

# Prologue

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## A Nation Under Construction

On 6 November 1817, the 21-year-old British Crown Princess Charlotte died in childbirth. If she had lived, the course of history would have been different. Charlotte and her husband Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, a shrewd and ambitious German prince, would have succeeded to the British throne in 1830 and would have left their mark on a significant part of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British history. What happened instead was that in 1831 the International Powers installed Leopold on a throne in Brussels. He was appointed King of Belgium, a newly created state one-and-a-half times the size of Wales or New Jersey.

Belgium – its name referred to *Belgica*, the Latin word for the Netherlands – was an artificial state. It was inhabited by two different peoples: Catholic Dutchmen, referred to as Flemings (after Flanders, one of their historical regions) in the North, and French-speaking Walloons in the South (Wallonia). The country was the result of an international compromise. The Powers, however, were sceptical about the viability of their artefact.

The French diplomat Talleyrand described the new country as ‘an artificial construction, consisting of different peoples.’<sup>1</sup> According to his Austrian colleague Dietrichstein, the Belgian nationality was ‘a political attempt rather than an observable political reality.’<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Britain decided to give Belgium a chance. Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, liked the prospect of a weak and internally divided bogus state on his doorstep. But the grand old men of 19<sup>th</sup>-century European continental diplomacy, from Metternich to

1 Quoted in Stengers 1, pp. 90–2

2 Quoted in De Ridder, Alfred 3, p. 114.

Napoleon III to Bismarck, all thought that Belgium could not last longer than one or two generations. Leopold surprised them all by cleverly holding together his new state. He even vindicated his own Saxe-Coburg family by helping Albert, officially the son of his brother Ernst, but more likely Leopold's own, onto the throne of Great Britain. Thus Britain became an even stauncher defender of Belgium's independence and territorial integrity.

Leopold I and the five descendants of his House that have succeeded him since 1831 acknowledged the artificial nature of Belgium and the fact that it was unloved by the large majority of its citizens. They have been constantly in search of unifying elements to compensate for the lack of nationhood and the absence of genuine and generous patriotic feelings in their country. Belgium's history is a dramatic search for the civic glue that bonds 'normal,' i.e. non-artificial, countries.

Unlike normal states, artificial states have been *constructed* (in Friedrich Hayek's sense of constructivism: according to more or less specific plans or rationalist schemes) in places where no similar state had ever existed and where the people had no common identity that would enable them to acquire a national consciousness and, hence, become a genuine nation. Artificial states are either established through violence or drawn up at conference tables. They unite peoples of different cultural, linguistic, religious or ethnic backgrounds and are by definition multinational. Until the late 1980s, Europe had four of these artificial states: Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Today, only Belgium remains.

Belgium is sometimes compared to multilingual Switzerland. While Belgium is an artificial and multinational state, Switzerland is not. Switzerland was not constructed but grew organically, thereby gradually creating a Swiss national consciousness. In this respect Switzerland is more akin to the United Kingdom where historic accident brought together two of Europe's oldest nations, the English and the Scots, but where their subsequent common history fostered a British national consciousness, thereby creating a British nation encompassing both the English and the Scottish nations in a common home. Belgium is a state in which two peoples were forced to live together and where no common Belgian national consciousness developed.

Nevertheless, if there is no national consciousness binding Belgium, what has managed to keep it together for 175 years? The answer to this question has an importance beyond Belgium, because European politicians are at the moment trying to create, through constructivist planning at conference tables, a pan-European super-

state. The European State currently in the making will resemble a 'Greater-Belgium' in that 'Europe' is also going to be an artificial, multinational construct, but it will hardly be a 'Greater-Switzerland.' Those who want to learn what the future of the European Union as a single state might be should study Belgium. Based in Brussels, and sharing its capital with Belgium, the European Union is greatly influenced – even infected – by Belgian political attitudes and habits. But, more importantly, Belgium acts as a model for the EU in the latter's efforts to 'construct a nation' out of different peoples with separate languages, cultures and traditions. Contemporary Belgium foreshadows Europe as a federal state.

Interestingly, the Belgian establishment realised one hundred years ago that Belgium could only survive if it were to become the nucleus of a European state. In this sense, *Belgicism* and *Europeanism* are the same thing. 'Have we not been called the laboratory of Europe,' the Belgicist ideologue Léon Hennebicq wrote in 1904. 'Indeed, we are a nation under construction. The problem of economic expansion is duplicated perfectly here by the problem of constructing a nationality. Two different languages, different classes without cohesion, a parochial mentality, an adherence to local communities that borders on the most harmful egotism, these are all elements of disunion. Luckily they can be reconciled. The solution is economic expansion, which can make us stronger by uniting us.'<sup>3</sup>

People like Hennebicq inspired the third King of the Belgians, Albert I, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to turn a peculiar mix of socialism and corporatism into the foundation of the Belgian state, thereby assuring the loyalty to Belgium of all those at the receiving end of an ever-expanding welfare mechanism. Belgium was built on a principle that was later, in the 1960s, described by Public Choice theorists as *rent-seeking*: 'the resource-wasting activities of individuals in seeking transfers of wealth through the aegis of the state.'<sup>4</sup> Belgium became basically a system of financial redistribution.

According to Mancur Olson 'distributional coalitions slow down a society's capacity to adapt to changing conditions, and thereby reduce the rate of economic growth.'<sup>5</sup> Belgium's history during the past decades confirms this. Economic stagflation and social rigidities have turned the 'national' conflict between Flemings and Walloons, which was until the 1960s mainly a linguistic conflict, into the ever-deepening socio-economic conflict that it is today. In other

3 Hennebicq, p. 278.

4 Buchanan, Tollison and Tullock, p. IX.

5 Olson 2, pp. 61–5.

words: an artificial state, based on rent-seeking, can survive as long as the economy performs reasonably well. Once the economy stagnates, tensions grow. The Belgian establishment is hoping that the transplantation of the Belgian model to a larger-scale European level will boost the economy, thereby averting the danger of the model imploding.

Meanwhile, however, the rent-seeking mentality of the Belgian establishment has led to corruption. In the case of 'normal' states, one can argue that these states have managed to become voluntary organisations resulting from generous motives of mutual concern and co-operation. They are based on a virtue called *patriotism*. In the artificially constructed state of Belgium, the absence of any patriotic feelings has forced the Belgian monarchs to make hard-headed calculated self-interest the foundation of the state. They have literally had to *buy* the adherence of the citizens (or a substantial group of them) to the state.

Belgium is sometimes considered to be a boring country – not the kind one would want to read a book about. How wrong can one be. *Boring Belgium* alliterates well, but *Baffling Belgium* does, too, and is nearer to the truth. Belgium is 'the land of a thousand scandals.'<sup>6</sup> It is striking to see how all the present characteristics were there from the very beginning. It is equally striking to notice how these characteristics were encapsulated in the Saxe-Coburg dynasty. Belgium's kings created their artificial country in their own image. Belgium's history is the Saxe-Coburg family tale. Belgium is their tragedy. The Belgian crown is their livelihood, but at the same time they all came to loathe Belgium with the 'decadence of its administration' and 'the ruinous abuses.'<sup>7</sup>

Corruption is, indeed, one of the basic characteristics of an artificial state. A second characteristic is the absence of the rule of law. If the latter were not absent and the state were able to survive while respecting democratic majority rights, it would no longer be an artificial state, but would have become a genuine nation-state. The third characteristic is its unreliability in international relations. The lack of sincere patriotic feelings has made the Belgians unwilling to make sacrifices for the common good. It has also made Belgium extremely unreliable to its allies.

Today there is a real danger that these three characteristics will infect the whole of Europe. In an Open Letter in 1998, a group of neo-Belgicist intellectuals wrote that they cherish the Belgian flag 'because

6 Rachel Johnson in *The Spectator*, 30 Oct. 1999.

7 Albert I in *Willequet* 4, p. 254.

the latter does not represent anything,' and that Belgium, precisely because it has no national consciousness, is 'an antidote against nationalism' much needed by the postmodern world.<sup>8</sup> According to the Belgian historian Louis Vos, 'a non-ideological postmodernism has become the predominant fashion in intellectual life, more eager to deconstruct the national identity than to make a contribution to it. Some go so far as to deny that the "invented" concept of national identity and community refers to anything real.'<sup>9</sup>

These 'postmodernists' claim that Belgium's lack of identity constitutes a supreme morality. This was also the opinion of Belgian King Baudouin who in 1993 stressed the importance of 'the European construction,' which, in following Belgium's lead, 'can best help us resist the temptation of egotism and narrow and disastrous nationalisms.'<sup>10</sup> The question must be asked, however, whether states that were established as artificial 'constructions,' according to rational constructivist schemes, can really be morally superior. This is a question that should be at the heart of the debate about the future European super-state.

The importance of this question goes even beyond Europe. Indeed, Belgium belongs to the category of the 'failed states' because it has never succeeded in generating a Belgian national consciousness that could become a genuine 'civic glue' binding the nation. Though failed states are exceptional in Europe and the Western world, where nation-states are the normal pattern of statehood, they are not exceptional on a global scale. Like Belgium, many of these states have fallen victim to mafia clans that colonise the state for their own purposes.

Hence, this book, while its primary purpose is to entertain the reader with a good story, is a work on several levels. It is a book about a royal family that is more closely related to the British monarchs than most people think, but also a political analysis of baffling Belgium. One cannot unravel these two stories, because they are connected as closely as Siamese twins. Finally, it serves as a warning concerning the European super-state currently in the making. Will Belgium's past be Europe's future?

8 *De Standaard*, 3 Mar. 1998.

9 Vos, p. 201.

10 Baudouin, vol. II, p. 1465.