



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on March 30, 2011

Belgium Sets World Record for No Govt

Mark Twain once observed, “History has tried hard to teach us that we can’t have good government under politicians.” So far, Belgium has found that it is hard to have any government under politicians. Yesterday, this polyglot nation of two major linguistic groups, Flemish and Walloon, set the world record among countries with parliamentary systems for going the longest time after a general election without any government being formed (Iraq, “saved” by American forces, held the old record of 288 days).



Professor Dave Sinardet of the University of Brussels summed up the situation:

There is a lot of apathy on both sides of the linguistic front. Last time I checked, there was no progress. It is a bit surreal. They say negotiations are going on, but there is a conviction it will turn to nothing. And we have a caretaker government which is increasingly looking [like] a real government.

Sinardet went on to note that “acting” Prime Minister Yves Leterme is more and more acting as if he is the real Prime Minister.

Belgium faces several serious problems. The European financial system, formed around the supra-national euro, continues its meltdown. Nations such as Greece, Portugal, and Ireland are in the midst of crises as bond rating services have either downgraded public bonds or publicly discussed such action. The downgrading of bonds raises the interest rate that governments must pay to service their debt, causing even greater financial problems in the future.

Belgium has not been immune to such woes. Part of the problem is that France also faces some difficulties with bond credit rating, although not as serious as those of Greece, Portugal, and Ireland. Much of the Belgian economy is almost inseparable from that of the French. Another concern is that the long period without any government raises concerns among investors that there is no one who could act if the Belgian economy began to weaken. Standard & Poor has already lowered Belgian bonds in 2010 from AAA to AA+, and the rating service stated in January that if Belgium does not form a government soon, its bond ratings could be lowered again.

And, as if the tiny country did not have enough internal troubles, it has now become embroiled in the Libyan civil war, agreeing to send jet fighters to help the European and American forces. Historically, for parliamentary nations to engage in a war requires, at the very minimum, a government which perceives that it has a majority mandate behind it.

Another concern which calls for a united Belgium in order to be addressed is the rise of radical Islam within the country. Last year Belgium banned the burqa, and as a result it has been threatened with violence by radical Muslims. How will the country react to terrorist attacks if there is no government?

Finally, of course, is the key issue: Will Belgium actually remain a nation? The Walloons in the south



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and west of the country account for about one-third of the population, almost half of the unemployment, and less than one-quarter of the GDP. The Dutch-speaking Flemish majority resents the dependency of their fellow Belgians on social welfare programs which are disproportionately paid. If the nation divides — and the longer a stalemate lasts, the more possible that becomes — pundits have speculated that Walloonism, as it is called, would not become a separate nation. Instead, part of the Walloon section of Belgium might be joined to either France, Germany, or the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. A section of Walloonism, around the provinces of Hainault and Liege — hotbeds of Marxist thinking in Belgium — might remain as a Francophone nation.

There is another, happier model in Europe, of course. Switzerland easily embraces different nationalities in a way that Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and perhaps Belgium could not. The Swiss secrets are strong local governments, a requirement to keep and bear arms, sound fiscal policies, and a low-key national government which scrupulously avoids squabbles with other nations. The Swiss model works.

Photo: Brussels



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