

Governments, Parliaments and Parties (Belgium)

By [Emmanuel Gerard](#)

Summary

The First World War changed the balance of power in Belgium. From a strongly polarized system dominated by the Catholic Party, the country shifted towards a coalition system, marked by a tradeoff between left and right. That shift was facilitated by the patriotic responses resulting from the German invasion and the exceptional circumstances of the war. It was also strongly supported by King Albert I, who believed the coalition system would give more stability to the country. In 1918, the Catholic Party had to accept a democratic electoral reform and share power with the Liberals and Socialists.

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Introduction

In 1914, the Catholics had been in power for thirty years, commanding the majority in the two houses of parliament since defeating the Liberals in 1884. They had survived the political and social turmoil at the end of the century, the rise of socialism and the first democratic reform. The First World War would challenge their position and bring about a new constellation.

Balance of Power on the Eve of the War

The Catholic majority – known as the parliamentary right – faced a left opposition, consisting of Liberals and Socialists. Liberals had their strongholds in [Brussels](#) and the big cities, whereas the Socialists controlled the industrial heartlands of the Walloon provinces. The *Parti ouvrier belge*, founded in 1885, was a conglomerate of numerous organizations, among which the unions were the most strongly represented. The Catholic Party, supported by the Catholic Church and interwoven with a myriad of clerical and religiously inspired social organizations, was deeply entrenched in the Flemish countryside and the smaller cities of the realm. Catholics and Socialists, and to a lesser degree Liberals, formed three separate worlds in Belgian society, which became known as “pillars”.

In addition to the school legislation that created state subsidies for Catholic institutions, the two parties of the left especially targeted the electoral system. Since the first democratic reform of 1893, the system was based on universal suffrage for men twenty-five years and older, with one or two additional votes depending on marriage, property and education. That system strongly favoured the Catholics – to a lesser extent also the Liberals – and formed a formidable obstacle for the Socialists.

[Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#), who became the third Belgian king in 1909, felt uncomfortable with the long hegemony of the Catholics. When in 1911 the cabinet, headed by [Franz Schollaert \(1851-1917\)](#), proposed a new school legislation that would strengthen Catholic institutions, he supported the left in its resistance and by so doing caused the fall of the government. Albert’s role in the 1911 crisis created mistrust between the monarch and the Catholic leadership. However, the Catholics, led by the new cabinet leader Baron [Charles de Broqueville \(1860-1940\)](#), were victorious in the following elections, provoking a malaise within the combined opposition, thrown into confusion by this unexpected defeat. To break the status quo and to impose an electoral reform – one man, one vote – the *Parti ouvrier belge* launched a general strike that ended in a stalemate.

The divide between left and right being the main cleavage, there was also a language problem that divided [Belgium](#). Since independence in 1830, the country had a francophone administration, although in the northern provinces – to become known as Flanders – the native tongue was Flemish, a variant of the Dutch language. A [Flemish movement](#) immediately began challenging this situation, asking at first for the recognition of the Dutch language in Flanders alongside French and from the end of the 19th century demanding the complete *flamandisation* of Flanders. A subnational Flemish identity was developing in the Belgian state. By the time the war started, language legislation had made some progress, but the principal demand of the Flemish movement – a Flemish-language [university in Ghent](#) – had not been met, creating a feeling of deadlock.

The German invasion in the summer of 1914 put a temporary halt to these divisions. The patriotic atmosphere created unity around the king and the Catholic government. Cabinet leader de Broqueville facilitated this union by appointing three opposition leaders as ministers of state: the Liberals [Paul Hymans \(1865-1941\)](#) and [Eugène Goblet d'Alviella \(1846-1925\)](#) and the Socialist [Emile Vandervelde \(1866-1938\)](#). At a solemn session of the two houses of parliament, King Albert made an appeal to the Flemish and Walloon populations. Thousands of young people signed up as volunteers for the Belgian army, Flemish as well as Walloons, catholic students as well as socialist working-class people.¹

A Government in Exile and a King Commanding the Army. Tensions within the Executive

The war and the turn of military events created an unexpected situation. King Albert took personal [command of the army](#) and joined the army's headquarters in Leuven. After the fall of the Liege fortress, the king and the field army retreated to Antwerp; the ministers left Brussels, declared open city, and joined them. Antwerp had been designed and fortified as the national bastion in case of a hostile attack. However, the fortress was forced to surrender under heavy German [artillery](#) fire. The king and the ministers were able to leave in time. The main body of the Belgian army managed to escape German encirclement and retreated to the extreme corner of West-Flanders, where it was able to halt the German advance during the Battle of the Yser.

From October 1914 on, the German army [occupied](#) nearly all Belgian territory. Belgian authority held in a small area at the sea. King Albert established his headquarters in Veurne and his personal residence in a summerhouse at the coast in De Panne. His decision to stay on Belgian soil near the army was not only motivated by practical considerations, but foreshadowed debates on Belgium's position in the war. It was the king's opinion that Belgium's [neutral](#) status had to be kept intact. The ten ministers, who first fled from Antwerp to Ostend, finally ended up in the French port of Le Havre in Normandy, where the Belgian government was granted sovereignty privileges by the French. In the small commune of Sainte-Adresse, ministers and their officials turned summerhouses and hotels into government offices. Le Havre and its surroundings would become the residence of some 13,000 Belgians.² More than 600,000 Belgians found refuge in the Netherlands, France or Great Britain.³ This situation continued until October 1918.

The geographical separation of the king and his government did not favour communication between the two partners of the executive. Moreover, the war created an imbalance between the ministers, who could not really deploy great activity in exile, and the king, who held a

crucial position as commander of the army. In fact, the war strengthened the personal involvement of the monarch in political affairs that had been a characteristic of the Belgian political system.⁴

Although the constitution declared the king inviolable and the ministers responsible before parliament, the Belgian monarch had been interfering in politics since the times of [Leopold I, King of the Belgians \(1790-1865\)](#), putting forward his candidates for a ministerial post, discussing political affairs with individual ministers or even presiding over cabinet meetings. Officially, Belgium had no prime minister, although the *formateur* took a preeminent position as leader of the cabinet. On top of that, Belgian monarchs considered command of the army in times of war a personal prerogative. Not surprisingly, it was King Albert and not cabinet leader De Broqueville who symbolized Belgian resistance in foreign [propaganda](#).⁵ Albert invited ministers for a personal audience in De Panne, but avoided a meeting with the cabinet. The first such meeting took place in April 1915 in De Panne, six months after the fall of Antwerp.⁶

De Broqueville was not only leader of the cabinet but also the first civilian to be minister of war. Before 1914, he had been instrumental in enhancing Belgium's military strength. A skilled diplomat, he had won the support of his traditionally antimilitaristic Catholic majority for the introduction of the universal conscription and for an increase of military spending. De Broqueville challenged the king's position, as he attempted to impose ministerial responsibility for military operations. At the same time, he took the lead as a "prime minister", trying to establish more coordination between the government departments because of the complex post-war problems ahead.⁷

Tensions between the king and the cabinet leader had risen since the outbreak of the war over the nomination of the army chief of staff. They reached a first climax in June-July 1915 over the foreign affairs portfolio. Minister [Jules Davignon \(1854-1916\)](#), whose health was delicate, did not meet the high expectations required by the war. De Broqueville, who dominated his weak colleague and in fact gave orientation to his department, did not want him to resign. The king, on the other hand, insisted that [Eugène Beyens \(1855-1934\)](#), one of his former advisors and a staunch supporter of neutrality, be appointed. The solution was a constitutional anomaly. Davignon was granted a rest and Beyens was appointed as minister of state in charge of the foreign department.⁸ At the same time, the king refused to recognize de Broqueville as a "prime minister". On the contrary, he blamed the cabinet leader for pursuing "absolute power" and insisted on his royal prerogative to preside over the executive, working on an individual basis with the ministers.⁹

Catholics under Siege. The January 1916 Cabinet Reshuffle

On one issue, Albert I and de Broqueville took the same line: both wanted a national cabinet. The consequences of the war would be devastating and the problems of reconstruction huge. The king, in line with his pre-war opinion, did not want his future linked with the fate of one party; de Broqueville was convinced that the Catholics could not cope alone with the post-war situation. In August 1914, de Broqueville had made a conciliatory move towards the opposition, but he had not formally broadened his Catholic government. He had only appointed opposition leaders as ministers of state. A minister of state had no executive authority; it was an honorary title that put the person in a more privileged situation in case the king wanted advice in a political crisis. Exceptionally, the king could convene a so-called Crown Council, a gathering of the cabinet ministers and the ministers of state. Such a Crown Council had repudiated the German ultimatum. De Broqueville invited the ministers of state (most of them Catholic) to follow the government to Antwerp and then into exile. They ended up in Le Havre, where they had no real business to do, except for Hymans, who was appointed as ambassador in London. Only in July 1915 did a meeting of the cabinet ministers and the ministers of state take place; it was the first such meeting since the war began.¹⁰

The pressure to incorporate the former opposition into a truly national government mounted after a national cabinet had been set up in Great Britain and France. For de Broqueville, the legitimacy of his cabinet was at stake as the war entered its second winter. However, his Catholic colleagues opposed that move and it took a long process to convince them of a change that would topple the monopoly of power they had been holding since 1884. [Georges Helleputte \(1852-1925\)](#), minister of agriculture and spokesperson of an uncompromising group of Catholic ministers, considered it a coup d'état, but he was ignored.¹¹

In January 1916, the former opposition leaders finally entered the cabinet. Hymans, Goblet and Vandervelde became "members of the council of ministers", i.e. minister without portfolios. The new ministers accepted the [union sacrée](#) and agreed not to stir up political divisions.¹² It was a turning point. From then on, the cabinet changed its modus operandi. Meetings became more frequent and minutes of the discussions were held. However, it was also the start of infighting and more reshuffles.

Parliament Forced into Idleness

The war eliminated the checks and balances of the Belgian political system not only by strengthening the king's position as commander in chief but also by crippling the parliament. Belgium was the only belligerent country without a functioning parliament. At the outbreak of

the conflict, de Broqueville had instructed the members of parliament not to follow the government to Antwerp but to stay in their constituencies and give moral support to the population.¹³ With the turn of the military events, most of the parliamentarians found themselves blocked in occupied territory. Out of 186 representatives and 120 senators, only seventy-two managed to leave the country.¹⁴ They were scattered all over the [Netherlands](#), [France](#) and [England](#). The government considered it impossible and unnecessary to involve them in decision-making.

This situation affected legislation as well as parliamentary control. According to the Belgian constitution, legislative power was in the hand of three branches: the two houses of parliament (the House of Representatives and the Senate) and the king (as head of the executive power). Since parliament was eliminated, the cabinet took over the role of parliament and legislated by decree-law. Parliamentary control became completely nonexistent.

Parliament's position became even more precarious as the war continued and the May 1916 elections could not be held to renew the legislature. The validity of the parliamentary mandate was disputed. De Broqueville used that situation as an argument to justify the expansion of the cabinet with members of the opposition. Franz Schollaert, former cabinet leader and since 1912 speaker of the house, who as minister of state was present in Le Havre, challenged him. Under pressure, the government gave way; it extended – by decree-law – the mandate of the MPs and accepted a form of parliamentary control by agreeing that written questions would be answered. On 29 June 1917, Schollaert passed away and the parliament lost its most ardent advocate. Except for one “friendly meeting” in Le Havre, in July 1918, Belgian parliamentarians had no real influence on the course of events.¹⁵ That did not prevent some of them, like [Frans Van Cauwelaert \(1880-1961\)](#), Catholic leader of the Flemish movement, or [Camille Huysmans \(1871-1968\)](#), secretary of the Socialist International, from playing a prominent role in public debates.¹⁶ Others fulfilled an official mission to defend Belgium's cause in the world.¹⁷

The Comité National de Secours et d’Alimentation as a Counterforce

While the *union sacrée* imposed prudence on the politically oriented refugee press, in occupied Belgium the brutal German regime made any open party activity impossible. The underlying structure of the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal world did not disappear, but their political expression was silenced except for the various forms of individual protest against the coercive measures of the occupying power.

However, a new force emerged in occupied territory. In September 1914, Belgian bankers had created a [Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation](#) (National Committee for Relief and Food) in Brussels in order to provide the starving and isolated country with necessary [food](#) supplies. The *Comité National* developed as a countrywide institution with provincial and local sections and thousands of collaborators. Politicians of all parties participated, nourishing interparty cooperation in the councils of the *Comité National*. That opened a window of opportunity for the Socialists, who could enter the cenacles of power. The leader of the *Comité National* was the banker [Emile Francqui \(1863-1935\)](#), one of the directors of the *Société Générale*, the largest holding company in the country. The *Comité* developed as a shadow government in occupied territory. The Catholic ministers in Le Havre considered the Liberal-oriented Francqui and his *Comité* as a potential rival force.¹⁸

In contrast to the *union sacrée* between the political parties, an emerging Belgian [nationalist](#) movement in the diaspora and a Flemish activist movement in occupied territory challenged the status quo. Belgian nationalists put forward the idea of a national party that would bridge the old divisions. They expressed their opinion in the [refugee](#) press (e.g. *Le XXe Siècle* in Le Havre) and found an audience in government circles. In occupied territory, Flemish activists, attracted by the [Flamenpolitik](#), accepted German support for achieving Flemish demands. In October 1916, Ghent State University was turned into a Flemish-language university, and in March 1917 the Germans installed a Flemish administration in Brussels for the Flemish part of the country and a francophone administration in Namur for the Walloon provinces.¹⁹

The Disintegration of the War Cabinet, the “Loppem Coup” and the Shift of Power at the End of the War

In 1917, the Belgian government in Le Havre entered a stage of increased internal conflict. Political disagreement and personal rivalry eroded the cabinet. One element of discord was the orientation of foreign policy. Should Belgium adhere to the Entente and become a full-fledged ally of France and Great Britain or should it maintain its neutral status? What claims would Belgium make at the end of the war: financial compensation or territorial annexations? Another element of discord was the attitude towards the Flemish question. In occupied territory a Council of Flanders, a German puppet instrument, supported the administrative division of Belgium; at the Yser front, unrest rose in the army as Flemish [soldiers](#) challenged discrimination by francophone officers. Some Flemish Catholic ministers wanted the government to give way to some of the soldiers' demands and to make post-war promises to the Flemish population. A substantial reshuffle of the cabinet occurred in August 1917. Beyens was sacked and de Broqueville took his portfolio, but the cabinet leader had to give way to King Albert and hand over his war department to a general. The new minister

immediately took repressive measures against Flemish unrest at the front. Moreover, a war committee of six members – four Catholics, one Liberal and one Socialist – was installed and presided over by the king.²⁰ Broqueville's position was continually under attack. In January 1918, the Liberal Hymans took over the foreign office, a portfolio that he would hold until the end of 1920, thus being the most important Belgian politician during the peace negotiations; de Broqueville was charged with the new department of national reconstruction. The left's position was reinforced as a second Socialist was appointed minister without a portfolio. In May 1918, de Broqueville resigned: the king was outraged at a new attempt to put the army command under ministerial responsibility and the cabinet leader was considered too conciliatory towards Flemish demands.²¹ [Gérard Cooreman \(1852-1926\)](#), a Catholic minister of state, one of the directors of the *Société Générale* and a former speaker of the house, succeeded as leader of the cabinet, but he was considered a transition figure.

In October 1918, with the prospect of German defeat, the centre of political activity shifted from Le Havre to Brussels, where meetings of the parliamentary groups took place. Socialists and Liberals claimed a Cabinet of National Union with half the portfolios for the left and an immediate reform (without constitutional revision) of the electoral system: one man, one vote. The Liberals explicitly excluded women's vote (allegedly said to favour the Catholics), the Socialists demanded the abolition of legal obstacles to union strikes. The Catholic Party, whose most prominent leaders were in Le Havre, was divided, a moderate group being prepared to compromise with the left and a more principled group refusing to give way. In the *Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation*, politicians of all parties had adhered to a post-war national union. In the meantime, as the Allied offensive was successful, King Albert moved his headquarters to [Loppem](#) Castle near Bruges.²²

When [revolution in Berlin](#) brought down [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) on 9 November 1918, and mutiny among the German soldiers created chaos in Brussels on 10 November 1918, the course to follow was clear for Francqui and the king. Informed in Loppem of the events in the capital by emissaries from Brussels on 11 November 1918 and after a meeting with Francqui in liberated Ghent on 13 November 1918, the king dismissed Cooreman and his cabinet. He bypassed the conservative Catholic faction and used the constitutional vacuum and his prestige to impose a new direction. He appointed [Léon Delacroix \(1867-1929\)](#), a Catholic lawyer without a political past and one of Francqui's partners in the *Comité National*, as the leader of the Cabinet of National Union, composed of six Catholics, three Liberals and three Socialists. On 22 November 1918, King Albert made a triumphant entry into the capital. In a speech before the two houses of parliament, still commanded by a Catholic majority, he presented his new government and made a gesture of appeasement to the country by announcing the immediate granting of universal suffrage for

men twenty-one years and older, without additional votes. In April 1919, the House of Representatives approved the electoral reform.

Conclusion

The war ended the hegemony of the Catholic Party. In the November 1919 elections, the Catholics lost their absolute majority. Many conservative politicians considered the Loppem episode a coup. However, Socialists and Liberals accepted the Catholic school legislation and did not form a coalition against the Catholics after the elections. The war brought about more democracy, but the trade-off between left and right in the post-war years also introduced a form of consociational power sharing in Belgian politics.

Emmanuel Gerard, KU Leuven

Notes

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External Links

- [Bissing, Friedrich Wilhelm von: A l'Université. Les journaux bruxellois publient cet arrêté: "... Les cours de l'Université de Gand se donneront en langue flamande ... Freiherr von Bissing", 1916 \(Ghent University Library\) \(Article\)](#)
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Rameau Subject Headings

[Belgique -- Politique et gouvernement -- 1914-1951 ; Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\)](#)

Key Person(s)

[Vandervelde, Emile](#); [Huysmans, Camille](#); [Davignon, Julien](#); [Beyens, Eugène](#); [Hymans,](#)

[Paul](#); [Francqui, Emile](#); [Cooreman, Gérard](#); [Delacroix, Léon](#); [Cauwelaert, Frans van](#); [d'Alviella, Eugène Goblet](#); [Schollaert, Franz](#); [Leopold I, King of the Belgians](#); [Helleputte, Georges](#); [Wilhelm II, German Emperor](#); [Albert I, King of the Belgians](#); [Broqueville, Charles Marie Pierre Albert, Baron de](#)

Key Location(s)

[Brussels](#); [Ghent](#); [Leuven](#); [Antwerp](#); [De Panne](#); [Le Havre](#)

Title

Governments, Parliaments and Parties (Belgium)

Author(s)

[Emmanuel Gerard](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Regional Thematic Article

Articles That Link Here

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