The issue of political identity based on language has become so entrenched in Belgian politics that it threatens the break-up of the state. Linguistic communalism is the principal, though not the exclusive, cleavage in contemporary Belgian politics. The critical problem is how to accommodate two language communities, each dominant in its own region, to the shared endeavour of a nation state. The problématique belge is a residuum of history, though it was not always as politically potent as it has become during recent decades. The fusion of the south Netherlands peoples into a single state in 1830 represented a triumph of common purpose over much less palatable options for the two cultural groups inhabiting a territory that bestrides the ancient fault lines between Romance and Germanic culture. Friction over language and cultural differences eventually crystallised into a full-blown ethnic conflict and what was once merely an irritant in national politics has assumed crisis proportions.

Considerable political energy has been expended in an attempt to resolve this issue. Whether this endeavour succeeds or not will depend on settling outstanding issues during the forthcoming stage of constitutional reform. Prospects for success depend on maintaining the spirit of compromise that has prevailed during the four previous stages. History offers some cause for optimism, though there are no certain outcomes in a country where intercommunity cooperation is under unprecedented pressure from both sides of a growing divide. Political elites in both communities have so far approached the matter of a problematic identity with both imagination and commitment. Regardless of mutual hostility from entrenched factions on both sides, those engaged in the reform of the state have reached much the same conclusions as the founders of Belgium: that however unpalatable the prospect of sharing a common homeland with people of different aspirations and political identity, the vagaries of outright separation threaten even greater uncertainty in an unpredictable world.

Survival of the state is far from being a foregone conclusion. On the surface at least, it seems a less likely prospect with each cycle of constitutional change. The pragmatic option of enduring an ever more
tense marriage of political convenience, instead of negotiating a messy divorce, has rather less appeal now than it did even a decade ago, an unravelling of a common purpose due, in part, to a shifting geopolitical landscape. At the outset, the unitary state was the normal model for European state-building. It guaranteed security of sorts, fostered a sense of belonging in a changing world, facilitated industrialisation and market-making, guaranteed an effective fiscal base and sound money, and ensured political self-determination. At this stage of political development, alternative forms of governance were generally regarded as eccentric at best, and at worst contrived. Federalism, for instance, was one such exotic model, though there was a brief acquaintance with federal government in the republic of Les États Belgiques Unies/United Netherlands States, established after the rebellion of the Netherlands provinces in 1790 against Austrian rule. Otherwise, multinational government meant either the despotism of imperial governance or imposed incorporation in 1815 of the southern and predominantly Catholic provinces of Brabant, Hainaut and Liège into the Netherlands. The result was civil war and rebellion in 1830.

The Belgian state that emerged drew, initially, on a manufactured sense of national identity, manipulated to its own advantage by a francophone elite which adopted a strategy of assimilation. Shared historic experience, and what passed for mutual interests, supposedly overlaid residual cultural differences, reinforced by an invented territorial ‘past’ rooted in a medieval ‘Belgian’ heartland with its own ‘national’ icons, such as the lion of Brabant. For a time this elite-led bargain held.

From ‘founding identities’ to fighting over tongues

Linguistic divisions were accommodated within this founding bargain, but latent cultural tensions were only ‘resolved’ by being discounted. Flemish identity was simply overlaid by a dominant francophone culture using the convenient alibi of universal values to disguise its narrow intentions. The strategy worked well enough, and francophone culture was embraced by Flemish aspirants in public life and civil society alike. The predominant goal of ‘Belgian-ness’, a common national endeavour, was maintained by superimposing the culturally ‘superior’ French tongue on both primordial Flemish and Walloon dialects.

Tensions were evident, nevertheless, from the outset. There was particular opposition to the law (1831) that established French as the sole official language of politics, administration, the law and commerce. Flemish cultural interests resisted assimilation with a campaign (launched in 1840) for recognition, if not yet parity, of their language. The issue was temporarily marginalised by the growth of democratic politics whose predominant cleavages, as with mass politics in Europe’s other industrial states, were those of class rather than territorial or cultural awareness. However, the identity issue was now at least in the public domain, where it has remained ever since. Government
responded with caution, establishing a Commission for Grievances (1856) which recommended bilingualism in Flanders and unilingualism in Wallonia, but then fuelled a rising sense of exclusion in the former community by failing to legislate these modest reforms. Even after language laws did reach the statute book they merely permitted bilingualism for non-francophone speakers in the judicial process (1873), public administration (1878) and secondary education (1883). There was some success for an inclusive Belgian identity when both languages were used on bank notes and postage stamps. Agitation continued, eventually ensuring parity of the languages (1898), but it was at most a symbolic victory, as discrimination continued against non-francophone citizens in employment, education, and the public services. Obstacles to personal advancement continued, regardless of formal linguistic parity, and increased tensions encouraged a marked shift in the direction of the campaign when the Flemish movement widened its ambitions to demand complete cultural parity. The political stakes were raised, from merely the demand for language recognition to a claim to identity rooted in ethnicity as such, leading to "the emergence of a new Flemish ethnic identity, which for the first time could be separated from Belgian identity, although to a certain extent still forming a part of it." The problématique belge has been the abiding legacy of this shift.

The consequences of politicising ethnic identity

Ideological prominence in matters of ethnicity and racial origin during the present century has consolidated a sense of Flemish ethnie as the basis of a distinct political identity, calling into question the very meaning of Belgian nationality and by degrees destabilising the state to the point of threatening the country’s existence. German occupation in the two world wars encouraged Flemish separatism; Germany’s defeat in 1945, and the recriminations in Belgium that followed the inquest on the occupation, brought to the surface deep-seated antagonisms, fuelling a bitter debate over patriotism throughout the postwar decade. Anti-Flemish feelings and francophone triumphalism were rekindled as the country tried to exorcise the ghosts of collaboration. A dispute over the wartime role of the King, leading eventually to his abdication, exacerbated Flemish/Walloon divisions. Meanwhile, another issue, a dispute over state subsidies for denominational education, distracted attention, until it was resolved in 1958. Thereafter, however, cultural and language rights, and ethnic identity, grew in significance. By the 1960s the language issue was the focus of simmering communal friction. What would have been an acceptable compromise in a previous era was now upstaged by accelerating demands. Flanders finally secured unilingual status in 1962 and the cultural autonomy that went with it. The country was divided into two unilingual zones, but Brussels and some of its environs—located in historic Flanders but long the symbol of franco-
phone ascendancy—became a bilingual region, and as such a new cultural battleground. Economic change served to intensify the issue of linguistic/cultural parity. Agricultural decline, initially costly to Flanders, brought economic restructuring which encouraged a new regional prosperity; and with it the political self-confidence to assert a renewed sense of ethnic identity. Wallonia’s experience was the reverse of this trend. A steady decline in heavy industry saw unparalleled uncertainty, reactivating a long dormant sense of Wallonian nationalism. Both sides of a widening cultural divide mobilised, either in pursuit or in defence of their own advantage, adding to a climate of opinion that downgraded the idea of ‘Belgian-ness’.

The politics of identity became the principal modus vivendi of national politics, which by degrees precipitated nothing less than a crisis of state. Prior to the 1960s, language rights were a Flemish grievance: Wallonian concerns were primarily economic. Thereafter, economic and cultural issues became fused in both communities. Anti-Flemish feeling in Wallonia (and to a lesser extent in Brussels) confronted an increasingly assertive identity within Flanders. Ethnic parties mobilised, some of extremist disposition. Even the established ‘national’ parties, once ranged along the traditional left-right ideological spectrum, divided into their linguistic components, adding to the difficulty of negotiating stable coalition governments. The once routine consociational procedures that had kept political crisis at bay were harder to sustain, though to date political elites—and a majority of the people—have still preferred to negotiate a national bargain than move towards outright separation. The most significant outcome of this accommodation has been to remake the unitary state, obliging the political class to restructure the architecture of government. The critical question remains whether, after four stages in the reform of the state, and with another stage imminent, the federal experiment has accommodated distinct cultural identities, thus preventing the disintegration of Belgium, or merely postponed (and perhaps accelerated) the demise of an artificial state.

Unravelling the unitary state: accommodation or demise?

By 1970 it was apparent that ethnic identity was sufficiently entrenched amongst the dominant linguistic communities. What was equally clear was that the unitary state, established for the very purpose of nation-building under francophone domination, was now anathema to Flemish identity and self-interest. Reform at this stage was, however, more reactive than considered, an ad hoc rather than a priori project. Incremental adjustments were made as socio-economic change fundamentally altered the balance of advantage between the communities, and reform of the state followed this piecemeal pattern over more than two decades.² Its central concern was how best to satisfy increasingly divergent communal interests without tearing asunder the state.
As events have accelerated, the rise of separatist tendencies means that reconciling both communities to the idea of a unitary state is now simply out of the question. The challenge is how to accommodate competing territorial interests within a loose-structured federal polity as an alternative to outright partition. Extremist parties have tested the nerve of moderate politicians in both communities, as well as raising the stakes of constitutional politics. After 1991, the extremist and separatist party Vlaams Blok (VB), became committed to a state restricted to a Flemish ethnie (and campaigning on the slogan ‘own people first’). Its sanitised version spoke of a language ‘test’ for citizenship to curb francophone immigration, but it was also wedded to explicit racist notions by proposing to restore jus sanguinis to Belgian nationality law, so excluding non-whites. Meanwhile, Wallonian counterparts, such as the Mouvement Wallon pour le Retour à la France, demanded secession from Belgium. The Front National (FN) is a racist party that celebrates Belgian patriotism on its own narrow ethnic terms. The far right-wing faction, Agir stands as the ‘defender’ of the Wallonian people.

Even the mainstream parties have contrived, in this febrile climate, to prise loose the cement of a common nationhood. Under growing pressure within its own electoral heartland, from a constituency facing multiple socio-economic disadvantages, the Wallonian Parti Socialiste (PS) has begun to play the cultural card alongside more familiar class politics, though not entirely to the exclusion of an inclusive sense of ‘Belgitude’ rooted in the left’s commitment to universal political values. Elements, too, amongst both the Flemish Christian Democrats and Liberal parties have responded favourably to the idea of a semi-autonomous Flanders, independent in all but name albeit within a loose Belgian confederation.

Centrifugal tensions are apparent on all sides, but the more insistent threat to a Belgium state comes from Flanders where cultural identity has been transformed into a politicised ethnicity bolstered in recent years by economic well-being and demographic supremacy. Important differences of historical conditioning and sociological experience account for the relative absence in Wallonia of an ethnic as opposed to a merely an abiding sense of cultural identity. It can be argued that Wallonia clings more stubbornly to the idea of Belgium because it needs Flanders to prop up its ailing regional economy, but this is only a part of a more complex reality. The legacy of an assimilationist Belgian culture is deeply etched into the Wallonian psyche. The region’s industrial base always attracted immigrants from Flanders who were readily absorbed into its class-based culture. The francophone culture has always been more reflective of universalism than of exclusive, particularistic values.

The significance of this tense battleground should not be underestimated. Federalism is certainly the heart of the matter: how to remake,
Indeed reimagine, a once unitary state in order to accommodate rising ethnic-communal tensions within an inclusive and democratic political architecture and thus avoid break-up. One critical question is whether federalism is more the problem than the solution. Some observers have argued that federalising Belgium has had the very opposite effect to that intended. Institutionalising—and expanding in regular cycles of constitutional reform—the differences between distinct cultural identities has progressively denuded the state of either meaning or common purpose. More than that, increasing the autonomy of territorial governance has accelerated ethnic tensions, obliging the political class to contemplate the previously unthinkable, outright separation. According to this scenario, federalising the state can be construed as an institutionalised response to a fast disappearing resolution to live together in an agreed national partnership.5

The obverse of this pessimistic narrative is to see federalism as a testament to the commitment of most the political class to calm communal tensions. The pace of recent developments have made it difficult to balance communal interests, though this is precisely the objective of federalism. What is clear is that the unitary state has been federalised by stages. Unilingual zones became the basis for francophone and Flemish cultural communities, permitting a degree of autonomy in language matters, though not initially in the politically sensitive area of education. Three economic regions were also instituted, in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, each with authority over some aspects of economic policy. Both principal ethnies enjoyed parity in the arrangements of national government. But these arrangements amounted to little more than devolution as an attempt to facilitate self-government. Limits were placed on the discretion of community councils, while the supremacy of the national parliament, the embodiment of sovereignty in the unitary state, was ensured by the requirement that all laws passed under the new jurisdictions needed to be endorsed by a constituant (two-thirds) parliamentary majority.

The unitary state then began to unravel, with the politicians in uncharted territory and lacking any consensus over the next stage. The Brussels question became the main bone of contention. Linguistically mixed communes in the capital’s suburbs defied a neat territorial solution. Located geographically in Flanders, but a ‘francophied city’ since 1830, Brussels was on the front line of rising ethnic tension. Demography ensured tense politics: Fleming moderates demanded linguistic parity and power-sharing, more militant voices preferred inclusion in Flanders, while the francophone majority demanded full regional status. As such, the capital issue has become the principal gauge of success of the projected reforms, though far from being resolved and certain to re-emerge in the forthcoming constitutional round. The reform project was launched in 1970. A familiar pattern emerged: incremental adjustment by concentrating on issues where compromise
was feasible, leaving aside more difficult matters until a period of reflection restored the will to tackle them. The normal exigencies of politics reinforce this cyclical pattern. The politics of identity is, after all, a critical but not the exclusive concern of government. Other issues—redistributive policy, ecological, civil rights and so on—retain political purchase and periodically relegate the constitutional question to a low ranking on the national agenda. The reform project has also been waylaid at various critical junctures by mounting economic crisis. After 1970, for instance, the upheaval in the management of the international political economy raised critical issues for every modern state.

It was only in the 1980s that Belgium’s political class was able to return to the unresolved matters of constitutional reform. Intensive negotiations ensured a consensus to take reform a stage further. Two language communities were instituted, as well as recognition of the small German speaking enclave in the south east, although economic development was reserved to the Wallonian region in which the German community was located. Brussels remained the principal outstanding issue. The tenor of these latest changes was devolutionary, in as much as legislation by subnational authorities was accorded the full status of law, though parliament retained its status as the supreme sovereign body. Moreover, regardless of modest prerogatives over public expenditure in devolved matters, the principal source of revenue remained grant aid from the centre, with the central revenue department continuing to collect taxes and direct the national finances. Nevertheless, these latest changes represented a clear stage in deconcentrating power from the centre, and there was a growing consensus in favour of more far-reaching reform. An agenda was agreed that amounted to nothing less than federalising the state: the transfer of social and related policy matters to the subnational authorities which were to be directly elected, an agreement that regional legislation had parity of status with national law, and was so regarded by national agencies and citizens alike; with provision, too, for ‘own fiscal resources’—an elaborate formula for allocating revenue from death duties, registration and radio/television licence fees, a proportion of VAT returns and other national taxes, as well as the right to levy a supplement to national income tax and to exercise independent borrowing rights. A proportion of a national solidarity fund would then replace bloc grants from the centre. Effective arbitration procedures—a sine qua non of federalism—are intended to settle demarcation disputes between complementary or overlapping jurisdictions. This ambitious agenda was been the basis of subsequent reform.

A programme along these lines was implemented between 1980 and 1993. It included an arbitration court, extra fiscal powers for communities and regions, additional devolution from central government in education, culture and language policy, in transport, public works, energy policy, the environment, supervision of local authorities, town
and country planning and scientific research.\(^6\) Settling the status of Brussels was postponed until, with most of the straightforward issues out of the way, energies could be concentrated on resolving this impasse. The eventual settlement was a familiar positive-sum bargain that fits the Belgian consociational temper. On one side, francophones secured regional status for the city, but only after agreeing to reserve to central government some responsibility for managing affairs in a city that is both the national capital and the seat of the European Union. The minority Flemish community, on the other hand, secured a guaranteed role in the governance of the new region in proportion to its demographic size, giving it, in effect, a virtual veto over affairs.

The resolution of the Brussels question has confirmed an asymmetrical federalism. The coexistence of ethnic communities in Brussels and its far-flung suburbs in the Flanders region has prevented a more symmetrical territorial arrangement. Instead, the less than clear-cut demography requires a novel federal architecture to ensure that the city is governable. The council of the Brussels capital-region divides into its linguistic constituencies when dealing with community matters but sits as a composite body when common or regional issues are discussed. In order to ensure maximum consensus, as well as to reassure the Flemish minority, some responsibility for the city’s affairs remains with central government, and the city-region’s legislation has less formal authority than that of the other two regions. The arbitration court retains the right to overrule Brussels’ legislation if it is deemed to be contrary to an acceptable national standard of communal equity and non-discrimination. The executive, too, must be communally balanced.

The federal end game

The most recent, but certainly not the final stage in the reform project occurred with the formal acknowledgement in 1993 that Belgium is a fully fledged federal state.\(^7\) The Accord de la St Michel completed the gradual federalising of the state, formally demarcating the respective powers of the federal and constituent governments. The regions now manage most aspects of economic and employment policy, trade, urban planning, housing and environment policy and some aspects of scientific policy, supervision of local government, agriculture—except pricing policy (which has implications both for a single national market and Belgium’s obligations to the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy) and external trade. The communities deal with cultural matters (including the broadcast media and sport), education, social matters (including health and family policy). Substate authorities are now ‘federal authorities’, directly elected from 1999 and with increased powers; their executives have the status of governments in their own right, able to engage in foreign relations: for instance, signing treaties with foreign governments or international organisations, albeit only in those matters for which they have competence and after consulting with
the centre, but a prerogative which nevertheless enhances their authority and political profile. The imperative of adopting a coherent position in the increasingly important international arena, where so much of what is eventually legislated as domestic policy is determined, helps modulate out-and-out separatism. The federal state and the subnational authorities have adopted a cooperation accord (1994) that enjoins each side to act in concert in external relations. There is rather more evidence of a truly federalist tenor in setting constitutional norms; revision of procedures is no longer at the sole discretion of the centre. The constituent authorities have, albeit modest, constitutional prerogatives. Subject to a two-thirds majority of elected members, they may, without reference to the centre, alter their own size, electoral boundaries and procedures.

Fiscal federalism is less extensive than it might be. The centre manages the national budget, though it now raises revenue for policy matters over which it has little direct control. The critical boundaries of fiscal federalism are yet to be determined. There is a residual tension between central and regional governments over the management of macro-economic policy, maintaining an equitable internal market, responsibility for the national debt and social expenditure. Other sources of friction familiar to federal arrangements promise a febrile politics. The centre, as in any federal polity, retains considerable reserve powers in the devolved areas and manages the usual common services—defence and security, foreign policy, citizenship, some legal matters and judicial review, monetary policy, social security (family allowance, pensions, unemployment benefit) and public health. Some concurrent or reserve powers exist, too, in devolved matters where an overarching national interest is deemed likely to collide with narrower communal interests: inter alia, setting environmental and professional standards, basic social security norms, energy pricing, broadcasting regulations, national cultural and scientific policy, infra-structure and national transport networks. The administration of justice is also subject to central oversight.

The parliamentary system—once the fount of national sovereignty—has been substantially revised to accommodate the shift to a fully federal state. The lower house (Chamber) has gained some powers, reflecting its critical role as the sole democratic institution that embodies whatever remains of national solidarity. The Senate, meanwhile, has been substantially reduced, both in size and powers, and is now merely a place for discussion and deliberation on the great issues of the moment—another indication of the increased authority of the regional tier of governance.

Reform of the state remains an incremental rather than a conclusive project, with occasional bursts of energy followed by a period of adjustment to unprecedented change on the ground. As such, it was agreed to revisit the constitutional issue after the 1999 elections, when all authorities are directly elected. Meanwhile, Belgium has continued
to experience a period of intense political pressure, excessive even by its own frenetic standards, which intensified the demand for further reform and emphasised widespread resentment in both communities at political pelf and administrative incompetence. Corruption at the very highest level, and loss of faith in the effectiveness of the policing and criminal justice systems after the Dutroux paedophile case, inspiring the so-called ‘White March’ and brought 300,000 protesters to Brussels in 1996. A protracted crisis of national governance has led to multiple ministerial resignations and criminal prosecution, most notably the Agusta-Dassault trial (1998) in the wake of revelations about bribes paid into the coffers of both regional Socialist Parties in exchange for defence contracts, and whose defendants included four former ministers, two of them deputy premiers. More than half the cabinet have been forced from office between 1995–99. A scare over public health management, with dioxin poisoning of food supplies, broke during the recent election campaign—a débâcle that saw supermarkets emptied of chicken, eggs and meat. It provoked two further ministerial resignations and, above all, confirmed the broad perception of government incompetence that touched politicians of all mainstream parties in both communities.

Changes further afield also served to increase public ambivalence about the meaning and expediency of the state. The government’s decision to join the European Monetary Union in the first wave, despite a budget deficit double the target set in the Maastricht treaty of 3% of GDP and a massive public debt burden, required prolonged and painful fiscal retrenchment. The deficit did fall to 1.3%, and the debt subsided by 1999 from 135 to 118% of GDP, with the economy back to surplus growth, but this has been achieved at heavy political cost. A notable consequence of EMU membership, for instance, has been a sea-change in national economic management, including the much publicised take over by foreign (principally French and Dutch) companies of many flagship Belgian companies. The Société Générale de Belgique which formerly controlled a third of the economy, underlines this trend of losing national control of some of the key levers of economic management, an outcome whose irony is not lost on Belgians aware of their own history. Belgium once again faces, albeit in circumstances altogether different from those that confronted the state’s founders, a squeeze by more powerful neighbours.

This shift in global power puts into perspective more narrowly focused tribal quarrels about the locus of constitutional authority. What this will mean over the longer term for a residual national psyche is less than clear. The circumstances of such changes do not quite add up to an impression of a state without an abiding sense of its own national interest, since external forces tend to give a sense of perspective absent when the principal focus of affairs is shaped by abiding domestic rivalries. Besieged it may be, but Belgium (on this reading of events) is
not yet a state wholly lacking a common purpose. To this extent, Belgium is not facing terminal decline. But there is a mood of perplexity which may have any number of outcomes. On the one hand, it may deepen already implacable communal identities, as the impact of globalising forces has elsewhere, by persuading culturally coherent fragments that their best option for surviving a relentlessly competitive international economy is to play to its ethnic strengths and to cut adrift from the drag of a larger polity that submerges and discounts their particular interests. On the other hand, it may enjoin them to realise a common fate and give them an awareness that the sheer task of economic survival requires a pooling of efforts in order to survive. The reform project is a response, in part, to this predicament. It is unclear what its outcome will be—whether federalism will be underpinned or outright separation—but the scale of the task is apparent from the outstanding issues yet to be settled in the forthcoming reform round.

Facing up to divorce or contemplating a shared future

The 1999 elections were a minor earthquake in Belgian politics, confirming the steady decline in support for the Flemish Christian Democrats (Christelijke Volkspartij—CVP), the longstanding national powerbrokers; a modest rise in the vote of the Flemish Liberals (Vlaams Liberale Democrat—VLD), though not of their Wallonian sister party (Parti Réformateur Liberal PRL); and a surge for both Green parties (Agalev and Ecolo) helped by the dioxin débâcle but rewarded too for their steadfast endorsement of communal cooperation. Support for the extremist VB was less than anticipated on the basis of pre-campaign opinion polls, thereby preventing an impasse in the Brussels assembly that would certainly have complicated the 1999 reform round. These elections have added, nevertheless, to the difficulty of finding sufficient consensus for the next stage. The national power balance has shifted from a centre-left to a right-left axis under parties diametrically opposed over both ideological and constitutional preferences. It remains to be seen, with Flemish Liberal and Wallonian Socialists as the principal coalition partners, whether a constituant majority exists in the Chamber for dealing with what are, after all, unresolved and immensely perplexing constitutional issues. The return to national government of the VLD, a party hardly noted for its benign outlook on the present federal arrangements, and the exclusion of the centrist CVP and Parti Social Chrétien (PSC), the most consistent architects of communal accommodation, promises difficult negotiations.

These events have put at the epicentre of affairs a party whose leading lights are, at best, lukewarm about the federalist trajectory, together with a party widely perceived as the very embodiment of venality. In the circumstances, the 1999 reform round promises to be the most contested so far. Even the CVP, painfully aware of electoral ground lost to its more extreme regional rivals, is now more inclined to intransi-
gence, challenging much in a federal formula that it was instrumental in negotiating. One particularly unhelpful contribution to the present debate illustrates precisely the degree of consociational slippage in a movement once noted for common sense on communal matters. The Minister President of Flanders, Luc Van den Brande, has taken up populist Wallonia-bashing, criticising that region’s ‘sick man’ status and jibing at its ‘Marxist economic policies’. The stakes have been raised, too, by the growing support in both the Chamber and regional assemblies for extremist parties in both communities (most notably VB) which support a separatist agenda or worse, an unalloyed xenophobic celebration of what it deems ethnic/racial ‘virtues’.

Evidence of a rising temperature can be seen in the re-emergence of the bilingual quarrel in the mixed communes around Brussels. Six communes, formally part of Flanders region but with substantial francophone minorities or majorities, and each providing both public services and documents in both languages, were ordered (1998) on the instructions of the Flemish regional Interior Minister to rescind this provision. The six mayors resisted the instruction, arguing that it challenged their legal status as ‘communes facilité’: that is, communes where official use of both languages is permitted under the 1962 law. The Flemish region has ruled that hereafter no commune shall issue official documents in French unless a resident specifically requests it; and that no such documentation will be valid unless first issued in Flemish. It insisted that the ‘original arrangement was only intended as temporary until francophone residents acquired Flemish. This dispute, marginal as to its demographic impact, has far-reaching political implications for the approaching constitution round, mirroring the equally significant tribalism of the Fourons/Voeren dispute in 1995 – a Flemish enclave in Wallonia. The same issue has reappeared in Brussels where Flemish politicians have resisted an EU directive that permits non-nationals voting rights in local elections, arguing that as these immigrants speak French rather than Dutch, they are more likely to vote for francophone candidates. The Minister for Brussels in the Flemish regional government, a leading CVP member, refused to allow the change, unless the federal government guaranteed automatic representation for the Flemish community in the Brussels assembly.

This issue is as potent now as when it first surfaced. Cultural exclusivism continues to simmer on the surface of politics, a stark reminder of what is at stake for the negotiators who must address this still raw issue. The Flemish Laatste Nieuws in August 1999 summarised the elemental, still unresolved question of political identity reflected in these quarrels as follows: ‘What are we doing together? What should we ask the federal government to do? Such questions on the ultimate meaning of Belgium have to be answered in the end. If we avoid them the volcano will explode.’
The principal contentious issues for the next constitution reform round are as follows.

Federal taxation arrangements. The 1989 financial agreement, whereby the federal government continues to collect the bulk of taxation but distributes these revenues to regional governments to meet their expenditure, was always an interim arrangement. The logic of rising disparities of opportunity in a country where one cultural community is disproportionately more prosperous than another, raises the stakes of fiscal federalism. The negotiators will have to return to this issue, precisely because of the growing gulf in the perceived self-interest of the respective communities. There was only interim settlement of this thorny issue in 1993, with further reform postponed, following the usual practice of piecemeal adjustments which use up the political capital required for more far-reaching reform, but with the issues at least clarified for a future constitutional round.

As with redistributive politics in any fragmented society, this issue has the potential for exacerbating intercommunal relations. In short, Flanders has more to gain, Wallonia most to lose from separating out the public finances so as to ensure a closer link between the regional contributions to national revenue and the regional expenditure levels. So far, the impact of devolving fiscal functions to the regions has been weakened by central government’s retention of the taxation prerogative and the allocation of revenue share by bloc grants. In addition, the differential service provision that would result from public spending based on purely demographic calculations is adjusted by use of a compensation mechanism—a ‘national solidarity fund’—to ensure a degree of equity in public goods across the communal divide. Flemish interests regard the present arrangement as a direct subsidy to Wallonia, preferring a fiscal formula that more closely balances the ratio of public expenditure in the regions with their contribution to GNP. It was felt to be inopportune to tackle this sensitive issue in 1993. Instead, the Flemish centre-right settled for a review of finance procedures within the decade. In view of the growing regional disparity, both in the levels of prosperity and employment opportunities, compounded by the severe economic downturn that has disproportionately affected Wallonia, this issue promises to be a real test of what remains of a residual national solidarity between the communities.

Federalising social security. Much the same can be said about the parallel demand by some Flemish politicians to federalise the national social security system. Economic interests and ethnic identity are unavoidably linked. Flemish assertiveness is, in no small measure, a direct reflection of shifts in the balance of material and demographic advantage between the communities. Profiting from population growth, inward investment and the relocation of the tertiary and new technology sectors to a region at the very heart of the new European market, Flanders has seen economic regeneration and falling unemployment.
The Language Valley, once a battlefield of the Great War, has become a European ‘Silicon Valley’. Prosperity, likewise, has consolidated the position of centre/right parties in a predominantly conservative political culture. Wallonia’s economic fortunes, on the other hand, have declined: deindustrialisation and unemployment have increased the region’s dependence on social welfare transfers.

The Socialists, meanwhile, have maintained their electoral pre-eminence, regardless of recent scandals. Regular PS participation in national coalitions has helped maintain one of the most generous social security systems in the continent, though costly to business, with average wage costs at some 15% higher than for Belgium’s principal EU competitors. This burden has provoked resistance from centre-right liberals, demanding reform of inflexible, non-competitive wage-bargaining and social security arrangements. The incoming VLD-led government will be rather less squeamish about tackling this issue head on.

The close connection between ideological preference and political identity affects constitutional discourse. Flemish opinion sees, by and large, only advantage from federalising social welfare provision. It is amenable now to the arguments of those preferring, at the very least, a region as hermetically sealed as possible from the exogenous drain on its enterprise by profligate Wallonians. In a country now confronted by some unpalatable economic choices, as it strives to meet the demanding fiscal criteria for participation in EMU, this issue, too, is bound to loom larger still.

Some of the tension from the debate is attributable to the relative deprivation that accrues when one self-identified community perceives lack of interest by another. This is a familiar feature of territorial politics that only widespread prosperity and employment opportunities can settle. The recent efforts by the Wallonian region to attract inward investment and employment will be crucial to resolving this grievance, though success is by no means assured, or may not come soon enough. The prognosis is, at best, mixed: transforming an archaic industrial base, reskilling a traditional workforce, promoting more flexible work practices and coping with massive environmental clean-up costs present a formidable challenge. On the positive side, Hainaut, the most populous province, has acquired formal status as an EU Objective 1 area, and Liège is classified as an Objective 2 area. As such, both are eligible for development aid. Moreover, Wallonia’s workforce has a residuum of skills and is mostly multilingual, and there is abundant land for development (including surplus office space) and an excellent transport infrastructure in a region at the very core of the EU market. The Office for Foreign Investors (1991) had already attracted some $6 billions worth of inward investment in the decade up to 1997. Economic regeneration takes time and patience as well as resources: meanwhile, communal relations will not be well served by calls from clear economic
winners across the language divide to force the less advantaged region to take full responsibility for its own welfare.

**Federalising the public debt.** The improvement in the state of the national finances has not removed indebtedness or abated the Flemish preference to apportion its burdens ‘equitably’ so as not to penalise its own ‘thrift’ by carrying the welfare burden of prodigal neighbours. Reducing the debt level to 118% of GDP is only a relative achievement. It remains twice the Maastricht criterion of 60%, though debt reduction is a central objective of fiscal policy and there is a 6% surplus in the annual budget put by to cover retrenchment.

Whether this strategy will satisfy the demand from Flanders for wholesale reallocation, indeed a repatriation, of the public debt remains to be seen. As with the parallel debate on federalising social security, such compromises seem unlikely to appease a population convinced that its own enterprise is subsidising wasteful outsiders. Restricting growth in public expenditure (to 1.3% against projected economic growth of 2.4% for the current financial year), and a reduction in the proportion of GDP allocated to public expenditure (from 38 to 37.7%), is regarded by critics of current arrangements as no more than trifling measures. Flemish opinion regards the federal government’s reluctance to curb public spending as clear evidence of a regime whose political will is paralysed by archaic fiscal notions, the counter view regards the demand for reallocating the debt burden as sheer malice.

**Policing and legal reform.** The spectacle of local police services and the national gendarmerie refusing to share information in the hunt for a child rapist, each force preferring to win plaudits for solving the case on its own, merely adds to public disquiet over cumulate ineptitude. The Dutroux débâcle, and other instances of police incompetence, have facilitated consensus—the so-called ‘Octopus’ eight-party initiative—to reform the criminal justice system. Legislation is already going through parliament to replace three existing police forces by a single federal force; communal forces and gendarmerie brigades are to be fused into ‘zonal’ units at local level and a federal prosecutor’s office is to be instituted to coordinate national investigations. Judges will cease to be political appointments linked to local authorities, but will be appointed by a Supreme Council of Justice elected by judges and senators. This initiative should reinforce the cement of national self-interest, enhancing in some degree the perception of a national endeavour long associated with nation statehood—the reasonable expectation that citizens should enjoy public order and safety.

**Federal asymmetry and the Brussels question.** As a predominantly francophone island within Flanders, Brussels reflects the very tensions that are the root of the problematique belge. Capital-region status and the presence of the European Commission have brought the city unparalleled advantages. But the city’s prominence has, if anything, raised the political stakes. Its febrile politics reflect every type of identity in play
in Belgium. Unitarists, for instance, see Brussels as a model European city, a fount of modern enterprise and multiculturalism, a testament to what could be achieved in communal cooperation in the country at large when politicians dwell on what unites rather than divides the communities. This reconciliation model has prevailed in the administration of the city during its first decade as a region in its own right. The Minister President, Charles Picque, argued for more ‘own resources’—a greater return from the federal exchequer for the 35% of Belgium’s corporate taxes that the city’s businesses contribute to the federal exchequer—in the form of an annual bloc grant. That would acknowledge the capital’s special contribution to national affairs: but it is a viewpoint vigorously resisted by the other two regions.

There is resistance amongst cosmopolitan interests well represented in the capital, which are anxious to defend a residual Belgian identity, to moves in the regions to drag Brussels into the mire of communalism. Elements in both linguistic groups regard Brussels as the natural locale of ‘Belgitude’—a city with a federal status akin to Washington DC or Canberra. Louis Tobback, the president of the Flemish Socialistische Partij has taken this idea further, proposing a self-governing, self-financing city state, designated as Brussels DC, in whose governance the EU would play a significant part. This project is rejected by moderate opinion on all sides of city politics which prefers to see Brussels as proof extant that communal cohabitation in the national capital is a template for cooperation in the country at large. Charles Picque, for instance, has spoken of a ‘residual belgitude’, with the city remaining as ‘a fédérateur, or unionist, part of Belgium’. He argues that ‘It would be a tragedy if the capital of Europe became a symbol of cultural division. It would be a real paradox ... an unimaginable paradox, though the risk is there.’ According to this benign view, Brussels represents a bridge of communal understanding between two entrenched communities which ‘Have not always realised Brussels’ importance to their own development ... Belgium is undergoing a test at the moment, and Brussels is part of that test. It is a bilingual region and we have shown the capacity of Flemings and francophones to work together, against the background of a cosmopolitan and multicultural city.’

Other views reflect mindsets more exercised by communalism. The Wallonian Socialists have one eye on a dwindling regional power base, another on an already coherent Flemish polity. They are mindful, too, of less ideologically reliable francophones in the cosmopolitan capital who prefer to keep their distance from traditional Wallonian roots. They have advocated instead a fusion of regional and community authorities within its own geographical area. The current trajectory of state reform does favour tidying up an asymmetrical federal architecture. The St Michel Accord did acknowledge the right of the francophone community to transfer powers to the Wallonian regional council,
and in the Brussels region to the francophone community commission. Yet resistance remains, amongst some of the capital’s francophones, to weakening the city’s regional status. The Front Démocratique des Francophones are staunch defenders of capital-region status under francophone hegemony.

Flemish opinion, on the other hand, resists any proposal for strengthening francophone dominance, preferring instead to retain parity of status in Brussels’ governance. Evidence that the city’s delicate linguistic balance is under severe pressure from accelerating communalism came with a dispute (1998) which saw Flemish politicians call for—and the francophone majority duly resist—a formal language ratio in the city’s fire service of 70% francophone and 30% Flemish, though the actual demographic ratio is 85:15% francophone. Political opinion, too, reflects increased intercommunal tensions. In the 1995 regional elections the Front National took four of the 65 seats reserved for francophone parties, and VB two from the ten reserved Flemish seats. In spite of dire predictions, however, the 1999 elections have not significantly increased the base of extremist parties, though VB went into these elections with the intention of securing enough sets to obstruct assembly business.

The Brussels 2000 project, which aims to launch the capital as one of nine European Cities of Culture and is directed by a committee which brings together language and political groups on all sides, captures the enduring paradox of a city that bestrides an historic fault-line. Yet all is far from straightforward, even in a city with some enlightened community leaders. The British project director, quoted in the Financial Times, detects deep-seated tensions simmering beneath surface civility: ‘a ritual dance around the fire but no one has actually jumped into it yet . . . though if one (faction) pushes too hard it forces the others to push hard too (and) that’s how the construction could end in chaos’ (31 March 1999). As such, this project for civic renewal reflects in miniature the country’s persistent crisis of identity.

**Futures: will the Belgian bargain stand?**

Federalism is a political strategy as much as a constitutional formula, and its success depends on the sociological conditions that underpin political arrangements. As a response to declining national solidarity, federalism can be as much a risk as a remedy. The endeavour of the Belgian political class to accommodate pronounced cultural diversity has added momentum to these centrifugal tendencies as much as it has ameliorated them. In short, federalising the Belgian state has confirmed the everyday experiences of citizens inhabiting two distinct communities: it has not enhanced a common national interest, and without countervailing forces the affective solidarity that sustains federal states elsewhere may become so diminished as to threaten the very continuance of the body politic.

Several aspects of social life confirm this predicament. Federalisation
of the broadcasting media, for instance, has meant that broadcasters concentrate on ‘domestic’ events, discounting or portraying negatively those in the ‘other’ community. The same can be said about the adoption of separate curricula in education and the abolition of conscription—removing what has long served in fractured societies as a unifying experience. Meanwhile, the federal division of large areas of socio-economic experience into distinct cultural/linguistic zones has tended to inhibit demographic migration between them. And though Brussels does remain as a cosmopolitan magnet, communalism there does not bode well for a continuing sense of national purpose.

Constitutional change has primarily been a response to rising communal frictions, but events in Belgium have also been influenced by developments further afield. Imitation is a natural instinct and particular events, for example the peaceful ‘divorce’ of the Czech and Slovakian republics, have encouraged separatists on both sides to believe that even small polities breaking free from larger entities are now a viable prospect. The very success of the EU in fostering regional identity has boosted the appeal of micro-states, independent but integrated into wider regional political arrangements and markets. Other examples exert a contrary pressure. The ethnic barbarism that accompanied the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavian federation is a persuasive object lesson of what can follow the break-up of any state into its communal constituents. Any number of less malignant solutions are possible short of break-up.

The Belgian problematic is by no means a singular predicament, even if its particular circumstances bespeak a singular history. And a comparative perspective adds a sanguine tenor to the debate. The politics of territorial and cultural identity are indeed a universal phenomenon; one that is influenced by wider structural changes rewriting the rules of politics, encouraging a fundamental re-evaluation of the architecture of government. Changing expectations, new aspirations and revised notions of identity are all forces actively challenging the classic nation state everywhere, even in culturally coherent societies used to stable politics. Change continues apace in the wake of unprecedented structural shifts in contemporary political economy. The prospect of ‘ever closer’ European integration, the porosity of national boundaries, the exponential growth of transnational interests and accelerating globalisation are insidious forces ‘hollowing out’ existing nation states, encouraging novel prospects for multi-level governance above the state, as well as influencing subnational interests to pursue self-government as a more manageable option within a highly regulated international order. Socio-economic shifts are, of course, ambiguous: both a conservative influence and a force for progress, fostering insecurity as well as encouraging experimentation. On the one hand, an increasingly competitive, far from stable international environment does encourage exclusive ideas of belonging, the craving for past certainties in a mutable world, in turn
causing ethnic groups to follow atavistic instincts.\textsuperscript{10} But unremitting change opens up prospects for radically rethinking the architecture of politics, reimagining political identity. Belgium is far from being unique in confronting this challenge, even if its particular history suggests an especially daunting predicament.

Pessimists have seen in these developments the obsolescence of the nation state, an unravelling of national purpose. On this reading of events, Belgium might seem to be a prime candidate for partition. Certainly, separation is openly discussed nowadays and is eagerly anticipated in some quarters. An intermediate position, between outright separatism and the more usual variants of top-down or even cooperative federalism, continues to prefer a confederal arrangement to secession. The principal power-brokers had already begun to reassess the present federal arrangements before a combination of political mismanagement and deeper shifts in both public and elite loyalty to the historic national project undermined their customary power base. Even as his national party leaders were constructing the federal edifice in 1993, the then CVP head of the Flemish government, Luc Van den Brande, was arguing volubly for a confederation of two sovereign but cooperating states and laying claim to Brussels as the capital of the putative Flemish state.\textsuperscript{11}

There is, however, a more constructive, indeed optimistic, interpretation of current events. As a unitary state, the Belgian project was bound to experience centrifugal tensions once Flemish identity began to assert itself over language rights when the region discovered the political self-confidence that usually accompanies prosperity. The one-sided founding bargain that was the unitary state could hardly be expected to survive a persistent, determined demand for cultural parity. Wallonia’s steady decline was also bound to provoke negative reactions across the communal divide. As Louis Vos sees these contending forces working on the political imagination of the respective communities, ‘From a long perspective of time, it can be said that the Belgian nation had to make room gradually for the birth of a Walloon and Flemish ethnic identity which in recent years have grown into almost fully fledged nationalities. Today the waning of Belgian identity is almost complete . . . distinct Flemish and Walloon national identities have by and large superceded it.’\textsuperscript{12}

There may be life yet in the idea of Belgium as a single if no longer a unitary state. The coexistence of what are now politicised ethnies within a still evolving federal architecture does suggest that, for many of the political class, and even for a ‘silent majority’ of citizens, including those in the minority German speaking community and in bilingual Brussels, a residual Belgian patriotism continues to exist alongside assertive national identities. Several groups, including the Mouvement Pour une Belgique Rénovée dans une Union Féderale, recently issued ‘An Appeal by Supporters of Reconciliation’ to whoever
became the next government *formateur* to reject the ‘attitude of considering the partitioning of Belgium as inevitable’, and to speak for ‘the silent majority that wants to see Belgium continue to exist as a federal state and wants solidarity to be maintained beyond language frontiers’.

Political elites are central actors in the continuance of any intercommunal bargain, and the balance of political probabilities remains, for the time being, with these forces. As M. Martiniello views current prospects, Belgium remains ‘sufficiently concerned with its potentiality for internal conflicts and with its intrinsic risk of self-demolition, to establish and maintain permanent pacts between the various actors about social issues considered to be critical’.

The reform of political institutions, the imaginative use of political procedures and the remaking of the state itself are elemental to this project of continuing the national bargain. The public, too, though more equivocal is not entirely disengaged. The recent public outrage against official corruption and incompetence summoned as much indignation on behalf of a nation ‘betrayed’ as it provided an easy target for separatists seeking vindication of their cause.

Belgium’s pivotal role in the European Union is also more likely than not to sustain the fragile national bargain. There is considerable prosperity and prestige to be had from being host to the principal EU institutions. There is formidable pressure, both from within these institutions and by the member states, for Belgium’s communal elites to settle their differences some way short of outright separation. The very logic of EU governance—the encouragement of subsidiarity, but not at the expense of administrative coherence and efficiency—is another positive influence binding the communal parties to mutual endeavour, here as elsewhere on a shrinking continent. Leaders of large-scale business also endorse this cooperative logic in the face of competitive global forces that reward large, coherent markets and penalise autarchy. The president of the Federation of Belgium Enterprise, Georges Jacobs, for instance, warned after the last constitutional round that ‘we need to keep our tribal wars to ourselves. Outside Belgium, people do not know about the regions, they only understand Belgium as one country’.

For the time being then, Belgium continues to operate, especially on the practical level if less convincingly at the affective level, as a more durable political bargain than two exclusive ethnies which just happen, by the accident of history and the exigencies of Great Power diplomacy two centuries ago, to share an international football team, a national airline, a flag and a king. The problématique belge remains an enigma, continuing to defy those who predict national collapse. This political paradox survives the negative rhetoric of its assailants. So far, at least, fractious neighbours continue to make common cause, using parliamentary institutions calibrated now to take full account of persistent ethnic
identities, to douse any sign of combustion in the flimsy wall that separates their respective habitations.

11. *Le Soir*, 2.3.93.