



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on October 3, 2013

U.S. Government Shutdown Not Likely to Break Belgium's Record of 589 Days

With news that the partial U.S. government shutdown won't be resolved [for at least the next two weeks](#), and will then only likely end when the debt limit crisis forces it, commentators [have resurrected the history of the last government shutdown](#) during the Clinton administration. But little if any media attention is being paid to a much longer government shutdown in Belgium, which lasted 589 days and ended less than two years ago.



Conflicting political ideologies rather than fiscal excesses were the driving force behind Belgium's problems. A small western European country of just 11 million, there is a distinct political divide between the northern Dutch-speaking Flemish (6.5 million) and the southern French-speakers, called Walloons (4.5 million). The Flemish, generally speaking, want to be left alone, while the Walloons wish for a strong central government to run everything and everybody.

Those two opposing political philosophies collided in June 2010, when the national election gave the New Flemish Alliance (NVA) 27 seats in the Chamber of Parliament with the Socialist Party (SP) in the south getting 26 seats. Ten other political parties divided up the remaining 150 seats, guaranteeing a political impasse and inevitably a government shutdown.

Belgian King Albert II asked the former president of the Socialist Party to act as a caretaker for the government while negotiations were being conducted for the new government. Those negotiations lasted 589 days until December 2011 when Elio Di Rupo of the Socialist Party [became Belgium's prime minister](#).

How did the citizens fare in the meantime? Herman Natthijs, a political science professor at the Free University of Brussels, expressed the obvious:

A government without power can't introduce new taxes.... a government without full powers can't [pass] new measures concerning outlays.

The political crisis relating to the public finance saved money.

Another professor, Marc De Vos, at Ghent University, [was surprised](#):

By and large, everything still works. We get paid, buses run, schools are open....

The relevance of the cohesive national state has diminished.

Still another professor, Marco Martiniello of the University of Liege, commenting in February 2011 when the shutdown was being celebrated by the citizenry with parties and public demonstrations, was dismayed at such "lack of cohesion":

This [ongoing shutdown] will distance people from politics. This will have a negative effect on democracy and reinforce the gap between government and citizens....



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I already see a growing sense of [disaffection] amongst my students.

The citizens themselves noted little changes in their lives. The owner of a chocolate shop told CNN that “for us, it doesn’t make any difference. We still have a life outside of work. We can go on vacation. We have public transportation.”

In June 2011 Daniel Hannan, a conservative member of parliament for southeast England, [wasn't surprised at any of this](#):

Belgium has now gone for more than a year without a government and, you know what? Life is carrying on as normal. The crops are growing, the wheels are turning in the factories, the civil servants (there are lots of these) are lingering over their coffee and speculoos biscuits.

A lighter than normal legislative agenda has given the country something of a boost: growth forecasts keep being upwardly revised, and the economy is expected to expand....

With no new quangos [quasi-autonomous non-government organizations] being created, no new taxes being levied, few new regulations being imposed, the economy is growing faster than the state.

The beauty of the Belgian shutdown was that the local governmental agencies providing services such as trash pick-up, mail delivery, and police and fire protection [continued without any hitches](#).

The temptation to export Belgium’s experience to America is very great. Unfortunately the federal welfare state and the dependence of America’s citizens upon failing social entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and now ObamaCare, would make an extended government shutdown here excessively painful and therefore highly unlikely. But it does the heart good to think what the United States would look and feel and act like without its own quangos like the EPA, the IRS, the Department of Education, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health and Human Services, etc.

Photo of Belgian flag

A graduate of Cornell University and a former investment advisor, Bob is a regular contributor to The New American magazine and blogs frequently at www.LightFromTheRight.com, primarily on economics and politics. He can be reached at badelman@thenewamerican.com.

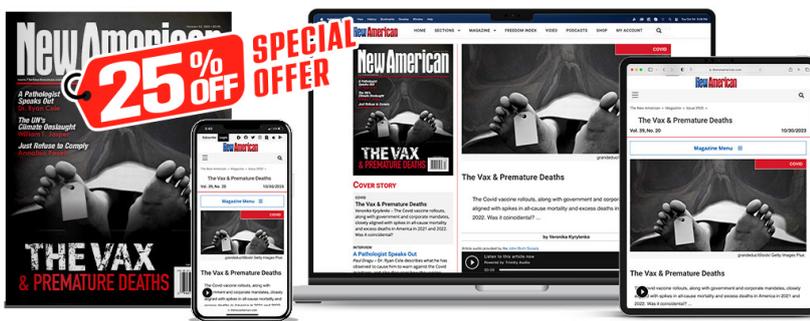


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