

## **“Independence for Flanders – good for democracy, good for Europe”**

**Lecture by John Laughland, Brussels, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2007.**

The question of the break-up of Belgium is no longer taboo in the Western European press. On the contrary, it is discussed openly as a possible, even likely future event. Most recently in *The Guardian* on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2007, Jon Henley wrote that the break-up seemed inevitable (even though he personally opposes it) while of course *The Economist* had written a similar thing in September.

The independence of Flanders has therefore become a matter of mainstream political debate.

What will the attitude of the rest of Europe be to the break-up of Belgium? As one surveys the geopolitics of post Cold War Europe, one can say only that one is struck by the double standards with which the EU and the US treat the question of national independence.

On the one hand, since 1991, no fewer than fifteen new states have emerged on the European continent as a result of secessionist movements (Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia). Powerful countries in the West worked actively for the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, and of course their efforts were successful. This is in spite of the fact that those states, unlike Belgium, were essentially united by a common language.

Now, indeed, the European Union is actively supporting a sixteenth secession, that of Kosovo. Following the election victory of the PDK in Kosovo's parliamentary elections on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> November - a party led by the former head of the Kosovo Liberation Army, Hashim Thaci - it is inevitable now that Kosovo will declare independence at some point between 10<sup>th</sup> December, when the deadline expires for the talks with Belgrade at the UN, and the end of the year.

The West has egged the Kosovo Albanians on, saying that it will recognise an independent Kosovo if the Albanians do indeed proclaim their independence. Such a move will represent a flagrant breach of international law, since the status of Kosovo as part of Serbia is governed by a U.N. Resolution passed in 1999.

The independence of Kosovo of course follows the secession of Montenegro from Serbia-Montenegro in June 2006, even though Serbs and Montenegrins are one and the same people, speaking the same language and sharing the same religion and history.

On the other hand, the West opposes secessions when they do not suit it geopolitically. Bosnia-Herzegovina is a case in point. When the Prime Minister of Republika Srpska called in September 2006 for a referendum to be held on the

secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia-Herzegovina, the international community's "High Representative" said that he would sack him unless he backed down. He did, but there is even now a crisis in Bosnia, as the new High Representative is trying to abrogate important parts of RS' autonomy. Bosnia is an EU colony - the 16,000 soldiers still stationed there (twelve years after the end of the war) are part of an EU military force – and the EU clearly does not want its territory to be divided.

The same goes for Transnistria in Moldova. Even though that territory voted by a massive majority in September 2006 for continued independence from Moldova, the West refused to recognise the results of that referendum. Indeed, Europe's main election-monitoring body, the OSCE, refused even to observe the poll saying that "The OSCE does not support a unilateral referendum questioning Moldova's territorial integrity." The author of that quotation is none other than the then OSCE chairman, the Belgian Foreign Minister Karel de Gucht. This is in spite of the fact that the legal reason why Moldova seceded from the USSR is that it revoked the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of September 1939, by means of which Bessarabia was annexed to the USSR. But that annexation also involved the annexation of Transnistria to what became the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, to which it had never previously belonged.

Further afield, the West also opposes independence movements in Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh) even though these territories, like Transnistria, have been independent for well over a decade.

So where does Belgium stand?

The reasons why the West opposes secession in Moldova, Bosnia and elsewhere are geopolitical and ideological. The EU wants to extend its writ deep into historic Russian territory and that is why it is not prepared to see Moldova divided. In the case of Bosnia, that artificial state was elevated, during the Yugoslav war, to an icon of multiculturalism (even though Yugoslavia itself had of course been a multi-ethnic state, as Serbia is today).

In my view, Europe will oppose the break-up of Belgium for the same reasons.

Of course there is no question that an independent Flanders could be a viable state. In terms of population, Flanders is bigger than the historic nation-states Denmark, Norway and Ireland, as well as than the more recently created states Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Cyprus, Malta - and obviously Luxembourg.

There is no question that Flanders has the requisite historic identity to constitute a sovereign state. It certainly has more claim to historical existence than Bosnia, an artificial state being held together as a last experiment in multi-nationalism. Flanders has exactly the same historic basis for a claim to independence

as Slovakia, Cyprus or Croatia (and, as I say, it is bigger than all three states). The English often joke and say "Name ten famous Belgians" and the list usually peters out after the fictional characters Tintin and Hercule Poirot. But it is obvious that you would have difficulty keeping the list to ten if you were asked to name famous Flemings - Rubens, Van Eyck, Memling and Hieronymous Bosch, for starters. Compare this to the thin or non-existent historical background of Estonia or Slovenia.

The reason why the break-up of Belgium will be opposed by Europe is that it will not serve the cause of European integration. With the partial exception of Czechoslovakia, the break-up of multi-ethnic states in Eastern Europe has helped Europe integration – on the basis of "divide and rule". Small bogus states with no real political existence provide good "lobby fodder" in the Council of Ministers – they take the EU's money and vote how they are told. It is obvious that very few of the secessions in Europe since 1991 have occurred as a result of a desire for real independence, or else the new states would not immediately have joined the EU and NATO. You can see this very clearly in the case of Montenegro, which will apply to join the EU within less than two years after becoming independent. Having adopted the euro in 2002, Montenegro has just signed a "Stabilisation Agreement" with the European Union. This Stabilisation Agreement is itself 680 pages long - quite a lot of legislation for a country of barely 600,000 people (Montenegro is just one and half times the size of the city of Antwerp) but of course nothing in comparison to the 80,000 pages of primary EU legislation which Montenegro will have to adopt when it joins the EU, which it hopes to do very soon.

On the contrary, the break-up of Belgium would show that the fault-line which is at the heart of the European project runs right through the EU's very capital. That fault-line is the contradiction between democracy and supranationalism. Flemings of course understand that a supranational state is inimical to democracy, and that it destroys it. The larger nations of Europe do not understand this because they are relatively influential within the EU and because the prominence of their national political life obscures the fact that they are, in fact, governed by the EU, which is a totally undemocratic and even anti-democratic organisation.

There is not time in a short speech to rehearse the arguments about why the EU is undemocratic. Everyone knows that the main decisions are taken in secret by the unelected Commission and the unaccountable Council of Ministers. National parliaments are systematically emasculated by the EU, which gives governments the right to make laws, in secret. The fact that the defunct European Constitution is even now being re-introduced, having been rejected in referendums in France and the Netherlands in 2005 (two founder member states of the EU) shows that the EU is prepared to override the results of democratic direct polls in order to achieve its aims. Democracy is actively suppressed by European integration.

The break-up of Belgium would be a highly symbolic of this fatal flaw. The EU is of course based on the historic reconciliation between the old countries of the original Holy Roman Empire – France, Germany, Italy and the Low Countries. The specifically Franco-German aspect of this reconciliation is mirrored in microcosm in

the coexistence of the Flemings and Walloons within Belgium. Many Belgian leaders including the late King Baudoin indeed said that the EU was a sort of Greater Belgium. The collapse of the Belgian model would be an event of immense significance and would, in my view, deliver a further blow to the already faltering project of European integration.

It would be essential, in my view, that an independent Flanders do not, therefore, immediately apply to re-join the EU, but that instead it negotiate its own terms of association, confining the ultimate deal to the obvious things which people like about the EU – free travel without passports, freedom of trade – and refusing to sign up to any of the EU treaties themselves. All of these treaties, starting with the Treaty of Rome, provide for the vast majority of legislative power to be transferred to the EU. All new member states have to adopt the totality of the so-called *acquis communautaire* (more than 80,000 pages of primary legislation) and therefore any state which signs such a treaty is no longer independent in any real sense. Of course the centralisation of power will increase only further with the reform treaty, in which states will lose further powers including over immigration. That treaty, indeed, contains a “enabling clause” which allows the EU to increase its own powers indefinitely and so further centralisation is inevitable.

There is therefore no point Flanders being independent of Belgium if it is not independent of the EU too, for otherwise it would only exchange the rule of Brussels for the rule of Brussels. The “Europe of the regions” model is a trap which would only make Flanders into a sort of Wallonia, the recipient of EU aid in return for political compliance in everything.

There are plenty of precedents in Europe for such a free association with the EU. For free travel, Norway and Iceland (neither of which belongs to the EU) both belong to the Schengen system which allows free travel without passports. Switzerland has signed extensive bilateral trade treaties with the EU which do not compromise its national sovereignty. As far as the currency is concerned, there are countries which belong to the EU which do not use the euro (the UK, Denmark and Sweden, plus the new member states except Slovenia which adopted it this year) and there are non-EU states which do, like Montenegro.

The European Union now displays all the worst characteristics of Belgium itself: an impossibly complicated institutional structure which is kept that way deliberately in order to serve vested interests; an opaque and deliberately undemocratic decision-making process; a vast system of internal financing which is used to pervert the political process by buying off certain powerful interest groups; and of course rampant corruption. By showing up the Belgian model itself as a lie, the independence of Flanders would provide a great service to democracy and to the whole of Europe. Flanders, indeed, could show the way for other countries whose people would also like to leave the EU. For that reason, I wish you all success.