THE DISCOURSE ON INTERNAL PARTY RENEWAL

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INTRODUCTION

With the decline of electoral stability in Flanders in recent decades – also observed in other West-European regions and countries – political parties have been trying to attract the growing number of uncommitted voters. This process has initiated a quest for party renewal and change (Deschouwer, 2004). In Flanders, such reflections on party renewal were primarily instigated by the elections of 24 November 1991, in which the extreme right party Vlaams Blok (now Vlaams Belang) knew its national breakthrough. At this point, parties mainly concentrated on their internal party organization. The reason is that the results of the 1991 elections were generally acknowledged to be a sign of the growing gap between voters and politicians. Hence, parties tried to open up their organization and forge closer ties with their members and the general population.

In the present paper, we analyse the discourse parties employ in their member magazines to present these organizational changes and how these changes are represented in the popular press. As such, we want to uncover which reasons the parties present for the renewal operation(s), how important they think this process of change is and what the aim of the change is.

The remainder of the text is structured as follows. The next section brings forward the theoretical background on party renewal and change. Then, we analyse how the internal organization of the three main Flemish parties (VLD, CD&V and SP.a) changed since the 1991 elections and, particularly, how these changes were communicated to their members as well as the broader public. This analysis will take the form of a discourse analysis of member brochures and press articles. Before describing the results, we briefly expound on the research methodology and the data sources used. The final section summarizes our main findings.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

Political parties exist in a given social and political context and adjust to these circumstances. In that sense, they can be seen as the dependent variable in a continuous process of change. Katz and Mair (1995), for example, believe that numerous social, economic and political events instigate an ongoing process of party renewal and development. Indeed, they argue that the reduction of voters’ partisan attachment and loyalty in recent decades and the decrease in political participation and interest across countries have led to the universal appearance of ‘cartel parties’ in which the central organization gains increasing importance. Panebianco (1998) however argues that external events will have a stronger effect on party renewal when parties are less institutionalised or when the party is already confronted with challenging developments internally (e.g. generational change in political personnel within the party). The probability that external elements will affect the party’s organization increases when the dominant group within the party is unable to formulate answers to the external threats. Also, the number of competing factions within a party affects the response to external developments. Appleton and Ward (1997), for example, find that American political
parties with a high number of internal factional divisions are less likely to quickly respond to external stimuli than unified parties.

Besides generally observable trends in external non-party specific factors\(^1\), party renewal and change can also be prompted by party-specific elements. These can be both external and internal (Verstraete, 2003). The former reflect developments outside the party, but that are party-specific. By way of examples, one might think of removal from government or incurring a significant electoral loss in elections. Lawson (1994) argues that the extent of political power of parties in government is a core determinant of party renewal. Opposition parties are more likely to initiate changes in their organization. Frantzich (1989) similarly concludes that parties that were victorious in recent elections seldom introduce innovations in their structure. Panebianco (1998) interprets this finding as evidence for the idea that electoral losses are of central importance for party renewal. Still, the effect of electoral losses on party organization depends on the primary goal of the party (Harmel and Janda, 1994). When a party’s primary goal is to maximize its vote share in the election (i.e. vote seeking), electoral losses will constitute a true shock since it prevents the party from obtaining its goal. When, on the other hand, the primary goal of a party is to participate in the government (i.e. policy seeking) and it obtains this aim despite electoral losses, these losses will have a less profound effect on the party’s organizational structure. Regarding internal elements, the number of factions, and especially the division of power between the various factions, seem to affect party renewal. Indeed, Belloni and Beller (1978) argue that these factions determine the party’s strategy, ideology, leadership, finances and so on. The presence and form of various factions also determines the distribution of power within the party. Panebianco (1998) therefore maintains that party control is lower when the factions within a party are well organized. The reason is that there is a constant need for compromises between the various factions. This implies that the initiation of intra-party changes is more difficult since it may break the fragile balance of power between the various factions. Parties where factions are less organized, on the other hand, will tend to have a more coherent and dominant ‘core’, which might ease party renewal. Harmel and Janda (1996) furthermore note that a more stable dominant coalition within the party reduces the internal pressure for change. The reason is that parties are assumed to be conservative entities that want to change as little as possible and that a stable structure reduces the probability of initiating party change. According to Epstein (1980) a party will be subject to fewer internal changes when it is more centrally organized and decision making therefore is not dispersed across various channels and levels.

Party leadership is also an important determinant in the party renewal process. Wilson (1994) argues that changes will only occur when the party leader believes this is necessary. In this process, the leader’s charisma and personality are of crucial importance. Indeed, (s)he will have to be able to overcome internal resistance against the proposed changes. The likelihood that this occurs is, amongst other things, determined by the power (s)he has within the party, and therefore depends upon the party’s current organization. Moreover, whether or not (s)he is part of the dominant faction within the

\(^1\) Such determinants, which are both external to the party and equal for all parties, can also be due to specific partisan actions (Verstraete, 2003). One example is the increase in government support for political parties.
party is also important. In practice, however, this will most often be the case since the leadership struggle is often a struggle between the various factions in which the winner will become the dominant faction (Verstraete, 2003). Given the role of the party leadership, the death of a prominent politician might have a profound effect on the party’s organizational structure. Finally, scandals involving politicians may trigger changes in the party structure.

ANALYSIS

Methodology

Throughout our analysis, we employ a qualitative approach. This provides the possibility to add the necessary nuances to the complex, multi-faceted matter under study and allows to better understand the topic and place it in a more general context (Jagers, 2006). To better understand internal party renewal, we analyse the discourse parties employ in their own publications and how these changes are depicted in the media. As argued by Harmel and Janda (1996), party renewal and change are complex phenomena which can hardly be studied in their entirety. Hence, in the present paper, we concentrate specifically on organizational changes and define party renewal as a change in the party’s statutes. More particularly, we analyse when statutory changes have taken place for the three traditional Flemish parties (Christian-Democrats - CD&V, Social Democrats - SP.a and liberals - VLD) and how the communication with respect to these changes was shaped. The choice for these three traditional parties was driven by the fact the all three parties have a relatively similar set-up and differ in this respect from the new politics parties such as the Green party (Deschouver, 1995).

Our data consist of both the party’s member magazines and publications in two leading Flemish newspapers (De Standaard and De Morgen). The latter two not only pay significant attention to Belgian (party) political subjects, but are also considered as influential in policy circles (Stouthuysen, 1999; Hautekeette et al., 2002). A third source of information is the weekly magazine Knack. By studying documents that derive both from within and outside the political parties, we aim to get a more complete picture of the discourse on party renewal and uncover some of the reasons, aims and arguments concerning the renewal process. It also allows us to assess whether there is a difference in the way party renewal is presented by the party (to its members) and how it is documented in the popular press.

The content analysis is complemented with input from interviews with prominent politicians from all three parties in the analysis.2 These are chiefly conducted to attain additional information concerning the reasons for and aims of the various parties’ changes in their internal organization. Citations from these information sources are given in italics in the main text.

The analysis focuses on the period since the elections of 24 November 1991, which are known as (the first) Black Sunday due to the national breakthrough of the Flemish extreme right Vlaams Blok. Moreover, these elections are generally considered as the

2 Interviews were conducted with Guy Vanhengel (VLD), Herman van Rompuy (CD&V) and Tuur van Wallendael (SP.a).
starting point of the debates on party renewal in Belgium (and in the region of Flanders in particular) – debates that have been focussing specifically on the organizational level (Deschouwer, 2004).

VLD

In 1991, even before the elections of 24 November, Guy Verhofstadt – at that moment president of the Flemish liberal party and currently Belgian prime minister – published his first Civic Manifesto. This publication quickly became influential in the political debates. It asserted the necessity of directly involving citizens in the political sphere and launched the concept of the ‘gap between citizens and politics’ (which later would be central in explaining the political breakthrough of the extreme right in Flanders). A second Civic Manifesto – ‘The road to political renewal’3 – in 1992 paved the way towards the political revitalization and broadening of the liberal party. This operation not only intended to re-establish the party in the political landscape, but also to lead to renewed electoral success and active participation in future governments. After persuading several independent politicians and members of the Flemish regionalist party Volksunie, Verhofstadt’s political project culminated in the establishment of a new political group, the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (VLD), which replaced the existing liberal party (PVV, Party for Freedom and Progress). In November 1992, the new party organized its first ideological conference, which attracted extensive public attention and featured spirited internal discussions. The ideas and principles at the basis of the new party were those voiced by Verhofstadt in both Civic Manifestos. The party explicitly intended to be institutionally different from all others and, by creating a flexible institutional structure, allowed party members to effectively shape policy outcomes. Direct democratic devices within the party were thought to be the answer to the growing gap between politics and the citizenry. Even the name of the new political group expressed this desire by including the caption “Party of the citizen” (Partij van de Burger). The new structure was intended to be simpler, more transparent and more democratic than that of its predecessor, the PVV (Bouveroux, 1996).

1993

The institutional structure of the new liberal party was further developed at its statutory conference of 26-28 March 1993. The conference committee, in which Rik Daems played a central role, produced a revolutionary manuscript according to its own members (De Standaard, 27 March 1993). The liberal party’s member magazine – De Burgerkrant (‘The Citizen’s Newspaper) – referred to the manuscript as pathbreaking: the statutes shape a party structure in which openness, transparency and democratic decision-making are core elements (De Burgerkrant, February 1993). According to various Flemish media sources (De Standaard, 27 March 1993; Knack, 24 March 1993; De Morgen, 27 March 1993), three central changes were addressed in the new statutes: the introduction of registered voters within the party (i.e. non-members who were, after registration, allowed to participate in conferences, shape the party’s program and vote on the composition of electoral lists), a stringent deontological code (e.g. prohibition of cumulating different positions) and the introduction of intra-party pre-elections (i.e. party

3 In Dutch, the second Civic Manifesto is entitled ‘De weg naar politieke vernieuwing’.
members and registered voters, rather than the party leaders, would in a secret ballot determine the candidate lists for elections). The party explicitly steered clear of age restrictions and gender quotas to ensure that *the citizen decides in all freedom* (De Morgen, 26 March 1993).

According to Rik Daems (Knack, 24 March 1993), the first mentioned change – i.e. the introduction of registered voters within the party – intended to involve as much people as possible in politics: *That is the major complaint raised against politics, that the citizen has the impression (s)he cannot change anything? We face that proposition: whoever signs our statutory declaration (“Beginselverklaring”) is allowed to influence the party’s program at conferences and, by voting on the composition of candidate lists, can affect who should implement the proposed program. This does not entail that one should become a member of the party. As such, the VLD becomes more a political movement that a membership association. All this, following Daems, would profoundly affect the relation between citizens and the political sphere: The core of the story is that the citizen leads the action. He obtains all rights, while all duties are for the political representatives. The latter will have to take a step towards the voters. The ideas Verhofstadt raised in his Civic Manifestos as well as his discourse on the gap between citizens and politicians thus are clearly reflected in the statements of Rik Daems. Importantly, however, opponents of the party changes also voiced their opinions in the newspapers. They argued that the proposed changes were at odds with the existing political culture (De Standaard, 27 March 1993). Willy Courtois, leader of the liberal faction in the Chamber of Representatives, argued that *the new statutes derive from the land of Coca Cola and therefore do not fit in our political tradition. Whoever wants to have a say in an organization should be a member of that organization.* Ward Beysen also doubted the feasibility of the proposal (Knack, 24 March, 1993). *There is no fundamental opposition to the proposition, but there remains a certain amount of distrust. One should very carefully expound on the terms under which people can have a say, since our members fear that things may turn out less unambiguous than they now appear.*

The discussion on the second major change, i.e. the prohibition of cumulating different positions, received most attention in the popular press. The proposition brought forward on this point by the conference committee was that an elected VLD representative could not have any other important leading function in a health insurance fund, union, employers’ organization or professional organization. This led to critical reactions that found their way into several newspapers. De Standaard (27 March 1993), for example, cites Willy Courtois arguing that *if this should be approved, I resign. Otherwise I would be denying my past.* At the same time, the press alluded to possible discords among the most progressive members of the party. These feared that empty promises were being made and that the party would retain links to important pressure groups for electoral reasons (De Standaard, 29 March 1993). De Burgerkrant (February, 1993) eased these concerns: *the Flemish liberal party first of all intends to apply their new institutional design on its own operation. The statutes are a first, but crucial, step towards a new political culture. They show that the VLD seriously intends to preserve a strict stance towards proper political conduct and to apply the new rules of the game of which the Party of the Citizen is the first and foremost proponent.*
In Knack (24 March 1993), Rik Daems further expounded on the prohibition to accumulate various posts. The idea is that one should not be a board member of some organization that defends specific interests at the same time when one holds a political position, which by definition intends to strive for the common good. The same article also cited Ward Beysen arguing that eliminating the links with health insurance organizations and unions is inappropriate from an electoral point of view. Willy Courtois (De Standaard, 29 March 1993), on the other hand maintained that the VLD should not become a party of professional politicians lacking any link to the general population. In the end, Verhofstadt clarified that the proposition was not meant to go against social organizations, but wished to establish the party’s independence (De Standaard, 29 March 1993).

The third change proposed at the statutory conference of 26-28 March 1993, i.e. the introduction of intra-party pre-elections, was approved without much discussion and hardly attained any attention in the press. Nonetheless, according to De Burgerkrant (March 1993), it was an extremely revolutionary proposition. It was explicitly framed into the democratic principles of the party. De Burgerkrant claimed that democracy is too important to be maintained only by political parties and organized social groups. Moreover, the party wanted to extinguish certain existing habits, such as the fact that political parties tend to always make decisions without really involving the citizenry. A democracy of citizens should be the ideal, also within the party. Indeed, according to De Burgerkrant (February 1993) one of the shortcomings of all traditional political parties was that they barely allowed for citizens to affect who becomes elected: It depends on the list formation process who becomes elected. This list formation process has up to now and in all parties always been directed by a very selective group. The Party of the Citizen intends to change this.

Looking back at the conference, De Standaard (29 March 1993) concluded that the VLD now has the most stringent statutes of the country: power has been transferred to the voter. Whoever wishes to be a representative of the liberal party should follow stringent rules in the future. The newspaper indicated that all propositions of the conference committee had been approved. It also pointed out that Verhofstadt in his closing speech did not fail to declare how important all these changes were: We have made a clear choice. A choice of independence to clearly distinguish ourselves from CVP [the Flemish Christian-Democratic party] and SP [the Flemish Socialist party], which are politically maimed by their strong ties to class and interest groups. Our choice is of real importance for the citizen. In De Burgerkrant (April 1993), Rik Daems also underlined his satisfaction with the proceedings: while other parties are merely discussing the gap between citizens and politicians, we are making an active effort. The liberal party has cast off its old habits and resolutely chooses in favour of the voter. Karel De Gucht mentioned that the party’s efforts constituted no less than a velvet revolution, but at the same time pointed out that the most difficult part was yet to come. Only the VLD has the nerve to take such a bold step. Others would not survive it, and even for us it will not be easy. But if we succeed, and we will, we will gain an advantage over the other parties they will not easily overcome (De Burgerkrant, april 1993).
The statutory conference of 8-9 November 1996 was very prominent in the popular press as it was generally viewed as the conference at which the re-establishment of the liberal party would take place. The reason was that the 1995 elections had, despite promising opinion polls, not led to the electoral growth and government participation that was hoped for. Moreover, 1995 also featured the first party-presidential elections in which the president was directly appointed by the party members. Interestingly, these were not won by the candidate supported by the outgoing party president Verhofstadt (who left the party because of the disappointing electoral results), i.e. Patrick Dewael, but by Herman De Croo. The latter, however, was the personification of resistance to the party’s recent renewal process. Though this unexpected victory clearly affected the balance of power within the party, Vanhengel (personal interview, 25 April 2006) does not believe that it led to a dominant position of the traditional faction of the party. Even though several of the earlier changes were subsequently removed from the party statutes – such as, for example, the introduction of registered voters – Vanhengel argues that this is mainly due to the fact that these changes had not generated the expected results in practice. This point of view is also supported by the content of the debates at various party conferences during the period. Even the head of the committee in charge of the 1996 changes in the statutes, Annemie Neyts, argues in De Burgerkrant (October 1996) that the new changes were mainly driven by pragmatic considerations: The VLD statutes have for the past three years been tested with respect to their feasibility and desirability. An evaluation and, where necessary, adjustment is thus called for. The statutes, she continued, at times contain very rigid rules that, though their intentions are virtuous, do not always coincide with general practices.

The working group in charge of the 1996 alterations in the statutes brought forward far-reaching changes in governing structures, which attained significant media attention (Knack, 6 November 1996; De Standaard, 6 November 1996; De Morgen, 6 November 1996). A first important proposition referred to the procedure for approving candidate lists during elections. By means of pre-elections, members would be given more input into the proceedings (De Burgerkrant, December 1996). When a proposed candidate list was not approved by a majority of the members, pre-elections would be organized in which each member provided his/her preferred list. The candidate most frequently placed at the top of these lists would then be designated as the party’s main candidate – and obtain the top position in the final list. This new rule meant to counter the frequently occurring situation where the proposed list was accepted merely because its opponents were internally divided as to the alternative. The popular press concluded that the change was a significant improvement (Knack, 6 November 1996), though it generated a very complicated procedure (De Standaard, 6 November 1996).

Another important change was the removal of the concept of the registered voter from the statutes. What had in 1993 been viewed as the most important innovation (De Burgerkrant, February 1993), turned out to be no more than an utopian idea with little value added (Vanhengel, personal interview, 25 April 2006). De Standaard (12 November 1996), moreover indicated that the system was open to significant abuse: Candidates were able to register their entire soccer team.
Most media attention, however, was directed at what was expected to be the major point of discussion: the re-liberalization of the rules concerning the accumulation of different positions. While the propositions launched by the working group preparing the statutory conference were in the media described as a liberalization of the current proceedings (De Standaard, 5 November 1996; De Morgen, 6 November 1996), the party itself had a different opinion: *It is not a return to the old political culture* (de Burgerkrant, October 1996). Hence, in the run-up to the conference party leaders explicitly expressed themselves as being opposed to all forms of political favouritism, politically inspired appointments and the accumulation of multiple positions leading to conflicts of interest. The president of the party repeated that the party was not taking a step back: *The current changes are necessary as some of the former stipulations are hypocritical* (Knack, 6 November 1996). Moreover, he wanted to *be in peace with the blue pillar* and therefore wished the stringent article 18 containing an absolute prohibition of multiple positions to be removed (Knack, 6 November 1996). Karel De Gucht, though part of the more progressive faction of the party, also stressed that the party was not falling back into old habits: *No one intends to abolish the democratic election of the party’s leadership. That is a right that can no longer be retracted. The VLD thereby shows an exceptional maturity. Article 18 obviously had a symbolic function, but human nature is what it is. It would not be good for the party when its relations with like-minded organizations remain embittered in the long run.*

During the conference, the party stressed that the proposed changes were mainly of a practical nature and that the underlying principles were not reneged upon. Karel De Gucht, for example, argued in Knack (6 November 1996) that at the time of the conference 30 liberal representatives were violating the rules established in 1993. *One can exclude one representative from the party, but not 30. If one does so, the party will be damaged beyond repair.* Herman De Croo, moreover, remarked that the committee responsible for examining these violations had to face over 600 cases in the four years that the rules applied. *I wanted to get rid of these time-consuming discussions. We have learned a lot in the past four years and now we realize that all these excessive demands should be cleared from our statutes.*

The proposition to relax the party’s rules came, however, at a most unfortunate time. Indeed, following the White Protest March – a massive protest march involving roughly 300.000 people addressing the failure of the judicial and police system in the affaire Dutroux⁴ – the liberal party had just launched a proposition to introduce a very stringent deontological code for politicians. According to Verhofstadt, this was needed to weed out the Belgian disease of politisation, clientelism and corporatism (De Morgen, 6 November 1996). The reaction of the press was therefore quite predictable. De Morgen (8 November 1996), for example wrote: *The VLD proposes to limit the number of political positions one politician can accumulate, while at the same time it wishes to make the rules within the party more flexible.* The general tenor of the discussion at the party’s conference was similar. Quite a number of speakers argued that the party should

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⁴ Marc Dutroux was arrested in August 1996. He appeared to be responsible for the kidnapping of at least six girls. Four of them were killed, and two were rescued. He had been convicted of rape a few years earlier but was released early. The Dutroux case rapidly became a political one, in the sense that the judicial system and the public authorities were blamed for the mistake (Deschouwer, 2004).
set the right example. Various party leaders also actively participated in this debate. This led De Standaard (12 November 1996) to conclude that *the VLD leadership had to set all sails in order to convince the audience of the need for some political pragmatism.* The same newspaper cited Patrick Dewael arguing that *those who obstinately cling to the principle of the matter are not consistent with themselves since during elections they would sell their souls to get familiar faces onto the party’s list. Can we decline Vermeiren [the liberal mayor of Zaventem] to be mayor and representative in the chamber of representatives while we cannot do the same for Norbert De Batselier [Socialist mayor of Dendermonde and president of the Flemish Regional Parliament]?*

After the conference, the media agreed that the renewal operation of 1993 had not been undone (De Morgen, 13 November 1996; De Standaard, 12 November 1996). De Burgerkrant (November 1996) reacted scornfully to these remarks: *Apparently, the media had not adequately interpreted the ideas and propositions by the working group since these never alluded to the idea that 1993 had been a step too far and that these changes should now be made undone.*

### 2000

After 1996, the institutional design of the party received only limited attention and at best minor changes to the statues were implemented. The basic viewpoints introduced in 1993 remained unchallenged. Also, the changes that did occur were mostly technical modifications driven by pragmatic considerations: some rules turned out to be impractical or needed to be adapted to changes in electoral legislation. Interesting in this period was that the initiative for these changes did not originate from the party’s leadership, nor from its local divisions. Mostly, it was the secretary of the national statutory committee, Ludo Asselberghs, who indicated the existence of certain difficulties (Guy Vanhengel, personal interview, 25 April 2006). The proposed changes were generally ignored by the media and only slightly expounded upon in the liberal party’s member magazine De Burgerkrant.

According to Asselberghs, the changes made in 2000 *merely intended to make some minor technical changes to the statutes* (De Burgerkrant, March 2000). One proposition that failed to be approved, however, was the so-called evocation right, which implied that the national party leaders would be able to control local candidate list formations when these failed to be resolved at the local level. This proposition clearly intended to give the national leadership more control and power. Asselberghs defended this proposition arguing that *there are plenty of examples where arguments, distrust or some other reason prevent the generation of a suitable candidate list or even the establishment of a working group to discuss the list formation. Currently, such discussions tend to endlessly remain in disciplinary committees and no political steps forward can be made.* Asselberghs claims that the proposition failed to reach the required majority because certain local divisions felt — in the run-up to the municipal election of October 2000 — personally affected.

### 2001

On 13 February 2001, a national statutory conference was organized in the light of the adjustments needed for the leadership elections at the end of that year. More specifically,
two changes were proposed: the abolishment of regional statutory committees and the introduction of eligibility requirements for national positions in the party. The first change was proposed as these regional committees had failed to work in practice (De Burgerkrant, January 2001): *In some regions such committees do not even exist or have disappeared over time due to the limited number of complaints and candidates to run these committees. By abolishing the regional committees, the party furthermore intends to increase uniformity in addressing complaints, which up to now could differ across regions.* The second change, i.e. the introduction of eligibility requirements, was defended by pointing out the need for uniformity: *the proposed eligibility requirements already exist for national and local elections* (De Burgerkrant, January 2001). Both propositions were approved without much debate and hardly received media attention.

2002

The only change that occurred in 2002 was the addition of two paragraphs concerning cooptation of members in the board of external organizations. No attention was given to this change, except for a brief note of their contents in De Burgerkrant (December 2002). Though nothing really changed, the analysis of the statutory conference in the membership magazine focused on ‘renewal’. The caption ‘party of the citizen’ that the party had adopted in 1991 was therefore replaced by ‘dare to innovate’ (‘Durven vernieuwen’).

2004

During the statutory conference of 12 October 2004, changes were made due to the introduction of provincial electoral districts in Belgium. The change to provincial executive committees was therefore also presented in De Burgerkrant (October 2004) as *the most important change and the one that attracted most discussion among participants of the conference.* Other changes were only briefly summarized in De Burgerkrant (October 2004). The media ignored the conference altogether.

SP.a

1992

While all parties had lost voters to the extreme right Vlaams Blok during that party’s electoral breakthrough in 1991, this was especially the case for the socialist party (at that point named SP). This electoral loss inspired the party to change its institutional structure. The party’s president, Frank Vandenbroucke, maintained in the member magazine Doèn (June 1992) that *a party which loses votes should in the first place criticise itself and wonder whether the general public is still heard by the party. Hence, the party’s statutes should be altered – while we want to drastically renew and change the SP.* In the same interview, he also stated that the party had *no other option* (...) *I will not say that under normal conditions we would not have taken more time for certain changes.* In other party documents, there are similar indirect allusions to these circumstances (i.e. the Vlaams Blok’s electoral success): *Our opponents are unbelief in the political system and those that exploit this feeling; those who manipulate the ‘common man’ and instigate him against the political sphere* (Doèn, June 1992). The
party furthermore assumed that *involving more people in the political process is the only answer to those willing to tread on democracy and social justice*. Indeed, *indifference is what they feast upon* (Doorbraak, May 1992). This statement clearly refers to the discourse on the gap between citizens and politics, which was prevalent in the period following the 1991 elections. Along similar lines, Doorbraak (May 1992) argued that *the Flemish socialists urgently need to revive their contact with the citizenry*.

In the issue of the member magazine that was published prior to the statutory conference of 13-14 June 1992, the conference is depicted as *extremely important* (Doorbraak, May 1992). The same issue features a review of the main proposed changes. These illustrate that the party wishes to give members a central place and develop into a *membership movement*. The member magazine is re-launched under a different name, a central membership list is generated and the rights of members are described in the statutes. The party thus intended to become a modern membership movement that provides as many people as possible a direct link to the political sphere. In this process, the local divisions, *being the most important element within the SP*, were awarded a central role. To allow easy and direct access of these local divisions to the decision-making process within the SP, the General Council (i.e. the main national decision-making body of the party prior to 1992) was abolished and replaced by a Council of Leaders and Secretaries of the local divisions. This change was extensively discussed by Norbert Debatselier in an interview in Knack (10 June 1992) that appeared a week before the statutory conference. In the same interview, a point is made of the centralized role of the national party in the formation of candidate lists during elections. *The national party bureau will pass judgement on a number of important principles such as the presence of women, elderly and young candidates and the progressiveness of the lists. (...) This is justified since the interests of the party as a whole should be able to take precedence over those of local politicians*. The desire for centralization also expanded to certain aspect of the party’s governance and administration. This process was justified in two ways (Doorbraak, May 1992). Firstly, the party wanted to strengthen its operation ‘in the field’ as well as its contacts with the populace. Secondly, it realized that the party’s current decentralized structure did not work adequately. The ‘federations’, which formed the link between the local divisions and the national party leadership, had obtained too much autonomy over the years (Bouveroux, 1996) and had thereby gained significant influence over the composition of candidate lists, produced own membership lists and acquired significant financial independence. One of the aims of the centralization process was therefore to limit the power accrued to these federations; a change that attracted significant media attention. De Morgen (15 June 1992), for example, noted that *the local divisions are given additional power, which is taken away from the federations*. The federations were, moreover, presented in a negative light in the media. *In practice, the autonomy of the federations led to so-called ‘baronies’, which in turn instigated rigidity and authoritarianism especially in the larger federations such as Antwerp, Mechelen and Ghent*. In Knack (10 June 1992), it was argued that these changes were a direct consequence of the 1991 election, *which indicated to the party that it had lost touch with the needs and desires of the populace*. Hence, the media also framed the renewal

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5 Up to May 1992, the socialist membership magazine was called ‘Doorbraak’. This changed to ‘Doèn’ with the June 1992 issue.
process in terms of the gap between citizens and politicians. De Morgen (12 June 1992) maintained that the conference directives installed a more direct contact between the party’s national leadership and that in the local divisions. Still, it wondered whether this change was inspired by a desire for more democracy, or rather the wish to more quickly execute future regulations installed by the national leadership.

Despite this critical note, both the media and the party itself referred to significant changes in the statutes (Knack, 17 June 1992). These were made possible by the crisis in which the party had landed after the 1991 elections. In fact, Norbert Debatselier opened the statutory conference noting that our party is not doing well. SP president Frank Vandenbroucke recognized that these are indeed hard times (Doèn, June 1992). A renewal process thus could not be avoided. The institutional changes were thereby presented as a first step to be taken: The thorough restructuring of the party is a necessary condition to be able to debate ideas more openly afterwards. It is imperious to establish a strong back-bone in order to give solidarity and democracy a powerful voice against egoism and intolerance.

1995

The statutory conference of 9-10 December 1995 took place in the after-wake of the Agusta affair (i.e. a corruption scandal concerning a large arms deal in which several socialist politicians were involved) and the federal elections of 1995. The latter elections had been relatively successful for the Flemish socialists despite the afore-mentioned scandal. This (relative) success was mainly attributed to the socialist party president Louis Tobback (Bouveroux, 1996).

The Agusta affair was the core reason for the SP to organize a statutory conference. New party structures are designed. The spirit of Agusta clearly hovers over this initiative (Doèn, December 1995). Organizing the party in such a way as to prevent recurrences of what occurred earlier this year was clearly the prime concern of the socialist party. One important element in the ensuing discussion was the introduction of a deontological code into the statutes. This code included a number of rules of thumb applicable to all party members. Tuur van Wallendael, head of the working group designing the code of conduct, insisted that dishonesty, fraud and corruption go against the central tenets of our ideology itself. The code of conduct thus was clearly inspired to prevent ‘excesses’ such as those of Agusta. Nonetheless, van Wallendael agreed that it had not been easy to reach agreement on the exact contents of the code and De Morgen (5 December 1995) maintained that it had only come about after numerous fierce debates. De Standaard (11 December 1995), moreover, claimed that the need for a code was received with the necessary scepticism within the party. Several conference participants argued that Agusta was due to the conduct of a limited number of high officials and that the majority of members had no need to be controlled by a deontological code. This resistance ceased when the at that time party president Louis Tobback argued that the party’s credibility was at stake (De Standaard, 11 December 1995).

Besides the establishment of a code of conduct, the party structure was also revised in order to further develop the party into a modern, well-organized membership movement.
By focusing on centralization, the socialist party here extended the process that was started in 1992. Dirk Houttekier, head of the working group preparing the statutory conference, argued that this choice derived from the fact that the past the party had been prone to an overdose of amateurism and lack of professionalization (…) [and that] an organization of the size of the SP should be governed centrally (Doèn, December 1995). The centralization and professionalization of the party entailed that, among other things, clarity was provided in the web of non-profit organizations surrounding the party. Also, the financial management was simplified and centralized (which clearly derived from the financial mismanagement that became apparent following the Agusta scandal).

That the party had survived the Agusta affair without excessive electoral damage also inspired Renaat Landuyt to opt for a very rigid structure. It meant salvation in the time of need (De Standaard, 7 December 2002). This statement mirrors the speech of Louis Tömbba at the time of the 1995 statutory conference (De Standaard, 11 December 1995): Is this centralism? Yes. Is this more power for the party leaders? Yes. But this is what the party needs! This declaration silenced the Young Socialist Movement (the youth chapter of the Socialist Party), which clearly was hesitant to allow the central leadership too much power. Moreover, Tobback argued for decentralization with a democratic backbone. Democratization (or decentralization) was to be the key theme with respect to political decision-making while the reverse was to rule with respect to the governing of the party. Dirk Houttekier, for example, claimed that we want to take each member of the SP seriously. We have made the fundamental choice to be a membership movement, rather than just an electoral movement (Doèn, December 1995). This strengthening of the role of the members was operationalized, for example, in the direct election of the party president; an initiative the liberal VLD had already taken previously. According to Tuur van Wallendael (personal interview, 9 May 2006), this idea had been circulating in the party for quite some time and the initiative of the VLD merely triggered its introduction at that particular point in time. However, Dirk Houttekier clearly stated that we don’t want it to become a circus such as in the VLD. The candidates should maintain a certain degree of representativeness (Doèn, December 1995). De Standaard (7 December 1995) considered this direct election of the party president as the largest change. This is interesting as the same innovation within the VLD in 1993 had not obtained any media attention – and thus was unlikely to be considered an ‘important innovation’ at the time. The most likely explanation for this difference is that the presidential elections in the VLD in 1995 had been highly animated and resulted in the defeat of the leadership’s candidate (see above). A second innovation to give more weight to the members’ opinions was that future SP conferences would be composed of delegations from the local divisions rather than the federations. The reduction of power invested in the federations, started in 1992, thus was continued in this new reform. Yet, though the power of the federations was curtailed, the party remained to see an important role for them in supporting the local divisions (Doèn, December 1995). Tömbba (De Morgen, 22 December 1995) supported the reduction of power in the federations by the argument that as the party president, I don’t want to be responsible for something I have no control over. Likewise, Steve Stevaert argued that bureaucrats could in the past fulminate against the bad guys in the federations. That is no longer possible. They can only do so against themselves now. Moreover, Stevaert indicated that the additional
power for the president and party leadership also implied increasing responsibilities for them.

**2002**

The most recent changes in the statutes of the socialist party (renamed to SP.a in 2001) were ratified during a party conference in November 2002. Changes included the prolongation of the presidential term from two to four years, the introduction of the function of vice-president (who should be of a different gender than the president), the abolition of the age limit of 65 years for party functionaries and the transformation of the federations into provincial party divisions. The party’s member magazine, however, did not discuss these changes, but focussed exclusively on the policy issues that were discussed during the conference. Moreover, Tuur van Wallendael (personal interview, 9 May 2006) argued that the statutory changes were all ‘adjustments inspired by practical considerations’ and were not considered by the party as fundamental changes.

**CD&V**

**1993**

Following its electoral loss on 24 November 1991, the Flemish Christian-Democratic party (then named CVP) decided to organize a renewal conference in 1993. According to the party’s member magazine (Zeg, 14 November 1993), the conference, under the name “Politics close to the people” (“Politiek dicht bij de mensen”), intended to *provide the Christian-Democrats’ answer to the movements in the political landscape. (…) It provides a possibility to engage in a wide discussion on the coming political challenges prior to the elections in 1994 and 1995.* The conference was co-organized by functionaries of the local divisions *since the permanent power of our party lies with a broad representation at the local level, close to the citizenry* (Zeg, 14 January 1993). Though the conference intended to reach traditional, loyal CVP-members, it also meant to attract newcomers in its debate on upcoming social themes.

The Christian-Democrats thus responded to *the acceleration of the liberals: These had begun a thorough revision of their programs and institutional structures, and fairly quickly succeeded in improving their performance in the opinion polls* (De Standaard, 5 June 1993). Herman Van Rompuy (personal interview, 28 April 2006), re-elected as CVP-president in 1992, argues he felt a strong pressure to innovate in that period, even though he personally remained sceptic towards the entire process. The reason was not only the strong performance of the liberals in the polls and the criticisms against the first Dehaene government, but also the fear that CVP-functionaries might be convinced by Verhofstadt’s novel approach and change over to the liberal party if the Christian-Democrats failed to take action themselves.

Given the liberal party’s campaign against pressure groups, significant interest arose with respect to the position the CVP would take towards the various factions (closely related to various pressure groups) in the party. Herman Van Rompuy replied to this pressure by stating that the party should keep in close contact with the voluntary associations: *Let us maintain our close relations with the large Christian organizations in the form of*
dialogues. But it should be clear that the party independently decides on its policy positions. It must be able to speak and act for the common good. Other may speak their own interests if they please (Zeg, 14 January 1993). The topic was further developed in an interview in Zeg (8 April 1993) with Chris Taes, head of the communication committee of the party. Taes declared that the CVP was a party of the common people and would always remain so: That is why it is a good thing that in the party’s working and decision-making we are able to take into account the wishes and desires raised by various groups in society. Yet, a party should be more than the sum of social interest groups. Moreover, numerous new social movements have developed over the years which correspond to the needs and desires of the current age, and where the CVP thus far has been to little involved. Taes furthermore argued that when the CVP wished to present an up-to-date and attractive program with which people can identify, it would be necessary that militants and party leaders kept in touch with whatever lives in society. Hence, Taes claimed, it would be absurd to impose a prohibition to accumulate different positions in political parties and social interest groups. It is, however, crucial that at any point in time the statutory organs of the party are able to take their political decisions autonomously.

At the end of April 1993, president Van Rompuy presented a Basic Manifesto (‘Basismanifest’) in preparation of the party’s statutory conference entitled ‘Social challenges for which the Flemish Christian-Democrats seeks answers’. The manifest identified ten such challenges. According to the media, the proposed amendments to the party’s statutes were often more important than appeared at first sight: the word ‘stand’ (sectional interest groups based on class or professional status) does not appear anywhere in the text (De Standaard, 5 June 1993). The proposed changes were, however, not extensive enough for some party members. De Standaard (5 June 1993), for example reported the existence of a significant divergence between the young, who wanted to be equally progressive as the VLD, and the elderly members, who rather wished to hold on to their conservative prudence. Reference was thereby made to the CVP faction in the chamber of representatives, among which were many younger parliamentarians of the so-called Falstaff-group, who aspired a more stringent phrasing of the text. Johan Van Hecke, for example, claimed that the conference should look like a revolution: we cannot afford to simply fiddle with the party façade (De Morgen, 3 June 1993). Similarly, the regional divisions expressed a desire for some more spices in the dish of party renewal (De Standaard, 15 June 1993). Paul Maertens, director of CEPESS and main author of the first draft of the conference notes, therefore hastened to point out that the current propositions were not the end of the road, but rather the beginning (De Standaard, 5 June 1993).

On 3 June 1993, De Morgen headlined that the CVP was preparing for an important conference and expected that the Chamber-faction would vent its displeasure with the conference texts and fiercely support the numerous amendments it had provided. Others were less excited. Knack (2 June 1993), for example, claimed that the renewal operation would be close to impossible since the party would in any case be judged by its performance in government. De Standaard (5 June 1993) also thought it unlikely that the conference would lead to an explosion within the party. (…) While there indeed was an
old rivalry between the different factions in the party and many were unhappy with the power the ACW [i.e. the Christian Movement] had, there remained the high number of mayors and local functionaries which simply did not want to get involved in the arguments of the party leaders.

Media attention to the conference was limited due to an incident involving the representatives of ‘Vrouw en Maatschappij’ (‘Women and Society’), the working committee of CVP women. Prior to the conference, the CVP-women had implored that the party would give full priority to the equalization of men and women at all levels. This was deemed part of the new political culture and a political sphere closer to the citizenry (De Standaard, 3 June 1993). During the conference, however, Van Hecke produced an amendment that meant to end all internal divisions within the party. Marc Van Peel also defended a similar amendment in which all rules to divide seats within the party were to be abolished. De Standaard (7 June 1993) reported that these amendments led to strong protest of the young and female party members, who by the current statutes had guaranteed representation in various party departments. When a majority of the conference participants approved the amendments, the women left the conference venue. Only after they had been promised it was no more than a proposal for the upcoming statutory conference they returned. De Morgen (7 June 1993) remarked that the incident threw a different light on all the expensive words that had been used since November 1991 in discussions on the gap between politics and the electorate.

Looking back at the conference, De Standaard (7 June 1993) deemed that the originally rather weak texts had been made more clear and explicit. Moreover, the newspaper found that a number of remarkable decisions had been reached. It thereby referred to the creation of open governments for local divisions, the obligation to organize at least one regional conference per year, the direct election of the party president by the members, the expansion of the time to prepare for conferences, the obligation for functionaries to take up their assignment, the drastic reduction of the age limit for functionaries to 65, the decision to abolish internal rules to divide positions and the prohibition for party leaders to act as spokesman of an interest group that comprises a faction within the party. An editorial in the same paper (De Standaard, 8 June 1993) concluded that things have indeed changed, for the CVP, for the government and hence also for the country. The newspaper argued that the call for change deriving from the roots of the party had reached the party leadership, which found it useless to prevent these phenomena. Overall, however, the decisions were argued to be incomplete and unstructured. (...) This is only the beginning of the struggle. The struggle with the various factions will continue, mainly during the make-up of candidate lists during elections. The abolition of the list vote at all levels should be an important element in this battle.

Looking back at the 1993 conference, Herman Van Rompuy (personal interview, 28 April 2006) deems that no one really felt as if the party had changed, but that ones duty had nonetheless been done. In contrast to the VLD, the drive to radically change the party was much weaker in the CVP. Moreover, CVP was part of the governing coalition, which made radical changes in the party structure much more difficult (Van Rompuy,
personal interview, 28 April 2006). The party gave most attention to the realization of its policy objectives.

2002

Party renewal remained an important theme under the presidency of Stefaan De Clerck. Remarkable, however, was that the focus had moved from structural and institutional change to changes in political personnel. De Clerck argued in the party’s member magazine (renamed to Ampersand) that I strongly believe in new talent, in chances for the younger members. (...) We should also be able bring new elements when making up our candidate lists. I am the only party president in Flanders that has made the commitment to get at least one young party member in parliament in every province (Ampersand, October 2002). Van Rompuy (personal interview, 28 April 2006) also states that this particular period was noteworthy for its stress on political personnel changes. This is clear from certain changes in the national party structure, which were a mean to remove part of the previous generation from the party: i.e. the introduction of a new way to elect members of party government bodies, the designation of new members into several party bodies and the further formalization of already existing party bodies (such as the directoral committee). None of these changes were addressed in the member magazine, nor in the popular press.

2005

On 28 May 2005, the Christian-Democrats (meanwhile renamed to CD&V) introduced some new statutes to accommodate for the introduction of provincial electoral districts. At the statutory conference where these changes were approved, the party also had extensive attention for the statute of voluntary workers. The new statutes, for example, included the guaranteed valorization and assistance of voluntary workers. In the future, political functionaries must sign a contract with the party’s base, which includes that electoral campaigns are teamwork (De Standaard, 6 May 2005). As such, the party wanted to exclude ‘Einzlgängers’: Party functionaries must listen to the party, abstain form actions and communications that are at odds with party viewpoints, pay their party contributions, follow accumulation regulations and strive to participate in local activities as much as they can, and give utmost priority to such activities. This increased attention for the party’s base was explained by De Standaard by referring to the remarkable score of Karel van Butsel, an outsider lacking a political position, in the party’s presidential elections of October 2004. Noteworthy is that Ampersand failed to give any attention to the statutory changes. Though they were announced as a significant reorganization prior to the conference (Ampersand, March 2005), none of the changes were discussed after the conference had taken place.

CONCLUSION

The elections of 24 November 1991, in which the extreme right Vlaams Blok obtained its first significant electoral victory, were generally seen as proof for the existence of a gap between the electorate and the political world. The breakthrough of extreme right
therefore instigated a series of institutional changes in the other parties in order to make their decision-making processes more democratic. In a sense, this is a surprising development given that the Vlaams Blok was in itself not the embodiment of democratic decision-making. The attention parties devoted to their internal organization can, however, be explained by the fact that parties can easily change their regulations (Deschouwer, 2004). Van Rompuy (personal interview, 28 April 2006) furthermore acknowledges that the traditional Flemish parties chose this institutional approach to avoid being forced to deal with new themes such as crime and migration (on which they were generally internally divided).

The renewal operation was most extensive for the liberal party VLD. The fact that this party was at the time an opposition party is likely to have increased its willingness to reform (see Frantzich, 1989). The reform process was, moreover, strongly steered by the party’s president Guy Verhofstadt (see Wilson, 1994). The CVP was much more reluctant to extensively reform the party. It only happened in 1993, while we had to (Van Rompuy, personal interview, 28 April 2006). The reforms were driven by the improving results of the VLD in the opinion polls and that party’s renewal process which broadened the party’s base. Enthusiasm for reform was also limited in the socialist party SP. In 1991, the reforms were prompted by the fact that the party had lost a lot of voters to the Vlaams Blok. In 1995, on the other hand, the Augusta affair induced further changes. Still, given the difficult situation in which these two elements landed the socialist party, the reform met least resistance in this party. Moreover, the party had a strong president in this period (i.e. Louis Tobback) and was not encumbered by various internal and opposing factions (see Panebianco, 1988). In both the VLD and CVP, however, the renewal process led to significant struggles between the various factions or generations within the parties. These internal struggles also determine the amount of media attention for the renewal process. The media appears to communicate about statutory changes mainly from the perspective of such factional oppositions. When, as today, the statutory changes are not clearly or directly related to factional differences, the media loses its interest. Media attention for parties’ institutional changes therefore shows a clear pattern. High attention was the norm in the early 1990’s, while more recent statutory conferences are barely mentioned in both the popular press and the party’s member magazines. Interestingly, no clear relation appears to exist between the amount of attention reforms generate and the content of these reforms. In the early 1990’s even minor changes were discussed in detail, while more recently even significant changes barely attract attention.

REFERENCES


