Overwhelming victory for liberal-socialist backbone of government

The Christian-Democrats’ plan of breaking the ‘Purple’ majority in Flanders by becoming the largest party themselves failed completely. The Flemish Greens of Agalev have been dealt a sizeable electoral dressing-down (down 6.6%), failing to hold even one single of their nine seats, and thus no longer having representation in the Federal Parliament. In Flanders, the big winner was the SP.A-Spirit cartel, led by figurehead Steve Stevaert. The formation gained 8.4% and has overtaken the Christian Democrats of CD&V to become the second largest party. The neck-and-neck race between Liberals and Christian-Democrats that had been predicted for weeks in the opinion polls and the press, in fact turned into a neck-and-neck race between the Liberal VLD and the SP.A-Spirit cartel (23.5%), which was just won by the Liberals of the VLD (24.2%). The result is also a success for the Liberals (who have upped their share of the vote by 1.5% and notch up their fourth consecutive electoral gain).

Christian-Democrats are already looking forward to regional elections of 2004

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The Vlaams Blok has made gains in all provinces, notch- ing up the strongest growth in rural areas, where it had been weakest. This ‘catching-up’ movement is most noticeable in Limburg and West Flanders. In Limburg the party climbs from 12.7% to 15.7% of the votes, which means the party captures two seats in Limburg - one more than in 1999. In West Flanders the Vlaams Blok climbs from 11.1% to 14.1%, an increase that also yields an additional second seat.

The Vlaams Blok has scored well in Leuven, too. The party has gained three percentage points, climbing from 11.9% to 14.9%. It is in East Flanders, Guy Verhofstadt’s home base, that the Vlaams Blok’s growth is the lowest. Here the party has achieved 16.7%, as compared to 15.4% in 1999. In Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, the Blok climbs from 8.7% (in 1999) to 10.3% of the votes.

In its bastion, the province of Antwerp, the Vlaams Blok can point to a showing that is up 3.2% on the last elections.

The party climbs from 20.9% to 24.1%, as a result of which it remains the largest party in the province. However, the long-drawn-out administrative crisis afflicting the City of Antwerp has not immediately provided the Blok with an electoral bonus. In the canton of Antwerp, the party climbed from 28.7% to 30.5%. Had this been the result in new municipal elections, simulations show that the Blok would have had to surrender two of the twenty Antwerp city council seats. Philip Dewinter, the candidate for the post of mayor of Antwerp, was therefore quick to point out that these were not municipal elections.
Comments: success for Verhofstadt, triumph for Stevaert

Many papers are painting Steve Stevaert as the ‘new superstar’ of Belgian politics

Opinions

BART STURTEWAGEN
DE STANDAARD • 19 MAY

The phenomenal success of SPA-Spirit is first and foremost the success of the formula. It was only through the amalgamation with Spirit that the previously awkward and slow-moving internal party modernisation succeeded and the Socialist ministers’ extremely hard government work delivered returns. The cartel was more than the sum of its component parts, since it demonstrated a willingness to go off the beaten paths. Flemish voters, who have had traditional religious and socio-political barriers removed, are due for some creative solutions. Agalev, yesterday’s biggest loser, cannot avoid that conclusion. The Green party has been demotivated to a marginal phenomenon. In terms of its voter profile, the Vlaams Blok has become a mainstream right-wing party. Only the three traditional parties are ahead of it. The group of voters who do not feel represented by this political system is still growing, and the answer to that feeling of exclusion and uneasiness has still not been found. For the Christian-Democrats, the result is quite simply disappointing. Chairman Stefaan De Clerck never came into his own as a challenger to Verhofstadt, and the rejuvenated team of which he calls himself the coach has not been honed to a sufficient degree. The Flemish-National N-VA has exacted respect from the Flemish voter, but the party’s survival base is too narrow. It will have to enter into talks about a pooling of forces with a larger grouping. With the exception of the far right, the trends in the French-speaking part of the country mirror those in Flanders. Purple without Green - Verhofstadt II - is virtually a certainty. This simplified formula offers the opportunity for serious work to be done - without any song and dance - on the business of modernising the country and safeguarding the future. The voters want that; they have made it possible and are entitled to it.

STEFAAN HUYSTENTRUYT
DE FINANCIËL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 19 MAY

‘The Greens are necessary!’ That is what Green politicians have been chanting over the last few weeks, in an attempt to alter the direction of the negative trends coming across in the opinion polls. But according to the voters, the Greens are no longer up to it. The Green voters have defected by the handful to the SPA-Spirit cartel, which has consequently increased its share of the vote to come up to the level of the VLD, even overtaking the CD&V. The CD&V was unable to cash in on its first opposition course of treatment in living memory in these elections, and now flounders below its historic low point of 1999. Evidently four years on the opposition benches is not enough to turn a power party into a party that constitutes a sufficiently attractive alternative in itself.

The results in French-speaking Belgium for once show a parallelism with those in Flanders. On the basis of the election result, the Socialists and Liberals can go on board with each other again. Although Liberals and Socialists no longer need the Greens in tow at federal level in order to achieve a majority, they do still need the Greens in Flanders. If Agalev withdraws from the Government of Flanders, of its own accord or otherwise, we will find ourselves with a ‘Purple’ minority cabinet that will de facto only be able to deal with matters already under way until the regional elections in the middle of next year. It would be more comfortable to avoid this scenario. One cannot rule out the possibility, therefore, of the ‘Purple’ alliance sounding out the CD&V over the coming days or weeks with a view to a strengthening of the blue-red axis. This would be done first of all at Flemish level in order to secure the majority again, but the Flemish Christian-Democrats might also be asked to sit at the federal negotiating table. The ‘Purple’ alliance supplemented by the CD&V would have the two-thirds majority needed to reform the Senate and to have the federal and regional elections held simultaneously again.
The major winner in these elections is Steve Stevaert. Even though things have to be viewed with a degree of perspective (the SPA did record its worst ever result in the last elections), the progress the party has made is still implausible. From within the government, the SPA has grown to become larger than the CD&V. The choice of popular socialism removed from intellectual acidity - the option for comfortable socialism as a positive popular force against the eternal negativism of the Vlaams Blok - has clearly reaped rewards. Furthermore the cartel and its ‘Teletubbies’ (Patrick Janssens, Johan Vande Lanotte, Freya Vanden Bossche and Frank Vandenbroucke) - and Bert Anciaux and Sajid El Khadraoui can now also be added to that group - has in next to no time grown into a new brand that has completely erased the rather old, conservative-looking SP from the collective memory. The ‘Teletubbies’ have grown into a broad-based political generation with canvassing power. The CD&V’s result, on the other hand, shows that the party is suffering socio-logical wear and tear and that the dioxin crisis was by no means an accidental slip-up. The party that once secured almost the absolute majority in Flanders now finds itself relegated to the position of third largest party.

The top 20 of preferential votes in the Senate:

1. Stevaert Steve
2. Verhofstadt Guy
3. Michel Louis
4. Di Rupo Elio
5. DeClerck Stefaan
6. Dehaene Jean-Luc
7. Anciaux Bert
8. Van Hecke Frank
9. Milquet Joëlle
10. Dewinter Filip
11. Dewael Patrick
12. Schoupe Etienne
13. Van Dermeersch Anke
14. Bourgeois Geert
15. Wilmot Sarc
16. DeGucht Karel
17. DeCroo Herman
18. Van Peel Marc
19. Lizin Anne-Marie
20. De Bethune Sabine

SPA-Spirit: 604,571
VLD: 573,190
MR: 400,922
PS: 385,707
CD&V: 343,818
CD&V: 248,754
SPA-Spirit: 212,375
Vlaams Blok: 197,641
CDH: 160,142
Vlaams Blok: 148,563

The top 20 of preferential votes in the Chamber:

1. Antwerp
   - Inge Vervotte, CD&V: 93,030
   - Patrick Janssens, SPA-Spirit: 89,011
   - Filip Dewinter, Vlaams Blok: 77,891
   - Gerolf Annemans, Vlaams Blok: 76,829
   - Bart Somers, VLD: 57,812

2. Leuven
   - Rik Daems, VLD: 27,520
   - Saïd El Khadraoui, SPA-Spirit: 19,813
   - Carl Devlies, CD&V: 17,096
   - Bruno Tobbback, SPA-Spirit: 15,604
   - Mark Eyskens, CD&V: 11,903

3. Limburg
   - Steve Stevaert, SPA-Spirit: 130,339
   - Patrick Dewael, VLD: 58,164
   - Jo Vandeurzen, CD&V: 43,088
   - Sonja Claes, CD&V: 28,184
   - Hilde Claeys, SPA-Spirit: 26,314

4. East-Flanders
   - Laurette Onkelinx, PS: 98,671
   - Frank Vandenbroucke, SPA-Spirit: 98,389
   - Herman De Crem, CD&V: 84,337
   - Marc Verwilghen, CD&V: 80,254
   - Joëlle Milquet, CDH: 75,145

5. West-Flanders
   - Guy Verhofstadt, VLD: 98,671
   - Patrick Dewael, VLD: 98,389
   - Yves Letermé, CD&V: 84,337
   - Marc Verwilghen, CD&V: 80,254
   - Joëlle Milquet, CDH: 75,145

6. Brussels-Hal-Vilvorde
   - Laurette Onkelinx, PS: 43,473
   - Daniel Ducarme, MR: 40,744
   - Charles Picqué, PS: 38,615
   - Frank Vandenbroucke, SPA-Spirit: 32,682
   - Joëlle Milquet, CDH: 27,530
Stevaert doesn’t want Verhofstadt to start government formation now

Steve Stevaert (SP.A) first wants to talk about the content, and only then about the ‘ministerial posts.’

As tradition dictates, Guy Verhofstadt went to King Albert on the day after the elections to offer his government’s resignation, whereupon, the king began his consultations with a view to the formation of a new government. He first received the presidents of the House and the Senate, and then the party chairmen. Today the king will be continuing his talks, and will either appoint a socialist informateur (who investigates, on behalf of the crown, whether a proposed cabinet formation will succeed, ed.) or will directly give the Liberal Guy Verhofstadt carte blanche to form a government. But Steve Stevaert (SP.A) first wants to talk about the content, and only then about the ‘ministerial posts.’ (FF).

The Flemish Liberals immediately made it clear that they were going for a ‘Purple’ renewal under Guy Verhofstadt’s leadership, without the Greens. That is also the preferred option of Louis Michel (MR). And PS chairman Elio Di Rupo gave the VLD’s leader a passport to the Rue de la Loi 16 (the Prime Minister’s official residence). The only politician who has not said anything to this effect, even after some prompting, is Steve Stevaert. The SP.A chairman is immediately threatening to torpedo the scenario that the VLD has in mind. In VLD circles, there is the view that, given the clear result, a round of information talks is actually superfluous, and that Verhofstadt can be sent out already as the person charged with forming a new government. ‘Aren’t the Socialists entitled to an informateur?’, was the question being asked in the SP.A’s corner yesterday, with the Socialists adding pointedly that the Socialist group in the Senate is actually bigger than the Liberal grouping. In the VLD there is a fear that a round of consultations conducted by informateur Di Rupo would lead to disputes between the language communities which block further negotiations. ‘Given that the Socialists and Liberals are more or less the same size, SPA and PS should be able to provide as many ministers as VLD and MR’, was the message yesterday after the meeting of the party’s office. The liberal VLD camp is not opposing this view. The Socialists want to avoid at all costs the quick-fire formation of a new Purple cabinet in which the balances of power of the last four years remain intact. The 9% progress that has been made also has to be reflected in the coalition agreement, they feel.
Jos Geysels resigns as political secretary of Agalev

The departments of ministers Vera Dua (Agriculture) and Mieke Vogels (Social care and Well being) are, together with the allocation from the Flemish Region (EUR 1 million), just about the last refuge for the Greens.

The big loser in the elections, Agalev, has to answer a very pressing question: will it stay on in the Government of Flanders, or not? The day after the elections, many senior Agalev members said that that continued presence had become ‘very difficult’. But a withdrawal also has its drawbacks. The departments of ministers Vera Dua (Agriculture) and Mieke Vogels (Social care and Well being) are, together with the allocation from the Flemish Region (EUR 1 million), just about the last refuge for the Greens. Because the federal allocation to the party disappears (EUR 2 million in 2001), further to another half a million euros in income, which their members of parliament gave up, there is a risk of Green party apparatus imploding. There are 69 members of staff on the payroll, not to mention the staff of the ministerial departments who have to be made redundant. And because the Liberals and Socialists without Agalev do not have a majority in the Flemish Parliament, the Greens can use their presence as a means of pressure in order, even now, to get a few of their demands implemented.

Jos Geysels, political secretary of Agalev, has already taken a decision. Together with party secretary Luc Lemiengre, he is assuming full responsibility for his party’s defeat in the elections and is stepping down. With his resignation, he wants to avoid a whole generation of Green figureheads resigning. Even after the disastrous result, Geysels is calling for a clear and rational view to be taken of things, above all. This typifies the party strategist to a tee. He has been undisputed leader of the party since 1997 and has tried to build the party into a party of office (FF).

RENAAT SCHROOTEN • DE FINANCIËLE-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 20 MEI 2003

It was Geysels who made the major analyses and took the big decisions. That was clear from the government negotiations in 1999, when Geysels was the central Green interlocutor of the future coalition partners. As political secretary, he deliberately remained outside the Federal Government and the Government of Flanders, in order to take charge of things behind the scenes. It was precisely this refusal to become a minister, as a Green strong man, that severely weakened Agalev’s position in the Purple-Green coalition, according to his critics.

Under Geysels’ leadership, Agalev endeavoured to shake off its ‘open-sandals-and-woolly-socks’ image and turn itself into a party of office. Under Purple-Green, Geysels had his hands full finding a middle course between the lofty principles and the hard reality of government work with all its compromises. Decisions such as the arms supplies to Nepal or the giving up of the village of Doel met with considerable criticism.

In recent years he resolutely stressed that Agalev was not merely an ecological one-issue party, but was a progressive party that cared about social issues. Since the Christian-Democrats’ disappearance from the government, he pursued the rapprochement with the Christian Labour Movement. He characterised Agalev as the party that could raise its concerns at government level. He consequently turned down overtures made by the SP.A chairman Steve Stevaert. He regarded co-operation on specific issues as possible, but a major Red-Green cartel was wasted on him. Geysels continued to believe in the liveability of a strong Green party pursuing an independent course.

40 directly elected | 21 deputies from the communities | 10 appointed by co-option

DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS – SENATE

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SOURCE: DS-INFOSKET

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SOURCE: DS-INFOSKET

ELECTIONS

AGALEV % CHAMBER

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DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS – SENATE

40 directly elected | 21 deputies from the communities | 10 appointed by co-option

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SOURCE: DS-INFOSKET
CD&V already looking forward to Flemish elections in 2004

De Clerck wants to make further progress with the process of rejuvenation and modernisation in his party

At the meeting of its party office on 19 May, the Christian-Democratic CD&V announced that it was under no circumstances planning to come to the aid of the Government of Flanders if it loses its majority because the Greens withdraw from it. Although his party suffered a defeat and lost one seat, CD&V chairman Stefaan De Clerck was nonetheless given the task of drawing up an action plan with a view to the regional elections of 2004. De Clerck wants to make further progress with the process of rejuvenation and modernisation in his party. Among other things, the excellent personal result achieved by Inge Vervotten (97,000 preferential votes), who headed the CD&V-list of candidates in Antwerp, confirms his conviction as regards going further in this direction. According to young people in the party like Joke Schauvliege, the CD&V should have carried through a more radical rejuvenation operation in the wake of its defeat in 1999. The CD&V’s list looked too much like its 1999 list, she says in De Morgen (20 May) (FF).

DE STANDAARD • 19 MAY

Despite the defeat his party has suffered, De Clerck remains Chairman of the CD&V, and is assuming responsibility for the CD&V’s election result. After its defeat in 1999, the party has now dropped back still further, and has lost a seat in parliament. ‘It is an all-time low, but that is no reason for us to stick our heads in the sand. We have to keep fighting to strengthen Christian-Democracy. He who tries wins,’ said De Clerck. In the short term, De Clerck will be drawing up an action plan with a view to next year’s elections to the Flemish Parliament. He announced that CD&V had to give its alternative (the story of values) a more clearly defined profile, and had to carry through radical renewal and modernisation. De Clerck referred, among other things, to Inge Vervotte’s good election result. He announced, in the light of Agalev’s and N-VA’s poor election results, that CD&V should have thought for the Green and Flemish body of thought. However, he does not want to approach the N-VA himself. That party should itself first ponder on its election result, he feels. Replacing Agalev in the Government of Flanders, should that party decide to withdraw, is not on the agenda, according to De Clerck.

FRENCH SPEAKING SENATE

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DUTCH SPEAKING SENATE

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<tr>
<td>N-VA</td>
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SOURCE: MIN. OF THE INTERIOR
Flemings lose two seats in constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde

In the constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, the Flemish parties have lost two parliamentary seats to the French-speaking parties. Of the 22 seats in Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, 9 go to Flemish parties and 13 to French-speaking parties. In 1999, the ratio was 11-11. Agalev and CD&V lose one seat each. Herman Van Rompuy (CD&V) attributed the loss of seats to the votes cast by Belgians abroad and to the ‘Fast-track Belgian’ law. Those two factors, in his view, saw to it that more people voted for French-speaking parties.

According to Professor Stefaan Walgave of the University of Antwerp, there was no increase in the number of Francophone votes. In his opinion, the shift in seats is the result of the greater fragmentation of the Flemish votes in Brussels. This has resulted in two seats going to the larger French-speaking parties. An analysis of the figures shows that 65,000 extra votes were cast, and that these were equally divided between Francophones and Flemings. The shift in Brussels means that the Flemish parties have 88 seats in the parliament as compared to 91 in 1999 (one seat was transferred from West Flanders to Wallonia as part of the electoral reform.)