

# The Low Countries

## Confrontation and Coalition in Segmented Societies

Hans Keman

Both national and international events have had serious ramifications for the conduct of politics in the Low Countries since the late 1980s. Internationally this concerned the (re-)democratisation of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the further development of the European Community into a political union and the rapid enlargements since 1995. In particular, the introduction of the Euro and the involvement of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands through the EU and NATO in the Yugoslav internal conflict meant that foreign affairs and Europeanisation became contested in national politics and related policy formation. At the same time, national political developments have left their marks. It appears that the erstwhile politics of accommodation and policy concertation are definitively over: confrontation and competition are – so it seems – the name of the political game at present in the Low Countries.

Yet these signs of change were already noticeable before the 1990s. Between 1960 and 1970 a watershed in the political development of the Benelux countries was emerging, in particular in Belgium and the Netherlands. There is a *communis opinio* among most observers that the existing political institutions appeared less able to cope with the developing problems. Instead of *coalescence* as the main pattern of political behaviour, the name of the game appeared to be developing into political *confrontation* at elections, leading to change in the party system and within government.

In the Netherlands this process was reflected in a change in the informal rules of the game which, in turn, gradually changed the working of the political system. In

Belgium, however, adjusting to this new situation within the existing formal body of political institutions appeared impossible and eventually led to a radical overhaul of the polity. The consequences of the shift in politics surfaced most dramatically during the 1990s: in 1993 the Belgian polity became genuinely federalised and saw a further demise of Christian Democratic dominance. This latter effect also occurred in the Netherlands in 1994, when for the first time since 1917 a coalition government was formed without the Christian Democrats participating. In Belgium the same event took place in 1999. Furthermore, due to the emergence of (successful) 'new' parties between the 1970s and the 1990s the political landscape has indeed changed in the Benelux countries.

In this chapter I shall argue that the institutional configurations of both countries have profoundly changed and this has had ramifications for the behaviour of the political actors involved. These developments may well explain the different patterns of politics in Belgium and the Netherlands, which have led to different outcomes in terms of political performance and related processes of institutional change. In Luxembourg business remained more or less as usual, but for the slow fading of Christian Democratic dominance in parliament and the emergence of new parties.

In the comparative and national literature, the pursuit of political order in the Benelux countries has been labelled, more often than not, under Lijphart's denominator: 'consociationalism', or as it is currently considered as part of the broader type: 'consensus democracy'. This change in terminology as introduced by Arend Lijphart (1999) should not go unnoticed, since it implies that the focus of explanation has also shifted: the former concept focuses mainly on the societal structure that necessitates coalescent behaviour for effective political decision-making; the latter concept places greater emphasis on the political institutions *per se* which facilitate effective decision-making under adversarial societal conditions. In this chapter I shall employ the concept of consensus democracy, asking in what way existing political institutions and their workings have changed over time and to what extent these changes can explain the political behaviour in these countries, in particular since 1990.

Answering these questions not only implies the analysis of institutions and the way in which they have helped to solve societal conflict by including socio-political actors, but also the extent to which socio-economic actors have access to the political system. For one of the major characteristics of the politics of decision-making in Belgium and the Netherlands has been the inclusion of societal interests by means of political organisations, representing them on the basis of cultural divisions. Yet one of the features of the political history of the Low Countries has been that these organisational links have become weaker or even faded away. Instead of one, albeit complex, system of intermediation a second came into being: corporatism or policy control by diverse socio-economic actors.

This development has been noted by various observers of Dutch and Belgian politics and, more often than not, differently interpreted. Luc Huyse, for instance, sees corporatism as a successor to polarised politics; Daalder describes it as 'old wine in new bottles'; whereas Lijphart recently claimed that corporatism is merely a dimension of consensus democracy. In my view this development implies a fundamental institutional shift. Before 1970 the 'pillarised' political organisations represented

almost all societal interests and dominated the decision-making process. After that time, societal actors acted more independently and gained selective access to the political and administrative system, leading to new institutional arrangements. The 'segmentation' of politics shifted slowly from its socio-cultural origins and foundations to socio-economic ones, although it did not mean that the old style of politics disappeared altogether. Yet what should be noticed is that in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands these gradual shifts resulted in other types of government and new forms of negotiation between organised interest and the body politic. In particular, in the course of the 1990s this change became clear in the Netherlands and eventually in Belgium and Luxembourg.

The most remarkable features of this change have been the sudden and high levels of electoral volatility, indicating a growing mistrust of the political elites, and conducive to the emergence of new parties on both the left and right of the political spectrum. Additionally, this electoral shift led to new coalitions, in which parties participated that had never been in government before, and which were also conducive to a change in the policy agendas in the Low Countries. Although the socio-economic issues remained salient, new issues arose: immigration and welfare retrenchment and crime and law and order. Furthermore, the EU became a contested issue because of the financial implications and the EU constitution. The combined effect of the changes has been a more polarised political climate in which the established parties (and their elites) have seemingly lost their erstwhile dominance in steering the ship of state in the past decade.

To a large extent the changing political landscape is still an unfinished journey. However, whatever the eventual result is, the politics and policies in the Low Countries will be different from in the heyday of consociationalism. All three countries are experiencing a development towards executive dominance. In Belgium, in particular, this development is a complex process in relation to its federalised structure of the state that is shaping up.

Below, we shall first focus on the relationship between the electoral system and new parties as well as on its consequences for the division of the respective party systems, particularly after 1970 and 1990. In the following section we shall elaborate the institutional development in relation to the decision-making process, which is characterised by adversarial and coalescent behaviour simultaneously. The following section is devoted to the formation and functioning of party government, in particular in terms of its potential to play a mediating role between societal conflict and political co-operation. Whether or not this still results in feasible and effective policy formation will be discussed in this context. Both the roles of bureaucracy and corporatism will be examined from this perspective. Attention will also be paid to the so-called tendency towards 'diffusion of politics', which appears to develop as a result of the political changes and is seen as an outcome of intra-national developments as well as of the process of European integration. Finally we shall pull together the main findings with respect to institutional developments in the Low Countries and assess to what extent these changes have been important and can explain the contemporary interaction of institutions, political actors and policy performance.

## ELECTIONS

### Electoral system

The right to vote was introduced and enshrined in the constitution of the Royal Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1814. In the Netherlands and Belgium a bicameral system exists (First and Second Chamber in the Netherlands; Senate and Chamber of Representatives in Belgium, since 1831). The Dutch Second Chamber (100 seats until 1956, thereafter 150 seats) and the Chamber of Representatives in Belgium (212 seats until 1995, since then 150) are directly elected by the electorate (at least) every four years. In both countries this occurs on the basis of proportional representation, using the d'Hondt formula. In Luxembourg there exists a unicameral system (Chamber of Deputies, 60 seats) and the electoral system is based on multiple limited constituencies employing the Hagenbach-Bischoff formula. This chamber is elected directly every five years. In terms of proportionality these electoral systems are quite 'true' and access for new parties is relatively easy, since there is barely any electoral threshold.

The Senate of the Netherlands, as the First Chamber is also called, is indirectly chosen through the provincial legislatures. In practice, however, this indirect type of voting has been abolished, since the outcomes of the regional elections (based on the PR principle) are conducive to the allocation of seats. In the Belgian Senate 106 members are elected directly, the remaining 75 seats are allocated by the nine provinces (50 seats) and by co-optation (25 seats).

The electoral systems of the Low Countries therefore resemble one another, although there are some significant differences between them. The Netherlands – the only country in Europe with a nationwide constituency – provides the maximum proportionality between votes and the party seats. In Luxembourg the voter has a bigger influence in selecting a candidate through an open ballot or '*panachage*'. Generally, the electoral systems in the Benelux countries rank high in terms of proportionality and reflect the preferences of the population at large. Additionally, it implies that the emergence of new parties and high electoral volatility are likely. These effects have indeed taken place since the 1990s and have affected both the development of the party system and the party composition of government in Belgium and the Netherlands.

The development of the electoral system of a country, and hence of the institutional choices made, to a large extent reflects the ruling ideas about the principal goals of representative democracy. In Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, the majoritarian electoral system based on plurality was replaced around the turn of the century in conjunction with the granting of universal male suffrage, which took place during or shortly after the First World War. Female suffrage was established in Luxembourg and the Netherlands in 1919, whereas Belgian women had to wait until 1948 to gain full voting rights. It was half conceded in 1921 as being a possible reform in the future, but since a two-thirds majority was needed to implement it, it took a long time. At present the rate of female participation in the respective parliaments is 37 per cent (the Netherlands), 35 per cent (Belgium) and 23 per cent (Luxembourg).

All in all, one could say that the process of democratisation by means of the enfranchisement, or the extension of voting rights to the population, took shape around the First World War and was laid down in an electoral system that enables minorities to be represented on the national level in parliament, to which governments were responsible. The type of electoral system chosen reflected not only the extant division of power in these countries, but also to some extent the historical roots of these countries: it assisted in a new form, i.e. parliamentary democracy, the idea of a 'republican monarchy'. In these polities the rights as well as the influence of minorities were respected, and in turn, these gained political room for manoeuvre. To ensure this representative distribution the compulsory vote was originally introduced. In the Netherlands alone this was abolished in 1971. Hence, the institutionalisation of democracy in the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg took a specific trajectory and – as they were partially designed as political institutions to match societal divisions – it is worthwhile to examine the consequences.

The most frequently mentioned effect of a PR electoral system with low thresholds concerns the fractionalisation of the electorate and parliament, producing unstable voting behaviour and a fragmented party system in which the major parties are weak. The degree of fractionalisation among voters and parliamentarians is indeed comparatively high in the Benelux countries. Electoral fragmentation in the period 1945–90 was on average 0.84 in the Netherlands, 0.74 in Belgium and 0.71 in Luxembourg, whereas parliamentary fragmentation is slightly less. In Luxembourg and the Netherlands the degree of fractionalisation decreased somewhat after 1970, but increased in Belgium. Henceforth the number of political parties in parliament was relatively high. Belgium had 6 parliamentary parties before 1970 and 11 afterwards. The Netherlands is quite stable in this respect; on average 10 parties were represented throughout the post-war period, whereas in Luxembourg the number rises from 4 to 5 after 1970. More often than not this rise was associated with the emergence of new parties.

A comparison of the Benelux countries with other European countries with a PR system shows that the average number of parties in parliament in Luxembourg is by and large similar to the cross-European average, and in Belgium and the Netherlands slightly higher (Gallagher *et al.* (2005) report a European average of 3.9 parties before 1975 and 4.8 in the 1990s). Taking into account the relative strength of the first and second largest parties in parliament, however, it appears that the fractionalisation has dramatically changed: around 1970 these parties polled 49 per cent of the legislative vote in Belgium, 69 per cent in Luxembourg and 61 per cent in the Netherlands. At present these figures are 46 per cent, 60 per cent and 48 per cent, respectively. This development implies that the hold of the originally dominant parties is clearly vanishing in the Netherlands, but not in Luxembourg. The change in terms of fractionalisation of electoral support and subsequent fragmentation of the legislature in Belgium is in large part due to the process of federalisation of the polity.

The Belgian constitution requires that a qualified majority must pass legislation on territorial matters concerning socio-cultural issues and that it must be reaffirmed by a new parliament. In particular, after the 'Egmont pact' in 1970, this institutional requirement had an effect on parliamentary decision-making, which was, more often

than not, postponed or delayed, and has been politicised during elections since then. By means of the political room for manoeuvre – available through the Belgian electoral system – 'communal/territorial' issues cut across the existing party divisions. It led to a separation of the parties (Socialists, Christians and Liberals) on the basis of language, and to the rise of territorial parties, exclusively representing Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, since the 1970s.

In conclusion: the electoral systems of the Low Countries yield particularly dramatic differences regarding the number of parties. For example, the effective number of parties is, comparatively speaking, quite high. Over time (1950–2006) electoral volatility in Benelux has been around 12 per cent on average. After 1989 a steep rise in electoral volatility and successful new parties can be observed. From this survey it is obvious that electoral changes have occurred in the Benelux. The extent of this change in the Low Countries will be analysed in more depth by examining the relation between elections and parties regarding the changing divisions of the respective party systems.

### New parties and party system change

Electoral systems based on the PR principle are not so susceptible to manufacturing majorities, but in such systems it is also difficult to earn a majority for a single party. This happened only once in Belgium, in 1950 (CVP: 108 of the 212 seats), almost happened in Luxembourg in 1984 (CSP: 26 of the, then, 52 available seats) and has never happened in the Netherlands. Hence, although Christian Democratic parties have been quite dominant electorally, until the 1990s their electoral fortunes dwindled.

Proportional representation supposedly mirrors societal differences, if not change, better than majority or plurality electoral systems. Hence it can be expected that the cleavage structure is reflected in electoral results. The literature on the relation between parties and elections suggests three aspects of this process: (1) the cleavage structures of society; (2) the ideological roots of parties; and (3) the type of policy issue saliency. Whereas a cleavage is a sociological concept, the ideological and policy dimensions are directly related to politics. The main ideological differences, however, appear after the cleavages in society are politicised and only partially assimilated into the political movements. Parties in Belgium and the Netherlands are based on societal differences and are at the same time differentiated according to well-known ideological 'blocs': Christian Democracy, social democracy and (conservative) liberalism. Historically two cleavages have been prominent in Belgium and the Netherlands:

- 1 *Religious or moral dimension*: In the north this division was based partly on rivalry between Protestantism (which was by many considered as an informal 'State Church') and Catholicism (which saw itself as an emancipating minority), but they both shared an interest against the ('liberal') state regulation of social life, which was expressed, particularly, in the issue of education. In the south this division was shaped much more by the process of secularisation of social life,

acquisition of individual rights and opposition to the overwhelming influence of Catholicism and its clerical organisation (although the principal issue also centred on the educational system).

- 2 *Left-right dimension:* In Belgium and the Netherlands the socio-economic division emerged in the wake of the concurrent processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. It was based on 'class consciousness', which developed more strongly and rapidly in the south than in the north, owing to its earlier and more encompassing pattern of industrial activities. In both countries the major socialist party was reformist and preceded the formation of a nationwide trade union federation. Hence the political party led the way, mainly through its campaign for universal suffrage and a wish to enter government. Together with the fact that other cleavages played an important role in the Low Countries, this meant that the sheer 'class' division was not strong and faded after the Second World War.

Up to 1970 these two cleavages and related ideologies dominated political life and to a large extent electoral developments. It was only then that in Belgium a third cleavage became politicised: the language-territorial or 'communal' cleavage, which tended to overshadow the other ones. The existing ideological differences remained, but were now organised within a territorial party system.

In the Netherlands the religious cleavage became less prominent and since the 1970s electoral campaigns have focused more on new issues in combination with the socio-economic conflict dimension. The so-called 'post-material' dimension appears to capture the 'moral' high ground. The new party combination 'Green Left', formed in 1989, can be considered as the representative of this development. Similarly the flourishing of genuine ecological parties can also be observed after 1990 in Belgium (Agalev and Ecolo) and Luxembourg (Greng).

Until the late 1980s electoral politics was largely influenced by a two-dimensional space of voters – religious-moral and socio-economic – and the emerging party system is characterised by three distinctive party 'families' or blocs: Christian Democrats (religious and capitalist), Liberals (secular and capitalist) and Social Democrats (secular and labour). Until the 1970s these three party families dominated political and social life in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. As has been widely discussed and well documented, the main parties politically representing the cleavage structure in Benelux have had a tight relationship with their grass roots. Their differences concern their ideological homogeneity and strategic behaviour regarding elections and participation in government. It seems that under similar conditions each system allows different patterns of behaviour.

Several parties in the Netherlands represented the Christian Democratic bloc, whereas in Luxembourg this has never been the case. In Belgium the preponderance of the Flanders versus Walloon conflict after 1960 has produced an organisational and electoral division, whereas in the Netherlands the process of secularisation and depolarisation led to the unification of the Christian Democratic Party family into one party: the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA).

Both the Social Democratic and Liberal Party families remained roughly the same throughout the post-war history of Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Although

there have been splits within these blocs, these have mostly been temporary. The major shift that can be observed in all three party systems is the rise of green parties, in particular in the 1990s (8 per cent on average). Yet this new party family has not been able to distance itself in a clear way from the left-right dimension. Other new parties that have emerged have not either, but rather distinguish themselves by means of two features: (1) radical political views as regards left and right; and (2) populist tactics to make inroads into the heartland of both the left and right.

In Belgium this became visible with the Flemish Bloc and the National Front. The former has been most successful, whereas in the Netherlands various 'radical-right' parties attempted to gain electoral ground. It was only the ill-fated List Pim Fortuyn that caused a landslide electoral victory in 2002 (and to a lesser extent the Party of Freedom achieved the same in 2006). However, in the Netherlands a radical left-wing party also emerged in the 1980s, the Socialist Party, which slowly but

Table 7.1 Elections to the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1946–2007

Year	Turnout %	Communist KPB	Green Ecolo	Socialist PS/SP	Languages RW, FDF, VU	Christian CDH/CDV	Liberal MR/VLD	Flemish V.L.B	Other
1946	90	13	–	32	– – –	43	10	–	3
1949	94	8	–	30	– – 2	44	15	–	2
1950	93	5	–	35	– – –	48	12	–	0
1954	93	4	–	39	– – 2	41	13	–	2
1958	94	2	–	37	– – 2	47	12	–	1
1961	92	3	–	37	– – 3	42	12	–	3
1965	92	5	–	28	1 1 7	35	22	–	2
1968	90	3	–	28	3 3 10	9/22	21	–	0
1971	92	3	–	27	7 5 11	8/22	6/10	–	1
1974	90	3	–	27	6 4 10	9/23	5/10	–	2
1977	95	3	1	27	3 4 10	10/26	6/9	–	1
1978	95	3	1	13/12	3 4 7	10/26	5/10	1	3
1981	95	2	5	13/12	2 2 10	7/19	9/13	1	5
1985	94	1	6	14/15	0 1 8	8/21	10/11	1	3
1987	93	1	7	16/15	0 1 8	8/20	9/12	2	2
1991	93	0	10	14/12	0 2 6	8/17	8/12	7	6
1995	89	–	8	12/13	– – 5	8/17	10/13	6	8
1999	91	–	14	10/10	– – 6	6/14	10/14	10	6
2003	92	–	6	13/15	– – –	6/13	11/15	14	7
2007	91	–	7	11/10	– – –	6/19	13/12	18	4

Notes:

Communist: KPB: Communist Party.

Green: Ecologists (Ecolo/Agalev).

Socialist: PS: Walloon Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste); SP: Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A-Spirit/Cartel Social Progressief Alternatief).

Languages: RW: Walloon Assembly (Rassemblement Wallon); FDF: Francophone Democratic Front (Front Démocratique Francophone); VU: Flemish Union (Vlaamse Unie).

Christian: CDH: Democratic and Humanist Centre (Centre Démocratique and Humaniste); CDV: Flemish Christian Democrat (Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams).

Liberal: MR: Reform Movement (Mouvement Réformateur); VLD: Flemish Liberal Democrats (Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten).

Flemish: V.L.B: Flemish Bloc (Vlaams Belang).

consistently attracted more votes until it became the third-largest party in parliament, with fifteen seats.

In Belgium a fundamental and lasting change has taken place, which upset the party blocs which existed before 1965. Until then there were four parties in parliament representing the left (social democracy and the Communist Party), the centre (Christian democracy) and the right (Liberals). However, territorially based parties exclusively representing the language-territorial or 'communal' cleavage received more and more electoral support. Around the mid-1970s the traditional parties followed suit and organised themselves along this cleavage. The result has been that the Belgian party system had fourteen parties in which each territory – Flanders, Walloon and Brussels – was represented by the common ideological party families and by parties representing the language-territorial issue. After 1985 the latter parties gradually lost support (apart from the Flemish Bloc) and at present there are ten parties in parliament: a Flemish and Walloon party for each of the traditional ideological blocs, one large and one small language-territorial party, and, since the 1980s, two Green parties. All in all, it appears that the Belgian party system has drastically changed over time and is still in flux: not only because new parties have gained weight, but also because the main parties representing the Christian Democrats and the Liberals are changing their labels in an attempt to realign their voters, and – due to the federalist developments – are less similar to their brethren across the language communities.

Table 7.2 Elections to the Luxembourg Chamber of Deputies, 1945–2004

Year	Turnout %	Communist KPL/DL	Green G	Socialist LSAP	Christian CSV	Democrat DP	Others
1945	nd	11	–	23	45	18	3
1948	92	14	–	38	36	12	0
1951	91	3	–	34	42	21	0
1954	93	7	–	33	45	12	2
1959	92	7	–	33	39	20	1
1964	91	10	–	36	36	12	6
1968	89	13	–	31	38	18	0
1974	90	9	–	27	30	23	11
1979	89	5	–	23	36	22	14
1984	89	4	4	32	37	20	3
1989	87	4	8	26	32	17	11
1994	87	2	10	25	30	19	14
1999	87	2	9	24	30	23	13
2004	86	2	12	23	36	24	3

Notes:

Communist: KPL: Communist Party of Luxembourg (Kommunistesch Partei Lëtzebuerg). DL: The Left (Déi Lénk).

Green: G: The Greens (Déi Greng).

Socialist: LSAP: Socialist Labour (Lëtzebuurger Arbechterpartei).

Christian: CSV: Christian Social Union (Chrëstlich-Sozial Vollekspartei).

Democrat: DP: Democratic Party (Demokratesch Partei).

In Luxembourg the party system has remained remarkably stable and only during the 1980s were the Green movement and a radical left-wing party able to gain access to parliament. The total number of parties has risen from four during the 1950s to six since the 1980s. This growth is directly related to one issue: the reform of the welfare state, in particular pension reform. However, most of the new parties did not flourish for long.

In the Netherlands the first change occurred during the late 1960s, when a number of splits came about among the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats. However, the most important change at that time was the foundation of Democrats '66 – a progressive liberal party – which gained a lasting, albeit volatile, position within the Dutch party system. During the 1980s the situation again changed through a number of mergers (resulting in the CDA and the Green left). An additional change has been the electoral growth of the conservative liberal VVD.

Table 7.3 Elections to the First Chamber in the Netherlands, 1946–2006

Year	Turnout %	Socialist SP	Green CPN, PSP, PPR	Labour PvdA	Democrat D'66	Christian KVP, ARP, CHU, Oth	People VVD	Freedom PVV	Other					
1946	93	–	11	–	–	28	–	31	13	8	2	6	–	1
1948	94	–	8	–	–	26	–	31	13	9	2	8	–	4
1952	95	–	6	–	–	30	–	29	11	8	6	9	–	1
1956	96	–	5	–	–	33	–	32	10	8	3	9	–	1
1959	96	–	2	2	–	31	–	32	9	8	3	12	1	0
1963	95	–	3	3	–	29	–	32	9	9	3	10	2	2
1967	95	–	4	3	–	24	5	27	10	8	3	11	5	2
1971*	79	–	4	1	2	25	7	22	9	6	4	10	1	9
1972	84	–	5	2	5	27	4	18	9	5	5	14	2	5
1977	88	–	2	1	2	34	5	CDA: 32			4	18	1	1
1981	87	–	2	2	2	28	11		31		5	17	0	2
1982	81	1	2	2	2	30	4		30		3	23	1	2
1986	86	0	1	1	1	33	6		35		3	17	0	2
1989	80	0	GL: 4			32	8		35		4	15	1	1
1994	78	1		4		24	16		22		5	20	3	5
1998	73	4		7		29	9		18		5	25	1	2
2002	79	6		7		15	5		28		4	16	19	0
2003	80	6		5		27	4		29		4	18	6	1
2006	80	17		5		21	2		27		6	15	6	1

Notes:

\*Compulsory vote abolished.

Socialist: SP: Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij).

Green: CPN: Communist Party; PSP: Pacifist Socialist; PPR: Radicals; since 1989, merged into GL: Green Left (Groen Links).

Labour: PvdA: Labour Party (Partij van der Arbeid).

Democrat: D'66: Democrats (Democraten '66).

Christian: KVP: Catholics; ARP: Anti-Revolutionary Party; CHU: Christian Historical Union; since 1977, merged into CDA: Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen Democratisch Appel); Oth: Orthodox Catholic and Protestant parties.

People: VVD: Freedom People's Democratic Party (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie).

Freedom: PVV: Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid).

Yet the most striking feature of Dutch electoral politics has been the soaring levels of electoral volatility: 21 per cent in 1994, 31 per cent in 2002 and 13 per cent in 2006.

It is clear from this overview that the Dutch and, to some extent, the Luxembourg party systems have gone through a period of transition. In Belgium the dominant cleavage is not in as much left-right but instead the 'communal' or 'federal' one. Since the 1970s, the overall number of parties has doubled and the original party blocs are split according to this cleavage. Instead of one, *two* party systems exist in Belgium, representing the party families in separate ideological blocs in Walloon and Flanders. The extent to which these developments in the respective party systems have influenced the behaviour of parties will be scrutinised below.

## PARTY SYSTEMS. TURBULENCE AND TURMOIL

Before discussing the ideological differences between parties as well as their issue-guided behaviour, we will briefly describe the development of the major parties. Among the Benelux countries, Belgium has the longest history of a full parliamentary democracy in terms of a directly elected parliament to which government is responsible. It took until 1868 to reach this stage in Luxembourg and the Netherlands, when the principle of responsible government was introduced *de facto*. Hence parties emerged first as parliamentary groups as well as electoral organisations between 1846 and 1885 in Belgium, whereas in Luxembourg and the Netherlands the process of party formation took a different course.

Most present parties, except the Social Democratic ones (which were founded between 1893 and 1902), came into being after the Second World War. Although the Protestant parties of the Netherlands (Anti-Revolutionary Party, ARP, and Christian Historical Union, CHU) were also formed before or around the turn of the century, they have now ceased to exist after their mergers with the Catholic KVP into CDA (1977). The Catholic parties re-emerged as genuine people's parties after the war. The current liberal parties were founded between 1944 and 1950 in all three countries as a result of the regrouping of previously separate parties. The main difference between the pre-war and post-war liberal parties is due to populist tendencies. Although the ideological and organisational roots of the main parties in Benelux go back to the nineteenth century, their behaviour can be better analysed since the Second World War.

As has been noted already in the introduction to this chapter, after 1970 parties had to transform themselves in order to maintain their electoral support and at the same time they had to find the means to achieve optimal outcomes in terms of decision-making. To some extent both aims were contradictory or at least seem to have been inversely related. In order to remain viable political parties, the main parties of the Dutch and Belgian systems had to cope with societal developments and new political issues, as well as to re-establish links with the population. This led them consequently to rearrange the mode of interaction with other parties. This line of reasoning not only explains the transformation of the party system as an institution of collective decision-making, but also sheds light on the changing style of the

politics of accommodation in the Low Countries. In order to understand this process of adjustment, we shall now focus upon party differences in terms of issues and ideology before and after 1970, i.e. the development of the party systems and parties in a consociational environment towards a situation of adversarial conditions during the 1990s. In addition, we shall focus on the changes after 1989 in particular which aptly illustrate the changing political behaviour in the Benelux from coalescence to adversarial party politics.

## Adversarial politics and coalescent party behaviour

Political parties in Benelux are required to develop a dual strategy. On the one hand, parties must convince the electorate that they are the best choice for realising the voters' desires individually. On the other hand, parties must take into account the feasibility of future government participation. Hence parties must seek an optimal strategic position by means of an adversarial type of electoral competition and a coalescent attitude towards coalition formation. In other words, each party's problem is to reconcile its strategy concerning electoral competition and eventual co-operation in government coalitions that allows for decision-making with an eye to effective policy pursuit.

Originally, vote-organising, rather than vote-seeking, as an electoral strategy of parties was based primarily on societal cleavages, but since the late 1960s this option is no longer feasible. Parties must direct themselves in campaigning on the basis of issue salience. That is to say, parties compete on those policy-related issues on which they will be distinguished from other parties without making co-operation impossible. The relevant parties have to solve the paradox of ideological distance and policy connection in gaining access to government at a later stage.

A way of looking into this problem is to examine the extent to which parties differ in terms of their election programmes. To that end we here use a comparative left versus right scale, which shows the ideological differences between the three party blocs-cum-families and the new parties that have emerged on both the right and left of the respective party systems. First of all, it can be noted that after 1989 the pattern changes. The new parties on the left and the right are 'wing' parties, whereas the programmatic differences between Christian democracy and social democracy decrease. A glance at the range of each party system reveals that the party differences are strongly reduced. All in all, this implies a convergent movement with less space for competition.

In comparative perspective the party differences are not very great and tend to decrease. Furthermore, it can be noted that it is difficult to locate an obvious party at the centre of any of the party systems in the Benelux countries. The centre used to be occupied by the Christian Democrats (CDA in the Netherlands and CVP/PSV in Belgium). In Luxembourg the centre is not really occupied by any party, although the Social Democrats are close to the median. In short, the movements of parties in the Low Countries are less straightforward than before 1990. The overall movement is convergent for the established parties, with some divergence on the 'wings' of each party system as a result of the rise of new parties.

Since the late 1960s new parties definitely have entered the electoral arena in the Netherlands: Democrats '66 (D'66), the Green Left (a merger of small left parties in 1989) and the Socialist Party (SP). In particular D'66 and the SP have significantly changed the electoral game in the Netherlands, since the former competes with both the Freedom People's Democrats (VVD) and the Labour Party (PvdA); whereas the Green Left has been for some time a threat to the PvdA. However, the SP is the more serious threat by organising a homogeneous party bloc on the left of that party. In Belgium the party differences were well organised by the parties, in particular Social Democrats and Christian Democrats. After 1970 the language–territory or 'communal' cleavage gained real weight. This development is less reflected in the left–right distance than in the reorganisation of the main parties into Flemish and Walloon blocs. This was typically a strategy to limit the electoral room for manoeuvre of territorially based parties in Flanders (originally the Flemish Union, VU, and during the 1990s the right-wing Flemish Bloc, VB) and in Wallonia (the Reform Movement, MR) in order to maintain their electoral share and thus uphold their own position within the changing party system. In Luxembourg the main parties retain their electorate and are only marginally affected by the Greens and protest parties.

All in all, party system change has occurred in the Benelux. The general shift within each system has been towards the centre, where the party differences decrease, with a simultaneous development at the right and the left. Whereas the moral-religious dimension appears to fade, the socio-economic issues tend to become more important. The main change is the emergence of successful new parties on the left and right of the political spectrum that have a considerable share of the vote (12 per cent in Luxembourg in 2004, 24 per cent in the Netherlands in 2006, 27 per cent in Belgium in 2007). The room for electoral competition appears to be smaller than before and the programmatic differences between the established party families are diminishing. Traditional cleavages and related ideologies are less relevant nowadays. At the same time the saliency of issues is becoming more important for understanding the politics of policy-making in the Low Countries.

Table 7.4 Left–right placement of parties in Belgium

Greens Eco, Ag	Socialists PS, SP	Christians CDH, CDV	Liberals MR, VLD	Flemish VB
Left	Centre-left	Centre	Centre-right	Right

*Party names:*

- Eco, Ag: Ecologist (Ecolo/Agalev).
- PS: Walloon Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste).
- SP: Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A-Spirit/Cartel Social Progressief Alternatief).
- CDH: Democratic and Humanist Centre (Centre Démocratique and Humaniste).
- CDV: Flemish Christian Democrats (Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams).
- MR: Reform Movement (Mouvement Réformateur).
- VLD: Flemish Liberal Democrats (Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten).
- VB: Flemish Bloc (Vlaams Belang).

Source: De Winter *et al.* (2006), Keman (2007).

Table 7.5 Left–right placement of parties in Luxembourg

Communist DL	Green G	Socialist LSAP	Christian Democrat CSV DP	Justice ADR
Left	Centre-left	Centre	Centre-right	Right

*Party names:*

- DL: The Left (Déi Lénk).
- G: The Greens (Déi Greng).
- LSAP: Socialist Labour (Lëtzebuurger Arbechterpartei).
- CSV: Christian-Social Union (Chrëstlich-Sozial Vollekspartei).
- DP: Democratic Party (Demokratesch Partei).
- ADR: Action Committee for Democracy and Justice (Aktionskomitee fir Demokratie a Rentegerechtheet).

Table 7.6 Left–right placement of parties in the Netherlands

Socialist SP	Green GL	Labour PvdA	Democrat D'66	Christian People CDA VVD	Freedom PVV
Left		Centre-left	Centre	Centre-right	Right

*Party names:*

- SP: Socialist party (Socialistische Partij).
- GL: Green Left (Groen Links).
- PvdA: Labour Party (Partij van der Arbeid).
- D'66: Democrats (Democraten '66).
- CDA: Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen Democratisch Appel).
- VVD: Freedom Democratic People's Party (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie).
- PVV: Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid).

Source: Keman (2007).

**Salient issues**

Party systems in the Benelux countries have changed over time in terms of party differences and this also implies a change in the way parties interact with each other. An important feature of party interaction is not only how far apart they are ideologically, but also what this means in terms of issue salience. As we stated before, issue salience is, in addition to ideology, an important feature of the working of the party system as an institution of parliamentary democracy. Party differences with respect to issues are a more direct indicator of the extent to which parties are capable of cooperative behaviour, which is central to the process of government formation. What parties stress as their salient issues may also be expected to shape their agenda if and when they enter government.

Keman (2007) and Klingemann *et al.* (1994) have shown by means of European cross-national comparisons that the programmatic contents of the three party

'families' – Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and Liberals – show considerable overlap. It demonstrates that there is indeed limited room for manoeuvre for each party to compete and also that a lot of common ground is covered by each party family. Hence, it is the actual saliency of issues that influences adversarial and cooperative behaviour in parliament and government.

Christian Democrats strongly emphasise the provision of social welfare. However, it should also be pointed out that within the Christian Democratic family values related to societal permissiveness or traditional morality are more strongly emphasised in Luxembourg and the Netherlands than in Belgium. A policy priority is prominent in Benelux Christian Democratic and Social Democratic parties: social justice (indicating the importance of solidarity and egalitarianism), i.e. the 'welfare state'.

The European pattern of social-democracy fits the national profiles of the Benelux countries. Yet in this case it is noteworthy that issues relating to economic goals (e.g. full employment) appear to be a lower priority. This is paradoxical if one takes into account the process of de-industrialisation in these countries since the 1980s. All Social Democratic parties in Benelux stress the development of the social welfare state, a policy concern they share with Christian-democracy.

The liberal parties of the Low Countries are more different from the European pattern than the other two party families. It appears that the Democratic Party of Luxembourg shows much more concern regarding the development of the welfare state than its counterparts in Belgium and the Netherlands. These liberal parties (the Flemish Liberal Democrats (VLD) and MR in Belgium and the VVD in the Netherlands) have an issue profile that is much more oriented towards values and goals regarding the market economy. In fact their profile better resembles the ideological priorities of the European conservative parties, in which economic orthodoxy is a prominent feature.

It can be concluded, therefore, that the main party differences, expressed in terms of issue salience in the Low Countries, to a large degree match the European pattern, with the exception of the Liberals, which are more inclined to a conservative ideology. This is an important conclusion, for it points to the fact that the degree of co-operation and conflict within each of the party systems can be viewed as taking place basically within a two-dimensional space with two main issues: the economy and social welfare. This pattern enables each party representing these issues considerable room for manoeuvre in building coalitions within parliament and with respect to government formation. It is essential to understand this, since it shapes the process of collective decision-making in these multi-party systems and thus helps us understand why politics in the Low Countries can be characterised as a pendulum between cooperation and confrontation in order to compete successfully for a maximum share of the vote, without losing sight of the other aim of parties, which is linked to government participation.

## PARLIAMENT AND COALITION FORMATION

Given the structure of party politics in the Benelux countries, it goes almost without saying that in terms of collective decision-making party government is the paramount institution. Whatever description of politics in the Low Countries one examines, the formation and functioning of government are considered to be vital in explaining politics in those countries. Most important of all is that most writers focus on the role of parties with respect to the formation and subsequent behaviour of government in terms of policy pursuit and performance. Hence within this context of policy-seeking behaviour the policy space within the respective party systems is crucial for understanding the process of government formation.

Below I shall first describe the process of government formation in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. This description revolves around three elements: (1) the main rules of the 'formation game'; (2) the primary objectives of those parties; (3) the outcomes of the government formation process. After that, we shall focus on the decision-making process of the coalition governments in Belgium and the Netherlands. This is important for it is there that the paradox of the politics of confrontation and cooperation comes to the fore. Cabinet decision-making seeks to solve adversarial policy issues, thereby shaping the executive-legislature relationship and, of course, to a large extent determining the policy performance.

### Features of coalition formation

Party governments in the Benelux countries have almost always been coalitions. Unlike in Scandinavian countries, for example, governments must rely on a parliamentary majority. The exceptions to this rule are the so-called caretaker governments, which, however, function with clipped wings regarding policy-making. Caretaker governments are meant to pave the way for new fully fledged coalitions, mostly by preparing for new, often anticipated elections.

The Netherlands and Luxembourg fit the European average duration of governments quite well (786 days), and the composition of government is almost always a multi-party coalition. Since the 1970s the prevalent type of coalition government in Luxembourg and the Netherlands is the minimum winning coalition (MWC, with no superfluous members to form a majority). Over time the major change is that Christian Democrats are becoming less powerful after 1970, yet still holding the premiership more often than not. Another feature of party governance is that the parliamentary action of withdrawing legislative support from government is not often utilised. This suggests a diminishing role of parliamentary politics and a shift in the executive-legislature relation. From this overview of the features of party government in the Benelux countries it appears that, particularly in Luxembourg and the Netherlands, they are quite stable, tend to be minimum winning and have developed a relatively dominant position with respect to parliament.

However, it must be noticed that there is a striking contrast between Belgium on the one hand and Luxembourg and the Netherlands on the other as far as the features of coalition government are concerned. In virtually all respects Belgian governments



Table 7.7 Governments of Belgium, 1945–2007

No.	Year	Prime Minister	Party composition
1	1945	A. van Acker	Christian, Socialist, Liberal, Communist
		A. van Acker	Socialist, Liberal, Communist, Independent
2	1946	P. H. Spaak	Socialist, Liberal
		A. van Acker	Socialist, Liberal, Communist
		C. Huysmans	Socialist, Liberal, Communist
	1947	P. H. Spaak	Socialist, Christian
3	1949	G. Eyskens	Christian, Liberal
4	1950	J. Duvieusart	Christian
		J. Pholien	Christian
	1952	J. van Houtte	Christian
5	1954	A. van Acker	Socialist, Liberal
6	1958	G. Eyskens	Christian
	1958	G. Eyskens	Christian, Liberal
7	1961	T. Lefevre	Christian, Socialist
8	1965	P. Hamel	Christian, Socialist
	1966	P. Vandenboeynants	Christian, Liberal
9	1968	G. Eyskens	Christian, Liberal
10	1972	G. Eyskens	Christian, Socialist
	1973	E. Leburton	Socialist, Christian, Liberal
11	1974	L. Tindemans	Christian, Liberal
	1974	L. Tindemans	Christian, Liberal, Walloon
12	1977	L. Tindemans	Christian, Socialist, Francophone, Flemish
13	1978	P. Vandenboeynants	Christian, Socialist, Francophone, Flemish
	1979	W. Martens	Christian, Socialist, Francophone
	1980	W. Martens	Christian, Socialist
	1980	W. Martens	Christian, Socialist, Liberal
	1980	G. Eyskens	Christian, Socialist
14	1981	G. Eyskens	Christian, Socialist
	1981	W. Martens	Christian, Liberal
15	1985	W. Martens	Christian, Liberal
16	1987	W. Martens	Christian, Liberal
	1988	W. Martens	Christian, Socialist, Flemish
17	1992	J.-L. Dehaene	Christian, Socialist
18	1995	J.-L. Dehaene	Christian, Socialist
19	1999	G. Verhofstadt	Liberal, Socialist, Francophone, Green
20	2003	G. Verhofstadt	Liberal, Socialist
21	2007	G. Verhofstadt	Caretaker

Note: The first party indicates the Prime Minister's affiliation.

differ from the Dutch and Luxembourg ones: they are not minimal winning, they have not lasted as long and tend to be terminated for reasons that either have to do with internal dissent within the coalition or with losing parliamentary support. All these features of Belgian party government point to a lower degree of governmental stability.

In Belgium and to some extent in the Netherlands one should note that the internal cohesion of coalition government is fading. It is apparent that conflicts between parties tend to be fought out within the government, rather than in parliament. This may indicate a decline in traditional politics of accommodation.

Table 7.8 Governments of Luxembourg, 1945–2004

No.	Year	Prime Minister	Party composition
1	1945	P. Dupong	Christian, Socialist, Democrat, Communist
	1947	P. Dupong	Christian, Democrat
2	1948	P. Dupong	Christian, Democrat
3	1951	P. Dupong	Christian, Socialist
	1953	J. Bech	Christian, Socialist
4	1954	J. Bech	Christian, Socialist
	1958	P. Frieden	Christian, Socialist
5	1959	P. Werner	Christian, Democrat
6	1964	P. Werner	Christian, Socialist
7	1969	P. Werner	Christian, Democrat
8	1974	G. Thorn	Democrat, Socialist
9	1979	P. Werner	Christian, Democrat
10	1984	J. Santer	Christian, Socialist
11	1989	J. Santer	Christian, Socialist
12	1995	J.-C. Juncker	Christian, Socialist
13	1999	J.-C. Juncker	Christian, Democrat
14	2004	J.-C. Juncker	Christian, Socialist

Note: The first party indicates the Prime Minister's affiliation.

Table 7.9 Governments of the Netherlands, 1945–2007

No.	Year	Prime Minister	Party composition
1	1945	W. Schermerhorn	Socialist, Christian
2	1946	L. J. M. Beel	Christian, Socialist
3	1948	W. Drees	Socialist, Christian, People
	1951	W. Drees	Socialist, Christian
4	1952	W. Drees	Socialist, Christian
5	1956	W. Drees	Socialist, Christian
	1958	L. J. M. Beel	Christian
6	1959	J. de Quay	Christian, People
7	1963	V. G. M. Marijnen	Christian, People
	1965	J. M. L. Th. Cals	Christian, Socialist
	1966	J. Zijlstra	Christian
8	1967	P. S. de Jong	Christian, People
9	1971	B. W. Biesheuvel	Christian, People, Social Democrat
10	1972	B. W. Biesheuvel	Christian, People
	1973	J. M. den Uyl	Socialist, Christian, Democrat
11	1977	A. A. M. van Agt	Christian, People
12	1981	A. A. M. van Agt	Christian, Socialist, Democrat
13	1982	A. A. M. van Agt	Christian, Democrat
	1982	R. F. M. Lubbers	Christian, People
14	1986	R. F. M. Lubbers	Christian, People
15	1989	R. F. M. Lubbers	Christian, Socialist
16	1994	W. Kok	Socialist, People, Democrat
17	1998	W. Kok	Socialist, People, Democrat
18	2002	J. P. Balkenende	Christian, People, Freedom
19	2003	J. P. Balkenende	Christian, People, Democrat
20	2007	J. P. Balkenende	Christian, Socialist

Note: The first party indicates the Prime Minister's affiliation.

Whichever way one looks at it, it seems that the structure and behaviour of governments have changed over time. Let us therefore turn to the process of government formation in the Benelux countries.

### The process of government formation: a long and winding road

The formal and informal rules are structured in more or less the same way in Belgium and the Netherlands. Apart from short clauses/articles in the constitution pointing to the right of the Crown to appoint and dismiss ministers, there are few differences in a formal sense. The basic procedure is as follows: after the termination of government for whatever reason the monarch decides whether or not he or she will accept the resignation. Prior to the 1970s it was habitual to delay this decision in order to look into the possibility of restoring the old government by means of a reshuffle of either ministers or parties. It has been suggested, particularly in the Netherlands, that a new informal rule has been introduced: when a government is terminated, elections are anticipated in order to record the legislative distribution among parties before actually forming a new government.

The next step of the head of state is to appoint an *informateur*, or mediator, whose task is to find a viable combination of parties to form the next government. This is an important stage in the process, since he or she clearly steers the process of forming a government by laying the foundations for the basis of a policy agreement among the potential parties of government.

On the basis of this agreement the monarch appoints a *formateur*, an organiser, who is in fact nowadays the Prime Minister designate. It is the *formateur's* task to find the proper candidates and to finalise between them and the parties involved the policy programme of the new government. This protracted process has become more time-consuming in the last two decades for two reasons: first, the inter-party bargaining used to be secretive and among party leaders only, while today the media receive more information about what is going on; second, parties themselves state more clearly what they want out of the negotiations and have preserved the right to have the policy agreement ratified by their party decision-making bodies.

Again, most of these procedures are not formal rules, but they are nevertheless adhered to. These informal rules explain why the process of government formation in Benelux countries can take quite some time (it took, on average, 52 days in the period 1946–70, and 85 days afterwards). These rules have, of course, a certain meaning: they are intended to bring about a stable government and a party combination that is primarily founded upon policy-seeking behaviour rather than on office-seeking motivations alone.

From the preceding section it is clear that the formation of coalition governments is a game in which two motives drive the actors or parties involved: office-seeking and policy-seeking. Second, it must be noticed that the number of relevant parties is limited and that the government-formation game in the Benelux countries is strongly influenced by both the initiating and the mediating role of the head of state and the *informateur*. They are in a position to include and exclude parties, albeit restrained by certain 'habits' or informal rules. However, the parties themselves decide

the outcome of the negotiation process, and particularly the party elites representing and controlling the parties.

Another aspect of government formation, particularly since policy agreements are a crucial feature of this process, is the extent to which parties and their leaders stress policy pursuit. Again in Luxembourg and the Netherlands this is considered as a prime motive of behaviour, whereas in Belgium this has been less the case. The party leadership has a strong influence on building governments and, in Luxembourg and the Netherlands in particular, policy is traded off against office. It is therefore relevant to know what policies are considered important to the respective parties, for with such knowledge it is also possible to understand and to appreciate the final outcome of the coalition that is formed.

Earlier we found already that two issue dimensions appear to be important in each of the party systems: socio-economic left–right and matters regarding welfare-state development. Social Democratic and liberal parties are divided with respect to socio-economic issues, and Christian democracy takes up a position in between these two party families. Morality is clearly a core policy concern of the centre party in most governments: Christian Democrats. In addition, the development of the federal state *vis-à-vis* the language communities is an issue particularly relevant to the Belgian case. It can be concluded therefore that each party bloc (left, centre and right) is in pursuit of a salient issue, and it may be expected that this multidimensional division will spill over into the bargaining game.

A number of formal and informal rules figure in each system and define the room for manoeuvre, partly independently of their priorities. The following rules apply in Benelux:

- 1 Small parties and 'radical' parties are often discarded.
- 2 No minority governments are formed.
- 3 Without a policy agreement between parties, no government is formed.
- 4 Without the approval of the representative bodies of each party involved, there is no participation.
- 5 Parties have preferences for policy and related ministries.
- 6 Distribution of offices in government should be proportional to the share of seats of participating parties in parliament.

In addition to these general rules, there are a few specific ones, particularly in Belgium. First of all, faced with the need to find solutions with respect to the reform of the unitary state into a federalised polity, governments were wise to look for two-thirds support in both legislative bodies, making constitutional changes possible. Second, since 1971 linguistic parity of ministers in government is constitutionally required. Third, until 1993 it was felt necessary to have a corresponding political majority in the regional councils, which reinforces the fact that in Belgium federalisation is an important issue. At present this process is becoming even more difficult since the electoral differences across the three territorial communities is diverging.

Examining the eventual outcomes of this process we can assess the working of the six informal rules. Rules 1 and 2 have been relevant in all Benelux countries since the beginning of the cold war. In the Netherlands small parties were included in

government during the hectic period of the early 1970s and after 2002. The reformist Social Democrats (DS70) were part of a centre-right coalition because the 'normal' parties of government had lost their majority after the elections in 1971. In 1973 both the radical PPR and D'66 participated in Government. D'66 returned to government in 1981, 1994 and 2003. In 2006 the Christian Union (CU) – an orthodox party – took office.

In Belgium the situation has been similar. Since 1974, mainly owing to the constitutional changes we referred to earlier, it is essential to have linguistic parity within the cabinet and to form oversized cabinets to be able to introduce new constitutional arrangements. This led to the forced inclusion of territorially based parties (the Flemish Union, VU, the Walloon Assembly, RW, and the Francophone Democratic Front, FDF, later the Reform Movement, MR). Yet, more recently, owing to the organisational splitting of the parties representing the main party families and the constitutional resolutions of the 1990s, this has no longer really been necessary and the original rule appears to be once more in operation. It can be concluded, apart from caretaker governments and the temporary inclusion of small parties in the 1970s, that Rules 1 and 2 have generally been followed in Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

According to Rules 3 and 4, policy agreements are vital, for two reasons. The first is to ensure a majority in parliament in order to find approval. In Luxembourg and the Netherlands there is no formal rule of investiture, as there is in Belgium. Yet a legislative vote is always held on the contents of the Government Declaration, and this procedure is functionally equivalent. The second reason is that in Belgium and Luxembourg parties participating in government are obliged to get the approval of their representative bodies. *De facto* this is merely a 'rubber-stamping' procedure and shows, *inter alia*, the powerful position of the extra-parliamentary leadership. In the Netherlands this latter procedure is not obligatory, but most if not all parties follow this practice. On only two occasions has the outcome of the procedure led to eventual failure to round off the intended formation of government. In 1969 the socialist Luxembourg LSAP blocked the formation of government, and in 1977 the Labour Dutch PvdA did the same.

In respect to Rules 5 and 6, we have pointed out that policy-seeking and office-seeking are related motives in the countries under review. Recall also that policy pursuit is particularly emphasised in Luxembourg and the Netherlands, and that in Belgium office-seeking is on a par with policy pursuit (which can be understood from its requirements regarding the representation of linguistic communities). In addition, until the 1980s there were two conflict dimensions in terms of policy priorities in all three countries: social welfare and societal permissiveness. In particular the Christian Democratic parties had a pivotal position in this respect: in terms of left versus right they almost always controlled the median legislator, and they almost always were the largest party in parliament. Christian Democrats have benefited most from Rules 5 and 6. First of all they have almost always been in government as well as having a leading role by taking the premiership. Second, more often than not these politicians have controlled those ministries that are relevant to their policy aims, i.e. Education, Justice and Social Welfare. Third, the ratio between legislative size and ministerial representation has been maintained in all three countries.

The other partners in government could be considered as junior partners. In Belgium Social Democrats participated in 60 per cent of post-war governments, and the Liberals participated only in 30 per cent of all cabinets. In the Netherlands the left and right were both equally represented: both the Labour Party (PvdA) and the Freedom Party (VVD) participated in half the total number of governments formed. Yet these parties quite often held the ministries relevant to their policy concerns, representing the left–right dimension. Hence Rule 5 appears to work quite well, whereas Rule 6 used to be more beneficial to the Christian Democrats. Yet, during the 1990s the actual situation seemed to be changing, although the six rules are *still* in operation. Recall that Christian Democratic issues appear to be less effective in vote-seeking terms and that socio-economic issues have become even more salient. The result has been that Christian democracy eventually lost its 'pivotal' position in the respective party systems. This has led to a dramatic change in the composition of coalitions in the Netherlands since 1994 and in Belgium since 1999. In the former case it led to the formation of the 'purple coalition' with the Social Democrats together with the 'progressive' and 'conservative' Liberals, i.e. D'66 and VVD. In Belgium the Liberals (VLD/PRL) formed a coalition without the Christian Democratic parties. Luxembourg maintained its familiar process of forming governments of the two electorally strongest parties and therefore always has experienced a minimum winning coalition.

It can be concluded that the actual process of coalition formation in the Benelux countries is the result of the working of the party system and the existing procedures or rules of the game. It appears that many rules have been developed to facilitate a government formation process in which parties play a crucial role. Until recently the Christian Democratic Party family gained most from this game (especially in holding the premiership). The interaction between the actors involved and the institutions results in viable and often lasting governments in Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

### Party government and cabinet decision-making

The vital link between government and parliament with respect to decision-making lies in the policy agreement between the parties in government. Over time this document has acquired almost sacrosanct status in the Netherlands and binds parties of government in parliament. In Belgium the government programme is equally binding on the participating parties, but here the party leaders have more room to manoeuvre to deviate from it. In contrast to the Netherlands, the party Chairman has a strong influence on cabinet decision-making, as he regularly meets every week with the most prominent government ministers in the party. All this means that in both countries the balance between the executive and legislature is tilted in favour of the cabinet. Yet, at the same time, there are important differences between the countries regarding how decision-making takes place and thus how effective partisan control of government is in terms of policy pursuit.

In the Netherlands ministers are constitutionally part of the Queen's government and bear responsibilities that go beyond party. Of course, ministers are answerable to parliament, which, in practice, can dismiss them. There is no separation of powers

as, for instance, in the United States, nor are the powers fused, as in Great Britain. Ministers cannot be members of parliament, nor can they assume other public offices at other levels of the state. Both members of parliament and ministers can introduce legislation but most if not all initiatives come from the government. Hence government is clearly the most powerful policy-making agent in the Netherlands. Until the 1970s ministers and supporting parties remained quite independent of each other, since, for instance, the parliamentary leaders rarely took up a post in government. After 1970 this situation changed, and instead of 'specialist and technocrats' more and more generalist politicians have become ministers in the Netherlands. This development has led to a reduced role for the party leadership outside government. This gradual change in the recruitment of ministers may explain, together with the increased status of the policy agreement, why termination of Dutch governments is less often the result of parliamentary action than of internal dissent. Political cooperation and conflict over policy is by and large a matter of politics within the cabinet.

Another feature of Dutch cabinet government that has changed over time is the position and role of the Premier. Until the 1970s his position can best be described as *primus inter pares*. Yet today, although he or she still has few formal powers, he or she is influential in the decision-making process. The Premier draws up the agenda and chairs all the meetings of the cabinet and its committees. He or she casts the deciding vote when there is a tie, and is increasingly regarded as the referee concerning disputes within the cabinet. A final characteristic of the decision-making of Dutch cabinets is that all members are collectively bound by the final outcome. From this description it is clear that party government is not only dominant in the Netherlands with respect to policy-making but also appears to be well organised as a result of a number of formal and informal rules. Only recently this 'practice' of running government has been under pressure. This was mainly due to the electoral success of List Pim Fortuyn, which entered government, and the inability of the parliamentary party to act as a governing party. However, after the elections of 2003 (caused by the ministers representing List Pim Fortuyn) the new coalition returned to business as usual.

The formal institutionalisation of cabinet decision-making in Belgium is similar to the Dutch system. Ministers are in principle appointed by the Crown and are responsible to parliament. Yet there are a number of differences, which are important for understanding Belgian cabinet decision-making and the related policy performance. The major differences concern the position and role of the individual minister in relation to the government as a ruling body. In addition the role and power of the Premier is somewhat different. Each minister holds an individual responsibility and is not bound by definition by the collective decision-making of the Council of Ministers. In actual fact, no such council exists in the constitution; nor is it organised by means of Standing Orders (as the Dutch cabinet has developed over time). Dewachter (1992: 165) remarks that the Belgian government is in fact a political body in which decision-making is dependent on consensus rather than on majorities (i.e. ministers have a kind of veto power). Another difference is the role of central government *vis-à-vis* the autonomous territorial communities. Almost half of the spending by government is sub-nationally decided and therefore central

government must negotiate its policies in concert with the regional communities. This only reinforces the urge for consensus politics as regards policy pursuit.

In short, the ministers have a stronger position individually and each party has a strong influence, owing to the rule of consensus decision-making. In part, this explains the greater number of governments, and also the higher degree of government termination due to parliamentary action and internal dissent than in the Netherlands.

It can be concluded that Belgian cabinet government is the apex of the political arena, in which parties *per se* play a dominant role with respect to decision-making. The Belgian government can be considered as a party government and its system of decision-making as a continuous process of intra-national bargaining. The style of decision-making of Belgian governments is therefore different from the Dutch style. Although every government is also formed on the basis of a policy agreement between the participating parties, it is less binding. Parties (i.e. their chairmen) and their individual ministers feel freer to deviate from this agreement. Moreover, not all government actions need to be sanctioned by the cabinet. The role of the Premier can therefore be considered as less powerful than that of his or her Dutch counterpart and more dependent on his or her personal and political skills than on his or her formal position. The Dutch Premier (and also his or her Luxembourg colleague) has developed into a 'supreme referee', whereas his or her Belgian counterpart remains a 'co-ordinator-mediator'. Furthermore, the federalisation of the Belgium nation-state has led to an even more complex process of decision-making. The devolution of a growing number of competences to the regions and communities – in particular after 1993 – has been conducive to this. Finally, given the coalitional type of central and regional governments, policy-making in Belgium is at present affected by the fact that the eventual decision-making is a compromise between parties and the different governing bodies which tends to be conducive to non-decisions and to incremental policy-making.

### Government and parliament: emerging osmosis

In Belgium and the Netherlands parliamentary activism has increased over time, in particular since the 1970s. This is a paradoxical development. First, the number of governmental law-making initiatives in Belgium increased from 100 before 1970 to 500 per year in 1990, whilst in the Netherlands the average was 300 after 1970. The number of parliamentary initiatives was relatively low: 11 per cent in Belgium, 5 per cent of the total initiatives in the Netherlands for the same period. Second, the success rate of initiatives by the government is quite high, namely 90 per cent in Belgium and 95 per cent in the Netherlands. This implies that parliament is increasingly a rubber stamp with very little policy-making capacity. Yet it shows a lot of activity, although limited to its controlling functions. One may speak of an emerging osmosis between governmental parties in parliament and governmental action in parliament. As a consequence, parliament has shifted its activities from policy-making to controlling and adjusting governmental initiatives. These parliamentary activities have, however, decreased the speed of the decision-making process.

Another proposition discussed concerns the extent to which government policy reflects the party's preferences in terms of policy pursuit, i.e. 'accountability'. Research has investigated this relationship by relating the content of electoral programmes to patterns of budgetary allocations (Klingemann *et al.* 1994: 206–39). The result of this analysis has been that in the Netherlands the relationship is positive and thus more or less accountable. In Belgium, however, the relationship is weak. Moreover, it appeared from the analysis that in the Dutch system the left–right distinction was a relevant indicator, meaning that centre-left coalitions showed a distinctive pattern of policy-making compared with centre-right coalitions. Therefore in the Netherlands alternating party combinations do matter regarding policy-making, whereas in Belgium the language–territorial cleavage and its federal structure have affected policy formation.

Looking at the budgetary developments in both countries, it appears that the decision-making costs related to finding co-operation and consensus are high as well as difficult to alter. In Belgium government total outlays were 50 per cent of GDP, of which almost 50 per cent was devoted to social welfare in 2005. In the Netherlands government spending is slightly lower: 46 per cent of total outlays, of which 40 per cent was on social welfare in 2005. Until the mid-1990s these ratios had hardly changed, but under the influence of the EMU agreement and economic pressures the levels of public expenditure, particularly concerning the welfare state and public debt, have been curbed (in particular in the Netherlands).

It can be concluded that in reality governmental power in Benelux is stronger than that of parliament, regardless of the latter's formal powers. Second, government decision-making can be characterised by cumbersome procedures. This seems inevitable, owing to the fact that multi-party coalitions are necessary to form viable governments. Yet governments do govern, albeit constrained by policy agreements in the Netherlands and hampered by federalised power sharing in Belgium. Finally, although these factors appear to arrest policy-making, it is clear that, in so far as decisions on policies are made, the Netherlands shows a positive record in terms of accountability (the relation between a party's policy stance and policies made) by comparison with Belgium.

Governments in Belgium and the Netherlands tend to make policy on the basis of political co-operation and by finding societal consensus. Such a process can often induce higher levels of spending, as well as incrementalism and policy immobility. In Belgium the situation is aggravated by the complex federal structure, whereas in the Netherlands the major parties seem to have been captured by various organised interests, which did not allow much policy change either.

### The role of bureaucracy and corporatism

Policy-making in Belgium and the Netherlands is politically a complex process, but to make a policy work is equally complex. Two institutional *modi operandi* play an important role in the process of policy implementation: on the one hand, bureaucracy; on the other, corporatism. Particularly interesting is the extent to which these institutional *modi operandi* have a bearing on political decision-making and facilitate

policy implementation. One could assert that although the formal structure of bureaucracy in both countries is by and large identical, the way it works is not similar: in Belgium, so it seems, the bureaucrats are captured by politicians, whereas in the Netherlands the bureaucracy appears to be more or less captured by interest groups. The extent to which this is a tenable proposition may well explain differences in policy performance of these countries.

Belgium and the Netherlands had in common the fact that their state structures can be described as being unitary and decentralised. Like labelling their political system 'republican monarchies', this denotes a paradox. From the constitutions of Luxembourg and the Netherlands it is obvious that the ultimate regulating powers rest with the central authorities. This was also the case with Belgium. However, since 1993 the Belgian state has been federalised. Yet as regards the organisation of its bureaucracy little change has taken place. Hence, both Belgium and the Netherlands (but not Luxembourg) have constitutionally organised their state apparatus as 'decentralised and unitary'. This formal aspect of the unitary state is reinforced by the fact that, for instance, the main source of state income, tax revenue, is collected by the central state. In Belgium (still) 90 per cent of all tax revenue is organised through central government and in the Netherlands the figure is 95 per cent, whereas this figure is 84 per cent in Luxembourg. Hence the central state allocates funds and regulates public policy from the centre, in which, of course, the bureaucracy has an important role to fulfil. Why then should the term 'unitary decentralised' state be used instead of simply depicting both countries as unitary and centralised?

Three reasons can be noted. First of all, the organisation of the public administration is a three-tier system: central state, provinces and municipalities. Much of the policy organisation is both functionally and, particularly in Belgium, territorially decentralised. In the Netherlands the countervailing power lies predominantly at the level of the municipalities, whereas in Belgium, until the 1990s, the provincial tier was quite important. From then on the countervailing powers *vis-à-vis* the central, now federal, state were devolved to the three *communities*: French- Flemish- and German-speaking and responsible for cultural matters; as well as the three *regions*: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital, responsible for the socio-economic and infrastructural matters. Hence policy *implementation* is by and large decentralised in both Belgium and the Netherlands, whereas decision-making and allocation remain to a large extent centralised in the latter country. Second, the size of the bureaucracy is relatively small in both countries. The number of central civil servants in Belgium and the Netherlands does not exceed 6–7 per cent of the working population. In many other European countries the figures are higher. Hence in terms of manpower the bureaucratic state in the Benelux is not huge. Third, apart from territorial decentralisation and the concomitant delegation of authority and co-determination of policies, both bureaucracies are to a large degree functionally decentralised (e.g. by means of 'parastatals' in Belgium and by departmental autonomy in the Netherlands) or, with regard to implementing policies, are dependent on other agencies (e.g. trade unions, employers' organisations, professional associations, etc.). One could say therefore that there has been a development towards policy networks that have been institutionalised over time and in due course have gained a certain institutional autonomy *vis-à-vis* the central state.

Bureaucratic autonomy of the central state is thus in practice limited, owing to the decentralisation of its organisation of implementation, the relatively small size of the central civil service and the emergence and structural growth of policy networks. Bureaucratic power is further limited because of its 'culture' or, to put it differently, the way it operates. In this respect the Belgian and Dutch bureaucracies differ considerably: in Belgium the civil service is captured by politics, whereas in the Netherlands this is not the case. Here the top civil servants are considered quite influential with regard to policy-making and implementation. Another difference is the fact that in the Netherlands appointments are by and large non-political; in Belgium they are more politicised. Unlike Belgium, Dutch ministers hardly have a political cabinet, let alone a separate political staff. Apart from tensions between the departments, the loyalty and continuity of the bureaucracy are not questioned in the Netherlands. In Belgium, the opposite developments have occurred and, in consequence, the bureaucracy is merely an apparatus for technocratic implementation and has little influence on the making and shaping of substantial public policy.

In contrast to the bureaucratic style, within the concept of corporatism the emphasis is placed on the informal procedures that have developed over time and have led to the institutionalisation of relations between the state and organised interests.

Two types of corporatism can be distinguished: centralised and sectoral corporatism, which depict the organisational level of interactions, respectively between state agencies and actors representing nationwide organised interests and between public and private agents on the level of sectoral interests and specific departments (e.g. Health Care, Housing, Infrastructure etc.). These differences have much to do with the types of interest represented and what is to be achieved by concerted policy action. For instance, in Belgium and the Netherlands social and economic policy formation, as well as industrial relations, used to be organised at the level of the central state. This type of corporatist intermediation is intended to find co-operation by means of bargaining between the state, employers' organisations and trade unions. In general, if a bargain is struck, it leads to a set of arrangements, which are binding for all concerned, i.e. policy-making is by concertation. Conversely, sectoral corporatism is based less on antagonistic than on shared interests. Here the function of corporatist intermediation is co-determination in policy formation and delegation of implementation. An example is the Dutch social security system, which is organised, composed and controlled by public and private agents. In Belgium one can observe the same development – for instance in the organisation of health insurance. Instead of devolution of authority, as is the case in the decentralised state, one might denote this type of policy implementation as 'contracting out' on the basis of shared interests and mutual responsibility.

In contrast to Belgium, where after the Second World War the foundations of corporatist policy-making were laid in the so-called 'social pact' which bound the social partners voluntarily, corporatism in the Netherlands was slowly institutionalised by means of formal regulations and the creation of three-party bodies (e.g. the Social Economic Council in 1950). It can be put forward, somewhat exaggeratedly, that Dutch corporatism can be characterised as 'statist', whereas the Belgian type could be labelled 'societal' corporatism. However, at present – so it seems – this distinction is fading. According to many observers Dutch corporatism was

transformed during the late 1980s and early 1990s into a 'Poldermodel'. This phenomenon can be characterised as a system of interlocking (public and private) interests, whose agents share collective goals, instead of negotiating conflicting ones.

Summarising our discussion of corporatism as an institutional design, it appears that this type and style of policy-making and implementation not only exist in both countries, but also amplify the notion of 'unitary decentralisation', as both central and decentralised types of corporatism exist simultaneously. The central system of corporatism regarding public-private concertation is seen as facilitating socio-economic policy-making at the national level, whereas the decentralised type occurs regularly on the intermediate level in order to facilitate sectoral or functional policy implementation by means of semi-public agencies (in the Netherlands) or contracting out the implementation of policies (in Belgium). This decentralised style of corporatism can be considered an institutionalised part of both polities. Yet, in the same period, it appeared that attempts at concerted policy-making remained ineffective, owing to lack of regulating potential, and were quite often burdened by negotiation costs (e.g. in the form of tax exemptions, wage indexation, and allocations by means of transfer payments). Decentralised corporatism, however, appears by and large to be operating effectively but at a high cost. The institutionalisation of organised interests by means of corporatism has led to a situation in which existing arrangements, particularly in the realm of the welfare state, are difficult to change, let alone reverse. However, during the 1990s this situation changed for the better. This cannot, however, be attributed solely to the changing *modus operandi* of corporatism, but should also be considered as an effect of a changing political climate. The convergence of the party systems and the solving of longstanding conflicting issues shaped the room to manoeuvre of both the political actors and the private interests.

To conclude: what is remarkable is the observation that in Belgium and the Netherlands institutional change appeared possible and feasible. In Belgium, it took a long period and needed a thorough constitutional change of the polity. In the Netherlands, the break with the past was the result of a dramatic shift in the political coalitions: the combination of conservative liberals and Social Democrats paved the way for the institutional regeneration of corporatism.

## THE DIFFUSION OF POLITICS: INTRA-NATIONAL AND TRANS-NATIONAL DEVOLUTION OF AUTHORITY

Today national sovereignty, as well as the institutional autonomy of the central state, has become more and more questioned. Again, there is a paradox. On the one hand, political life is still enshrined in constitutional rules, which define the autonomy and authority of the democratic state. On the other, public regulation by law appears to be reduced in practice. This is not just due to decreasing legitimacy, but also a result of change in the actual use and scope of rule from the centre. The Benelux countries are no exception to this general trend. On the contrary, the devolution of power, as well as the ruling behaviour of local authorities and the judiciary, is increasingly mentioned as a factor limiting the assumed and historically defined powers of the

central state. The extent to which this is the case (no less if it is only believed to be so!) implies a tendency towards the diffusion of politics. This process assumes a changing relationship between state and society, public and private, and a different meaning of the political chain of command (and delegation). In other words the loci of power tend to become dispersed and hierarchical relations within these politics seem to become less effective.

In this section we shall discuss the decentralisation of political administration, in particular the development of federalism in Belgium. In addition, the changing role of the judiciary, which is considered to have become more important in co-determining formal legislation, will be investigated. Finally, we shall discuss the role of the European Union as a trans-national actor influencing the room for manoeuvre of the nation-state in terms of subsidiarity. These developments can be considered as indicators of institutional change, manifesting a tendency towards a diffusion of politics.

### Regional autonomy and local authority

In legal terms the organisation of public administration in the Benelux countries is defined according to the principles of a nation-state. Budgetary autonomy is somewhat restricted in Luxembourg and the Netherlands, as is the regulatory potential of regions and municipalities. Belgium differs, of course, from the other Benelux countries in that its regional governments and communities possess more institutional autonomy than Dutch provinces and Luxembourg districts. Constitutionally, these entities have since the early 1990s more room for manoeuvre in Belgium, because these bodies have the constitutional right to deal with cultural and socio-economic affairs as well as with everything that is of interest solely to the territory and not already covered by the central state. Hence, apart from the transformation of the Belgian unitary state into a federal one during the 1980s and 1990s, local and regional government in Belgium is more autonomous and able to self-regulate on the basis of the rule of 'subsidiarity'.

Local politics, and in particular its democratic quality, is a contested notion in Benelux. The main issue is the contradictory situation in which local and regional representatives are elected by the citizens of a territory but local government is held responsible by (or it is dependent on) central government and public administrative rules. Hence the electoral chain of command and control is short and weak. Without doubt this situation impairs democratic quality at the sub-national level.

The Netherlands can serve here as an illustration: since compulsory voting was abolished in 1971 the participation rate in local and regional elections has steadily declined by comparison with general elections. Between 1971 and 2004 on average nearly 80 per cent of the electorate participated in the elections to the upper chamber, whereas in the municipal elections the participation rate dropped from 76 per cent to almost 50 per cent in 1998 (on average; in the larger cities the rate is close to 45 per cent). This situation has led to many proposals for institutional reform in the Netherlands. On one hand, these initiatives focus on increasing the institutional autonomy of provinces and municipalities by means of devolution (enabling

independent policy formation); on the other, an attempt has been made to create smaller units of local government and to hold referendums at the municipal level. So far, the devolution of central powers has not gone very far and attempts to involve the electorate have not improved the participation rate.

In Belgium and Luxembourg local democracy is less an issue. Given the size of Luxembourg, this is hardly surprising. But why not in Belgium? First of all, because local politics has been the foundation of many a political career. Success in local or regional politics is a stepping-stone to a national career. Second, more offices (e.g. mayor and alderman) are contested in elections. Third, national parties are well organised at the levels of local and regional politics, and consider it important to have a balance of power at all intra-national levels of decision-making. Together with the rule on compulsory voting, these reasons can explain a higher level of party activism at the regional and local level, albeit perhaps not always motivated by interest in local politics and government *per se*.

In conclusion: local authority in terms of institutional autonomy is somewhat limited in Luxembourg and the Netherlands in particular. The central state defines the room for manoeuvre, and devolved policy-making is responsive to the central public administration in most of its activities. This implies that political authority and democratic legitimacy are weak, particularly in the Netherlands (most initiatives to modernise local and provincial democracy have not been introduced because parliament could not find consensus). In Belgium the situation is different, owing to the role of the 'party-cracry', and because local and regional politics have been part of the evolution towards a federal state. A process of transition in which the devolution of political and administrative power was instrumental to language-territory issues or 'communalism' has led to a complex institutional structure of regions and communities.

The federal organisation of Belgium has in fact been the last stage in a long process. The institutional transition to a federal polity can be seen as a compromise between the 'unionists' and the 'independentists'. Instead of the development of a clear division and devolution of political authority, the federalisation of Belgium has been the result of centrifugal tendencies in and between the language territories. The main difference between Belgium and other federal states is that there exist three conflict dimensions which have made political solutions so difficult to achieve: economic structure and development; closed linguistic communities; territorial 'bones of contention' (i.e. the language boundary and the geographical position of the capital, Brussels). These differences have led to political compromises that reflect the asymmetries inherent in each conflict dimension. As a consequence, the federalisation of Belgium is shaped to institutionalise divergence, rather than to unite diversity within one state.

The resulting complexity, laid down constitutionally between 1980 and 1993, clearly favours the 'federalists' (and not the 'unitarians'). A system has been developed with compromises on a huge variety of institutions, in which congruence is difficult to establish. The division into three regions with competence in social affairs and economic matters and four communities with competence in cultural matters and individual rights forms the structure of the federal state. The fundamental disparity is that Flanders is homogeneous and economically prosperous whereas in Wallonia this is not the case. Hence, there is an inherent asymmetry between the

regions which hinders fiscal equalisation and leads to political differences within the Belgian party families.

In sum, the role and position of local and regional government and the extent of decentralised institutional autonomy are somewhat limited in Luxembourg and the Netherlands. This also applies to the Belgian case only, if one regards the regions and communities as functionally equivalent to states within the federal state. In fact a trend towards diffusion and decentralisation appears to be prevalent in the Benelux as a whole. Recent developments with regard to European integration and the role of international treaties (if ratified by national legislatures) appear also to have affected the role of politics within these nation-states.

### The limits of the nation-state: judicial review and subsidiarity

Judicial review is a major and important institution of any liberal democracy. It defines the way the separation of powers works in a democratic society and the extent to which state power is limited. This separation serves the purpose of safeguarding the constitutional rights of the citizen.

Two recent developments make the role of judicial review in the Benelux countries particularly interesting. First, unlike countries such as the United States, Germany and France, there is no separate and superordinate judicial institution with the power to review ordinary laws in the light of the constitution. Instead, the only option open to a citizen is to contest the procedures embodied in the law or related to the law-making process. However – and this is the new development – with the ratification of, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1945) and the Treaty of Rome (1957) the legal opportunity exists to review national regulations and laws on the basis of these international treaties.

Second, legal observers suggest that the role of the judiciary is tending to become a more active one. There appears to be a shift from a strictly formal type of review to a more normative and material type of judicial review. Changing societal values and norms of social justice have become part of judicial deliberations and have resulted in judgements that affect legislative practice. In addition, it can be observed that, particularly in the Netherlands, there is a tendency to bring forward test cases representing political issues (e.g. the right to abortion or euthanasia; the exercise of the right to strike; the admissibility of organisations like fascist or radical movements). Some see this as wrongful interference by the judiciary; others see it as a positive development enhancing the position of the citizen *vis-à-vis* the state. It can be concluded, then, that the ratification of international treaties and a change in the attitude of the judiciary both appear to challenge the institutional autonomy of the nation-state.

The Benelux countries were among the 'founding fathers' of the European Community in 1957. This represents the common point of view of these small nations, held since the Second World War, that upholding their sovereignty is by and large dependent on international integration and military co-operation. Hence international co-operation and integration have become the key words for the Benelux countries in the post-war world. The paradox of this attitude is, of course,

that the aim of national sovereignty was to be achieved by means of subsidiarity to international politics. However, unlike those of other member states of the EU, both the politicians and the population did not appear to view this as jeopardising their status as a nation-state until the early 1990s. However, since this time the 'permissive consensus' of the public at large has dropped dramatically in Belgium and the Netherlands. For example, opinion polls revealed that between 1982 and 2003 there was a drop of 14 per cent in Belgium and 18 per cent in the Netherlands in the number of those in favour of a European government (only 3 per cent in Luxembourg), and 55 per cent of the population think that their country benefits from the EU (but only 44 per cent in Belgium!).

It can be argued that the development of the European Union, in particular towards a single market and as a political union, has severe implications for national institutions in relation to political decision-making of the member states. Moreover, this development is not yet matched by a simultaneous development of democratic control of EU decision-making processes. Europeanisation implies a decrease in political control as well as a decline in autonomous policy-making by the member states. In particular the agreement on European Monetary Union has made this clear since fiscal policy is in part directed by the EU.

These developments can be observed further in the working of EU regulations and the role of the European Court, as well as in the creation of a single market since 1987 and the introduction of the Euro currency. Member states are obliged to follow and enforce at the national level all regulations accepted by the Council of Ministers. As we saw above, this implies a change in state-society relations: citizens, as well as associations and interest groups, may use the national judicial system to enforce the implementation of EU regulations (as, for instance, is regularly the case in the Netherlands with regard to environmental matters and labour-market regulations). Conversely, both the EU administration and citizens can appeal to the European Court to enforce EU regulations at the national level. As the court's decisions are binding, and override those of domestic courts, this means that the scope and range of national and sub-national decision-making are constrained as far as they concern matters dealt with at the European level. It should be added, however, that judgements of the European Court are merely declaratory and do not (yet) have executive force, other than by sanctions eventually mediated through domestic courts. Hence EU regulations do confine the scope for national policy formulation, but it takes complex and often lengthy procedures before it takes effect, if and when national and sub-national governments do not co-operate.

With the move towards a single market and the adoption of a single currency in 2001, it appears inevitable that political decision-making within the member states will be affected and to a certain extent subjected to EU policy formation. It has been calculated, for instance, that measures emanating from the Single Market Act affect that around 75 per cent of national legislation will be directly or indirectly because national legislation is in conflict with them, or because the policy directive simply does not exist.

Apart from the direct consequences of European integration within the context of the EU, what is of interest here is that this will inevitably lead to institutional changes in the Benelux countries. Although 'federalisation' is perhaps too strong a



word, it is obvious that the trend towards subsidiarity implies a shift towards a European government, i.e. the idea that policy issues which either are taken up by the EU or concern issues that cannot adequately be dealt with by national authorities should be organised at the level of the community. This trend is strongly supported by Christian Democrats, as well as by Social Democrats, albeit more hesitantly.

Along with the effects on national legislation and related institutional procedures that have already been mentioned, this development also affects the modes of interest representation and may well lead to the sectoralisation of policy-making. Hence a diffusion of politics and policy formation appears inevitable. Agriculture and the environment are good examples of this process of diffusion. Interest groups have changed their strategy for influencing policy-making away from the national level (e.g. lobbying in parliament) to Brussels. Simultaneously, departments responsible for these policy areas are more concerned to comply with directives and measures emanating from Brussels. In short, the development of a single market heralds an increase in trans-national policy-making, which has consequences for the organisation of national decision-making and processes of implementation. At the same time it also has strong implications for the relation between societal interest aggregation and representation and national political decision-making. The loci of power are shifting and with them the legitimacy of national institutions.

In this section we have discussed the relation between local and regional government and national politics, the role of the judiciary and the impact of Europeanisation on the national state. It is argued that the independent role of the judiciary, as well as the development of the European Union, can be considered as changing the nature of the institutional autonomy of the state and tends to reduce its capacity for solving societal problems independently.

## SIMILAR POLITIES, DIFFERENT TRAJECTORIES

In this chapter we have described the political institutions of the Low Countries and have analysed the way in which they shape political life. As was set out in the Introduction to this book (pp. 1–16), institutions can be viewed as the 'building blocks' of political life. Institutions are, so to speak, the rules of the game which mould and direct the behaviour of the players, and conversely the players make use of these institutions to attain their ends. The outcome of this 'game' is conceptualised in the Introduction as a 'structure-induced equilibrium'. It is pursued by the main political players (i.e. political parties and organised interests) of the Benelux countries by means of two simultaneous strategies: adversarial or confrontational politics, on the one hand, and bargaining on consensual decision-making, on the other. This structure-induced equilibrium is a potential outcome of either political strategy and can be conceived of as a pendulum between societal conflict and political consensus.

Throughout history, social conditions prone to instability appear to have dominated Belgian and Dutch politics, but at the same time it has appeared possible to develop relatively stable systems. That is, until the 1990s. Since then, so it seems from the analysis, things have – sometimes dramatically – changed. It may be

suggested, therefore, that the nature of politics in these countries has changed: from co-operation between political elites, based on the support of passive social segments, towards an open model of adversarial party politics in which coalescence has become a final consideration instead of a point of departure. There has been a shift from a coalescent to a competitive style of politics. This change in the style of, for instance, electoral politics has taken place under the same institutions, which made it possible to play the original game, labelled by Lijphart the 'consociational' type of politics. Remarkably, this means that the existing electoral formula did not prevent a drastic change of politics and apparently allows old and new players room for manoeuvre.

In Belgium this process has been manifested in the development of two and a half party systems since 1970 – one Flemish, one Walloon and Brussels in between – and this was accompanied by constitutional changes during the 1990s. In the Netherlands one can observe a reorganisation of the parties after 1970, as well as reorientation of their ideologies and salient issues. As a consequence not only the faces of parties changed, but also the political exchange between the parties. In addition, new parties secured a position within the party system. This change occurred within the existing electoral system and has resulted in relatively high levels of electoral volatility from the 1990s onwards. In Luxembourg political change was restricted to the emergence of a Green party family and short-lived protest parties. Yet, its pattern of party government did not change and Christian democracy is still dominant.

It can be concluded, therefore, that political change has taken place in both countries, yet in Belgium it led eventually to constitutional change (i.e. federalisation of the unitary state), whereas in the Netherlands the institutional structure has persisted. In other words, societal change is and can be manifested in differential political behaviour under similar conditions, but has led to divergent trajectories in terms of institutional change. Despite strong popular support for political reform in the Netherlands, very little has actually taken place. Conversely, in Belgium institutional reform appeared inevitable, but why?

The answer to this question must be sought in the nature and effects of the political change that took place since the 1970s and intensified during the 1990s. In Belgium the original 'structure-induced equilibrium' was based on co-operation across party-political elites which shared a common interest, namely a 'unitary' Belgian state, but this became increasingly difficult. Instead of facilitating decision-making, the existing institutions appeared to function as instruments forestalling that process. Several minor adaptations of political institutions, introduced to meet demands related to the language–territory or 'communal' conflict, turned out to induce highly unstable outcomes in terms of decision-making and negotiation costs, which in the end led to persistent stalemates. The nature of the game has shifted from co-operation across the language segments in society to non-co-operation, which was made possible precisely through these institutional changes, as, for example, the requirement of bilingual parity in government composition and the constitutional requirements of parliamentary consent to solve political problems by the regions and communities. Additionally, the emergence of territorial parties and the asymmetry of electoral strength across the regions induced diverging party systems conducive to confrontation instead of coalescent party behaviour.

In the Netherlands a new equilibrium could be established within the existing institutional structures. Yet the nature of the game has also changed. Instead of 'depoliticising', the new trends were political decision-making by means of behind-the-scenes bargaining by party elites and leaving the implementation of the resultant agreements to government. Hence in the Netherlands a mixed game developed: the confrontation and coalescence game. On the one hand, this was due to a shift from a two-dimensional type of party competition based on religious and socialist ideas to a division of the party system where increasingly social permissiveness was considered a negative asset and left-wing ideas on 'big government' as detrimental to the Dutch economy. On the other, government formation became the central political arena, where, by means of seemingly endless negotiations, policy agreements were struck and spelled out for implementation by government. Through this development the Cabinet became a pivotal force in the Dutch political system based on co-operation. This has led to new informal rules concerning the legislature-executive relationship: the government governs – although strongly bound to its predetermined policy agreement – and, throughout its electoral period, is supported by its parties. The 'purple coalition' can serve as an illustration of this. However, this situation has been, in retrospect, as exceptional as the emergence of the 'radical right': adversarial electoral politics creates short-lived successes, but party government remains the same after all. At the same time the 'corporatist' game was played in a different way: instead of a centralised tri-partite structure it slowly transformed into a bi-partite one with strong decentralist features. These changes within the Dutch polity mean that the 'structure-induced equilibrium' was adjusted in the 1990s.

It can be asserted therefore that societal change has transformed politics in Belgium and the Netherlands, but the difference between the two polities is clear: in the former, institutional reform appeared the only option, whereas in the latter the rules of the game could be changed within the existing institutional framework. These institutional changes were in part, then, as we observed, a consequence of societal change, which in turn was reflected in the changing behaviour of the political players involved in the game. These changes have clearly affected the process, the efficacy and the quality of decision-making by multi-party coalition government in the Low Countries.

In Belgium the threat of withdrawal by parties or individual ministers (i.e. veto power) and the predominance of the issue of 'communalism' have induced very high negotiation costs and have led to new coalitions, both on the federal and the regional level. In the Netherlands policy-making appears to have become more effective, but has in turn reduced the influence of the parliament and limited the influence of organised interests that are not represented at the negotiation table. Hence, like in Belgium, the present equilibrium is quite sensitive to the quality of the players and the resulting policy performance in terms of public welfare. Yet at the same time it is difficult to see whether other scenarios could have been developed in the Benelux after the 1970s.

Perhaps this counterfactual question will be answered in the near future as a result of the institutional changes that are taking place in view of the Europeanisation of national politics and policy-making. We have labelled this progression towards the political integration of Europe a part of the 'diffusion of politics'. The reason for this

is that one can observe a dual development in the 'vertical' organisation of the Belgian and Dutch polities: a trend, on the one hand, towards decentralisation and policy segmentation; on the other, towards trans-nationalisation of politics and of policy co-ordination. Both developments may well imply further institutional changes through which the democratic chain of command and control is becoming less dominated by national political actors and peak interest organisations, reducing the option of regulating matters concerning the *res publica* autonomously by these actors alone.

It appears that the advent of the European Union in particular is the foremost force to challenge the institutional autonomy of national politics. On the one hand, political and legal regulation affects the room for manoeuvre in domestic policy-making; on the other, the binding force of EU regulations enables political actors, especially sectoral and regionally organised ones, to defy or to hold up implementation of policy by national authorities. Although political power appears more dispersed, political support within such nations for Europeanisation becomes diffuse – as the Dutch referendum on the EU constitution illustrates – and affects the legitimacy of national politics.

Perhaps the lesson that can be drawn from political and institutional developments in the Low Countries is that institutions matter with regard to politics. However, the way they do so also depends on the extent to which societal interests and related problems become politicised. Both the recent electoral developments and changing patterns of party government have shown that this tends to become more complex than before 1990. The way in which societal problems are transferred to the political scene and the extent to which the extant institutions allow political actors to contribute to societal problem-solving is then crucial. In the final analysis, the answer will be dependent on the question of whether or not the institutionalisation of political life in Benelux on every level can be considered to contribute to an optimal structure-induced equilibrium.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### General

- Andeweg, R. B. and G. Irwin (2005) *Governance and Politics of the Netherlands*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Daalder, H. and G. Irwin (eds) (1989) *Politics in the Netherlands: How Much Change?*, London: Frank Cass.
- Dewachter, W. (1992) *Besluitvorming in Politiek België*, Amersfoort/Leuven: Acco.
- Huysse, L. (1987) *De Gewapende Vrede. Politiek in België na 1945*, Amersfoort/Leuven: Kritak.
- Kossmann, E. H. (1994) *The Low Countries: History of the Northern and the Southern Netherlands*, Rekkeren: Stichting Ons Erfdeel.
- Lijphart, A. (1999) *Patterns of Democracy: Government Form and Performance in Thirty-six Countries*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

## Elections

- Brug, W. van der and H. Pellikaan (2003) 'Electoral Revolt or Continuity? The Dutch Parliamentary Elections 2002 and 2003', special issue, *Acta Politica* 38 (1): 1–106.
- Deschouwer, K. (2001) 'Symmetrie, Kongruenz und Finanzausgleich: die regionale Ebene in Belgien seit den Wahlen von 1999', *Jahrbuch des Föderalismus 2001*, Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Gallagher, Michael, Michael Laver and Peter Mair (2005) *Representative Government in Modern Europe*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

## Political parties

- Budge, I., H.-D. Klingemann, A. Volkens and J. Bara (2001) *Mapping Policy Preferences. Estimates for Parties, Electors and Government*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Winter, L., M. Swyngedouw and P. Dumont (2006) 'Party System(s) and Electoral Behaviour in Belgium: From Stability to Balkanization', *West European Politics* 29 (5): 933–56.
- Keman, H. (2007) 'Experts and Manifestos: Different Sources, Same Results for Comparative Research?', special issue, *Electoral Studies* 26 (1): 1–14.
- Klingemann, H.-D., R. I. Hofferbert, I. Budge, with H. Keman, F. Petry, T. Bergman and K. Strom (1994) *Parties, Policies, and Democracy*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Laver, M. and I. Budge (1992) *Party Policy and Government Programmes*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

## Parliament

- Keman, H. (2006) 'Party Government Formation and Policy Preferences: An Encompassing Approach?', in A. Weale and J. Bara (eds) *Democracy, Parties and Elections*, London: Routledge.
- Laver, M. and K. Shepsle (1996) *Making and Breaking Governments*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Government

- Budge, I. and H. Keman (1990) *Parties and Democracy, Coalition Formation and Government Functioning in Twenty States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Woldendorp, J., H. Keman and I. Budge (2000) *Party Government in 48 Democracies (1945–1998). Composition – Duration – Personnel*, Dordrecht: Kluwer.

## Inter-institutional relations

- Keman, H. (2000) 'The Policy-making Capacities of a Decentralised Unitary State', in D. Braun (ed.) *Public Policy and Federalism*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Kersbergen, K. Van and B. J. Verbeek (2004) 'Subsidiarity as a Principle of Governance in the European Union', *Comparative European Politics* 2 (2): 142–62.
- Swenden, W., M. Brans and L. De Winter (2006) 'Politics of Belgium: Institutions and Policy under Bipolar and Centrifugal Federalism', special issue, *West European Politics* 29 (5): 863–1,092.
- Visser, J. and A. Hemerijck (1997) *A Dutch Miracle. Job Growth, Welfare Reform, and Corporatism in the Netherlands*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Witte, E. (1992) 'Belgian Federalism: Towards Complexity and Asymmetry', *West European Politics* 15 (4): 95–111.