BELGIAN EXPERIENCE

The *compromis belge* was possible because of the tempering of Flemish nationalism which resulted from the past domination of the French language and culture. If the Flemish had wanted to take revenge and impose their language and culture on the Walloons there would have been internal war. There has also been recognition by the Walloons that the Flemish people are a people with their own history, culture, language etc.. Flanders and the Flemish people gain their recognition also because of the greater economic activity while Wallonia declined especially when multinationals began implanting themselves. It is of course true too that if the Flemish did not exert themselves they would not have gain their equal status with the Walloons. Their numbers too gave them weight but they held back from going to the other extreme of dominating the Walloons. A larger landmass of Wallonia may have carried some weight for the Walloons. Geography may have a part in the play. The recognition of the rights of each community was extended to the real minority, the Germans.

The Church may have had a part to play to moderate both sides although there has been a separation of religion and state since 1830. There was one and now two Christian democratic parties in Belgium but this has not led to forming a Catholic State and on this matter of the Flemish and the Walloons, the christian democrats, socialists, liberals, greens in each Community are cut through by their community interests.

One can really ask to what extent that nationalism has been contrived? Belgian nationalism had its roots in the revolt against the Dutch but the Flemish and Walloon identities were already there. This word, identity, is a loaded word which the writer does not like to use but uses without being able to find another. Belgium is an artificial State whose territorial delineation was decided by treaty which involved the great powers of the time. For example, the province of Luxembourg was detached from today's Luxembourg and attached to Belgium in 1839.

When we look closer into Flemish or Walloon nationalisms, one wonders too to what extent they are also contrived? The different provincial peoples of Belgium have their own identities. A *Liegeois* of the province of Liege in Wallonia adjacent to the

Netherlands and Germany has his own culture different to that of the *Namurois*. Further down the line, the different villages in time past spoke their own languages or dialects and they did not understand each other. The old in the villages still speak these languages or dialects. There is renewed interest to re-discover these old languages. In Wallonia one could say that French was imposed on the peoples there.

Held and McGrew in their book, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization*, in the chapter, “On the Fate of National Culture” stated that prior to the emergence of nations and nation-states, most cultural communication and interaction occurred either between elites or at a very local and restricted levels.<sup>2</sup> They stated that most national cultures are less than 200 years old.<sup>3</sup> Nationalism is something contrived and contrived by what they called state makers. “The sense of nationhood which accompanied the creation of the modern state came when state makers sought to centralize and re-order political power in circumscribed territories. .... Gradually, people became aware of their membership in a shared political community, with a common fate.”<sup>4</sup> If nationalism and the nation-state were contrived it also means that it can be undone. It is not sacred. It is easier said than done. Both authors stated that the elites who were behind establishing a national identity, was rarely their complete invention. .... Many nations were ‘built up on the basis of pre-modern “ethnic cores” whose myths and memories, values and symbols shaped the culture and boundaries of the nation that modern elites managed to forge’. .... The identity that nationalists strove to uphold depended, in significant part, on uncovering and exploiting a community’s ‘ethno-history’ and on highlighting its distinctiveness in the world competing political and cultural values.<sup>5</sup> So, it is not totally contrived. There was that material basis on which state makers, the elites could work on. This could explain why Wallonia and Flanders pre-existed Belgium and were more natural wholes. Even if they spoke languages or dialects different from one village to another, they nevertheless all belong to the same ethno group occupying a certain territory which, for example, for the Flemish extended into present day Netherlands. But it also points to the artificiality of Belgium and that it was contrived but it is real and it exists and it has to be dealt with as such and hence the present arrangements to live together while having an open mind to its future.

Having said this it is interesting to note that in this European construction of the European Union (EU), you have a Committee of the Regions enshrined in the Treaty on the European Union which indicates renewed interest and weight given to regions and regions here cross national borders. One must realize peoples who live side-by-side separated by a national border spoke the same dialect or language which demonstrates to the artificiality of borders. These people with a common past would rather be a more natural territorial whole if one thinks in terms of territory. A Federal Europe of regions may facilitate the re-drawing of borders. This could spelt the end of the nation-state as it is conceived in Europe. A dream of course. State makers of today still insist on the EU as a union of nation-states.

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<sup>2</sup> Polity Press, 2002, page 25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. page 28.

<sup>4</sup> See page 26.

<sup>5</sup> See page 27.

Shall I venture to find some relevance for Sri Lanka while it is completely different? If I think of the Tamil North and the rest of the country there is a territorial division similar to Belgium. But of course Tamils are not only in the North but elsewhere in the country. Are there Sinhalese in the North? I understand there also the Muslims and others so that you have places where there is a mix of peoples. Brussels??? Colombo?? I have to learn more of Sri Lanka. The most important is the willingness to compromise, a recognition of the rights of each community, to consider each community on an equal footing. There must be willingness to forget the past while not ignoring the injustices which took place without which one also cannot build the future. There must be a willingness to decentralize the State, a necessary step to create that framework of compromise, a willingness to move away from a unitary to a federal or even a confederal State. I don't wish to speak of two independent States. I just want to stress the willingness to be open-minded. I think the *compromis belge* had this open-minded to make compromises.

This much I want to say.

## MALAYSIA

Turning to Malaysia, I have been asked to speak of Malaysia which I know better but I don't feel qualified. I am a foreigner and been there since September 2002. Just a few words.

If I still remember well the history of the British Empire which I learned in school during the colonial days in Singapore, the Federation of Malaysia had more in common with the Canadian one with a strong centre in the federal government of course with local specificities. I don't know about Sri Lanka. In the Malaysian case, there are 13 states led by sultans with 4 headed by governors. The sultans elect among themselves by rotation the kingship of Malaysia. Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy *a la Britannique* but with amendments after independence under different Prime Ministers, the last of whom, the present one has cut down further the prerogatives of the King.

This federal structure institutionally means that each state has a Chief Minister plus his government plus a Legislative Assembly. Frankly I do not know what kind of competences state governments and assemblies have. For sure they implement central government policies. What I know is that the Sultans have competences over land and Islam. *De facto*, Malaysia operates like just having the one government, the central government. But because there are two states in the hands of the opposition party, PAS, the Islamic party, internal Malaysian politics seem to revolve between the central government and these two states with Malay Muslim majorities. An example of the concentration of power of decision-making, of centralization, is that while this Islamic party wants to practise shariah law in the state to include penalties that would not be acceptable and have it passed by the state assembly which it controls, it cannot do it because that kind of legislation somehow requires the sanction of the federal parliament which is controlled by the ruling party. There is at the moment a constitutional impasse. With a powerful centre, a powerful central/federal government, one may ask whether

Malaysia is in fact a unitary State? We may be playing with words. The power structure should be the focus really not whether it is a federal structure or unitary state or whatever.

One may say that luckily for centralization a state government cannot go ahead with a shariah law which frightens other ethnic communities and even moderate Muslims. Nevertheless, such a federal state has not prevented the rise of Islamic fundamentalism *a la* Malaysian which has reinforced the ethnic divide. Malaysia has behind it the history of ethnic tensions and killings in 1969 and observers say these tensions remain under the surface. The influence of Islamic fundamentalism has made it harder for the socialisation between the ethnic communities. Just think of going out for meals. What we see is that despite of all the claims of multi-ethnicity Malays socializing with Chinese is no more a common sight. The socializing is within the ethnic group. So, living side-by-side but an absence of contact except through work. Actually Malaysia could be the example of country where diversity marries well with an inter-ethnic socialisation which could lead to some kind of integration. Nation-building is still the attempt in fact I prefer to call it state-building in the sense that it is about loyalty to the state and an identification to the state. Statism?? There is an attempt to propagate the Malaysian identity but in the reality simply living side-by-side with little socialisation between the ethnic communities. These are my impressions in these six months in Malaysia.

Neither are the ethnic communities territorially separated which one may say would reduce tensions and potential conflicts. Chinese and Indians both migrated to Malaysia via British colonialism. This is unlike Belgium or even the Tamils in northern or north eastern Sri Lanka. During British times, the Chinese were mainly in the towns and cities while the Malays were rural but today Malays have moved to the cities while the rural Malay hinterland remains. Chinese too are found in the rural areas it must be said. Practically today the ethnic communities share the same social space and they cannot avoid one another. This reality has to be faced up to.

The ethnic tensions could be traced back to British colonial policy of migration then “divide and rule” and the export of the nation-state. But it must also be said that local elites had also a hand in fashioning the nature of politics. By this I mean Malay nationalism which was legitimate but specifically a political system based on ethnic political parties as the way forward and this set the trend and over the years the balancing act of appeasing and keeping within boundaries the demands of these political parties and the ethnic communities they represented. I will not want to contest political decisions taken then but obviously has its consequences which perhaps even the elites then did not foresee. The consequences go beyond the political like organizations of civil society along ethnic lines.

To speak of nation-building in this context is difficult. To speak of nation-building based on the nationalism, culture, of the majority ethnic group is also unacceptable to the rest. It is also hard for this majority ethnic group to accept the other ethnic groups as equal to themselves with claims to being the autochthons. The special privileges given them remain a contested issue. There is some legitimacy for it but how far? Has it become a

liability now? It is more real to speak of loyalty building to the State of Malaysia rather out of the different ethnic communities.

Relevance to Sri Lanka?? If the perspective is the respect, rights of the minorities, the Indians are in the most disadvantageous position, the politics of accommodation, compromise based on equality, of non-imposition of a majority's way of life, culture, religion etc. Malaysia is not an example to think about. Of course compared to many other countries, the situation is not as bad but this has also much to do with the economic development that has taken place which has seen benefits to the ethnic communities but when the economy does not go well then ethnic tensions tend to rise. If the perspective is the nation-state based upon the dominance of the major ethnic group claiming to be autochthons then Malaysia is the example to look at and how it plays out the politics of accommodation, of compromise, of the balancing act, with all its inherent tensions. I hope Sri Lanka is not looking towards Malaysia as a model.

#### GENERAL CONCLUSION

It is clear that for me if I have been invited to speak of Belgium it is to see what can be learned from the Belgian experience which could inspire the future Sri Lanka not that it can be copied. It cannot be copied. Belgium for me is more relevant than Malaysia if it is searching for alternatives. I was asked to make a comment on Malaysia which was not my original intention and which I feel uncomfortable to speak about as I cannot say that I know it well.