

From Vlaams Blok to Vlaams Belang: The Belgian Far-Right Renames Itself

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ABSTRACT *On 14 November 2004, the Belgian far-right party Vlaams Blok changed its name to Vlaams Belang and instituted a number of changes in its programme. This was a response to the earlier decision of the Court of Cassation which had found Vlaams Blok to be in violation of the law against racism. As a result, some of the more extreme positions of Vlaams Blok have been dropped from the new statute of Vlaams Belang. Opinion is divided concerning whether or not the law against racism has worked by effectively setting the parameters for legally acceptable propaganda, or whether the recent changes would help the far-right expand its voter base by making it more mainstream. This article seeks to contrast these two points of view.*

‘Vlaams Blok is dead, long live Vlaams Blok’ was the response of one of the leaders of the Belgian far-right, Filip Dewinter, to the decision of the Court of Cassation on 9 November 2004 that found Vlaams Blok to be in breach of the law against racism. The court’s decision effectively forced Vlaams Blok to disband and re-establish itself along a legally acceptable agenda in order to keep receiving state subsidies as a political party. Vlaams Blok was expecting the court’s decision, so the party leaders made the most of the media attention. While voicing their indignation, members of the Blok also managed to draw attention to the changes within the party. A few days earlier, the party had changed its statute, cleansing it of the more extreme positions and rebranding itself as a Flemish nationalist party on the political right. Five days after the decision of the court, a new party was launched by the members of Vlaams Blok on 14 November. The new political party under the name of *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) is now the ‘political heir’ to Vlaams Blok. So how much of a change in platform does the name change signal? And, what are the implications of the court’s decision for Belgian politics in general?

The decision of the Court of Cassation concludes a long legal battle between Belgian law and Vlaams Blok. The Court of Cassation was in fact

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hearing a case brought by the lawyers of Vlaams Blok itself. On 21 April 2004, the Appeal Court of Ghent had ruled that three associations affiliated with Vlaams Blok had violated the law of 30 July 1981 against racism and xenophobia. This legislation is also known as the ‘Moureaux’ law named after the Francophone socialist deputy who had drafted the bill. The case against Vlaams Blok was brought by the Centre for Equality of Opportunity (*Centre pour l'égalité des chances/Centrum voor Gelijkheid van Kansen*) and the Flemish wing of the League of Human Rights (*Liga voor de Mensenrechten*). The three Blok affiliates named were the *Vlaamse Concentratie*, the *Nationalistisch Vormingscentrum* and the *Nationalistische Omroepstichting*. The two plaintiffs argued that the propaganda material put out by these three associations advocated systematic discrimination based on race and therefore violated the Moureaux law.

Previously, the 46th chamber of the Brussels judiciary had declared the same case inadmissible in 2001. The Centre for Equality of Opportunity and the League of Human Rights had then appealed against the decision. But the Brussels Court of Appeal decided that courts had no competence over affiliates of political organisations and thus upheld the decision of the court of first instance. The plaintiffs continued their battle, however, and managed to get the decision of the Brussels Appeal Court disallowed. The argument was that the Brussels court had misinterpreted the clause of political offence by confounding political organisations and public institutions, thereby misinterpreting the jurisprudence of the Court of Cassation. As a result, the case was sent to the Ghent Appeal Court for retrial. The Ghent court found that the messages in the publicity released by the three affiliates of Vlaams Blok did indeed amount to inciting racial hatred. As a result, the party was deemed to be advocating systematic discrimination based on race; and accordingly, the three affiliates were fined €12,394.67 each. In addition, the party has to pay the two plaintiffs €5,000 in damages. In response, Vlaams Blok appealed against the decision on the ground that a contradiction existed between the law against racism and Article 3 of the Belgian constitution that guarantees liberty of expression and association. So the recent decision of the Court of Cassation is a ruling on this appeal by Vlaams Blok. The court was not swayed by the arguments put forward by the lawyers of the Blok, and the decision of the Ghent Appeal Court was thus upheld. However, Vlaams Blok still managed to take advantage of the media spotlight in order to bring attention to the changes in the party programme.

Vlaams Blok had already changed its statute and its declaration of principle before the decision of the Court of Cassation at its meeting in Antwerp on 6 November.¹ This means that the party has officially dropped its attachment to the infamous 1978 ‘orange paper’ which had hitherto functioned as the constitution of the party. Under the new name, Vlaams Belang now describes itself as nationalist party on the right committed to achieving independence for Flanders with Brussels as its capital. It calls for

an end to the linguistic services available to Francophones who live in the Brussels suburbs situated in the Flemish Brabant. The party statute calls for the return of lands 'stolen' from Flanders. Vlaams Belang continues the Vlaams Blok demand for an amnesty for wartime Nazi collaborators. The party also continues to call for closer ties with the Netherlands. There is not much that has changed here. It is in two areas where there are more discernible changes to the party. The first one is immigration. Vlaams Belang stands opposed to immigration just like its predecessor, but it has slightly softened its xenophobia. Instead of an across-the-board call for the forced repatriation of all immigrants, the party has now limited its position to the 'repatriation of those who reject, deny or combat our culture and certain European values such as separation of Church and state, liberty of expression, and equality between men and women' (Vlaams Belang 2004). While this coded message of anti-Muslim sentiment is bound to reach its intended target, the explicit racist extremism is now toned down.² In any case, Filip Dewinter helped decode the message by stating that the Muslim headscarf was in fact a 'contract' signed by Muslim women to be deported ('Buitenhof', *Nederland* 3, 14 November 2004).

It is mostly in its economic platform that Vlaams Belang differs from Vlaams Blok. The party has quietly removed the principle of 'solidarity' from its pre-eminent position in the party platform. This anti-trade union conservative collectivist ideal with its intellectual lineage going back to Italian fascism used to be a core link with far-right ideologies of the past. The party is now openly committed to the neo-liberal economic model. There is also reference to the principle of subsidiarity in order to keep big government in check. The changes are likely to ensure that Vlaams Belang does not violate the Moureaux law, and thus continue to receive state subsidies to which all Belgian parties represented in the Parliament are entitled. So the re-branding does bring some changes to the party's programme, but the question is but how much of a real change in platform is there?

It is worth noting that name change is not uncommon in Belgian politics. While continuity of party platform is often the norm, name change brings attention to the political parties as they seek to reinvent their electoral appeal. For example, all democratic parties in the Flemish Parliament recently went through name changes. The socialists changed their name from *Socialistische Partij* (SP) to *Sociaal Progressief Alternatief* (SP.A); Christian democrats changed their name from *Christelijke Volkspartij* (CVP) to *Christen Democratish en Vlaams* (CD&V); liberals changed their name from *Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang* (PVV) to *Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten* (VLD); the Greens changed their name from *Agalev* to *Groen!*. All these parties went through some changes in party programme during their name change, and this seems to apply to Vlaams Belang as well. It is clear that some of the more extreme positions of the party have been softened with the recent re-branding. However, the party president Frank

Vanhecke assured the party faithful during the launch of the party on 14 November that Vlaams Belang was not going to be a 'Vlaams Blok light'. Similarly, during the same meeting, Filip Dewinter who shares the leadership spotlight with Frank Vanhecke and Gerolf Annemans, repeated the message that nothing had changed in the party programme. After all, this is a party whose co-founder Karel Dillen once remarked that he considers the epithets 'racist and fascist' ascribed to him to be in fact honourable titles that he is proud of.³ Karel Dillen had founded the party together with Lode Claes from the ranks of the moderate Flemish nationalist party, *Volksunie*. The origins of *Volksunie* itself goes back to the early 1950s. In 1954 an electoral list of Flemish nationalists entered elections under the name of Christian Flemish National Union (*Christelijke Vlaamse Volksunie*). The name was soon changed to the *Volksunie*, and this party with a platform centred on the federalisation of the Belgian state thereafter became a part of the Belgian electoral landscape.

As a member of the governing coalition, *Volksunie* had participated in the Egmont agreement of 1977 on the federalisation of Belgium. Hardliners within *Volksunie* were incensed over the concessions given to Francophones in Brussels and the Flemish Brabant, and left the party. Initially, the dissidents had two wings; the *Vlaamse Nationale Partij* led by Karel Dillen and the *Vlaamse Volkspartij* led by Lode Claes. The two wings joined forces for the 1978 elections as Vlaams Blok. The ranks of the party included veterans of the *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (VNV) which had collaborated with the Nazis during the occupation, but it also had many young supporters. During the 1980s, the party carved a niche for itself on the right of the political spectrum by championing the cause of Flemish nationalism, anticommunism, anti-abortion, pro-apartheid and pro-amnesty for the Nazi collaborators. With the end of the Cold War, the party discovered immigration as a new issue. This gave the party a new dynamic that continues to this very day. In June 1992, the new star of the party, Filip Dewinter, published a 'programme of 70 points' aiming to combat immigration. The 70 points included the forced repatriation of all immigrants up to the third generation, educational apartheid, and the division of social security. The social security system for immigrants was to have a surcharge that would pay for their repatriation. The discussion of immigration was also coupled with questions of law and order. In the early 1990s, the party became increasingly visible with its slogan *eigen volk eerst* (our nation/people first). In response to the extremist platform of the party, all democratic parties represented in the Belgian Parliament signed an agreement on 19 November 1992 that established a *cordon sanitaire* around the Blok. That is to say, no party would enter into coalition or collaborate with Vlaams Blok.

A growing concern is that, with the recent cleansing of the party programme, the 'cordon sanitaire' might not be tenable any longer. Opinion is divided however. Many observers see the changes as merely cosmetic that

would amount to little; others fear that these changes would widen the party's appeal. Observers are also divided over the usefulness of the decision of the court. In general, there is some comfort in legally establishing that racial hatred cannot hide behind the freedom of expression in Belgium, and that the Moureaux law indeed works. But the reaction of the two linguistic groups to the decision of the Court of Cassation has been decidedly different. While the Francophone half of the country has been jubilant, Flemish public opinion has been more hesitant and cautious. Some observers think that the court's decision would contribute to the image of Vlaams Blok as a martyr persecuted for criticising the establishment. This is often the way the Blok had presented itself. The party often paints itself as the 'outsider' under attack because it dares to criticise the corrupt practices of established politics. It was therefore not surprising to see one of the party leaders, Gerolf Annemans, accuse the judiciary of being part of the Belgian establishment that wants to silence them. Blok leaders like to portray themselves as honest outsiders in a David-against-Goliath battle with a monster coalition of establishment parties.

Another concern is that the decision might be a blessing in disguise for Vlaams Blok as it reinvents itself as a bona fide member of mainstream electoral politics. As the party cleanses its programme and statutes, it would be difficult to exclude it from coalitions. The editor of the newspaper *De Morgen*, Yves Desmet, shares this point of view. He argues that the changes in the party statute would effectively remove any formal grounds to continue the policy of excluding Vlaams Belang (Desmet 2004). In other words, the 'cordon sanitaire' around the far-right is likely to be breached in the coming years. The socialist mayor of Antwerp, Patrick Janssens, believes that the legal path to combat racism is doomed to failure. According to Janssens, this brings the leaders of the far-right much-needed publicity and it contributes to the image of martyrs that they have built for themselves (*Le Soir*, 10 November 2004: 4). Another voice of scepticism towards judicial means to combat racism is Peter Vandermeersch. In a piece in *De Standaard*, Vermeersch argues that the decision of the Court of Cassation and the subsequent name change would give Vlaams Belang the chance to keep its old racist core and also expand as a new mainstream right-wing party (Vandermeersch 2004). The nervousness of the Flemish public opinion stems from the fact that Vlaams Belang is now effectively the first party in Flanders according to recent public opinion polls. Vlaams Blok received 24.2 per cent of the vote on 13 June 2004 in regional elections; and with 32 deputies, Vlaams Belang is the largest party in the Flemish Parliament.

From the beginning, the far-right has enjoyed widespread popularity in the city of Antwerp (Swyngedouw 2000: 121–43), but support for the party is no longer confined to its historical stronghold. Despite its origins as a Flemish nationalist party with an anti-Francophone message, Vlaams Blok also courted French-speaking Bruxellois by recruiting Johan Demol, the Francophone former police chief of the Brussels commune of Schaerbeck,

where there is a high concentration of immigrants. This brings the discussion to a division that the party has so far managed to keep under control. Despite its surge in popularity based on the anti-establishment theme that unifies them, the party combines two distinct streams. One is the hardline Flemish nationalist group centred around Gerolf Annemans, the second is an anti-immigrant wing led by Filip Dewinter. The divisions are not watertight, however, and the leadership has managed to keep a lid on potential differences concerning party priorities. The choice of the current party president, Frank Vanhecke, indicates a compromise that was acceptable to both streams. In fact, Vanhecke was the only candidate for the presidency of *Vlaams Belang*. He was elected with 94 per cent of the vote at the party congress held on 12 December 2004, which indicates the strong internal discipline of the rank and file. As a result, the anti-immigrant and Flemish nationalist streams seem to coexist and intermingle without much visible strain.

In addition to the recent formal changes in the party programme and statute, for a while the party has been engineering a cosmetic makeover as well. Party leaders are always well-dressed, they speak proper Dutch, they participate in family events, they tend to be courteous to their opponents in debates; and recently they have been careful to bring the spotlight to their new female members, like Marie-Rose Morel and Anke Vandermeersch (a former Miss Belgium). While this process of makeover is going on, the party also wants to retain its original constituency. In a recent newspaper article, Filip Dewinter explains the changes in the party in the following way: 'The changes in the name of the party, the modernisation of the statutes and the structure of the party, the remodelling of the style and use of language . . . and the updating of a twenty-five year old declaration of principle have nothing to do with content but everything to do with tactic' (Dewinter 2004). So the party is essentially trying to do two things at the same time. It wants to retain its core supporters by declaring that nothing has changed. But it also wants to expand its appeal to voters who have so far been reluctant to vote for a party stigmatised as racist. Of course, the changes in the party platform would also allow the party to play it safe in terms of state subsidies and legal matters. It appears that the leadership of *Vlaams Blok* felt that the movement had reached a turning-point. And the question that faced them seemed to be: can an anti-establishment party continue to grow along a xenophobic far-right path, or is further growth dependent on becoming mainstream?

Most observers of far-right movements in Europe highlight the anti-system image nurtured by *Vlaams Blok* (Ignazi 2003: 133, 136; Betz 1994). Cas Mudde argues that the *Blok* has made a career out of criticising the liberal democratic establishment (Mudde 2002: 135–48). Hugo Gijssels, however, draws attention to the fact that *Vlaams Blok* has never been a single-issue party (Gijssels 1993: 93). The party has adopted a political stand in all fields of politics covering a wide range of issues. For example, before

the last federal elections on 18 May 2003, Vlaams Blok released a 54-page document entitled 'A Future for Flanders' (Vlaams Blok 2004) in which it outlined the party platform in all policy areas from law and order to social security. Admittedly, many of the ideas put forward by the party are quite controversial. Such as the call for compulsory AIDS tests for all residents and visitors from 'countries of risk' (Govaert 2003: 18). But the point is that this is not a one-trick-pony of a party.

Vlaams Blok has also managed to pull the political centre towards the right in Flanders. Mainstream Flemish parties have felt the necessity to incorporate aspects of the far-right agenda. The uncompromising Vlaams Blok stand on the Brussels-Hal-Vilvoorde bilingual electoral district is now endorsed by all the political parties represented in the Flemish Parliament. The core of the issue is about Francophones who live in the Flemish Brabant outside the borders of the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region. There is now unanimity among Flemish parties concerning the splitting of this bilingual electoral district. Vlaams Blok has also established a hardline benchmark on further Flemish autonomy that most mainstream parties feel pressured to emulate. Vlaams Blok's emphasis on law and order is similarly endorsed by most mainstream parties. The rise of Vlaams Blok has also contributed to the demise of the moderate nationalist Volksunie. This party first went through an internal upheaval and split into two wings: a social-democrat wing led by Bert Anciaux, and a conservative wing led by Geert Bourgeois. Anciaux then formed a new political party, *Spirit*, which established an alliance with the Flemish socialists (SP.A). The conservative wing led by Bourgeois transformed itself into a party under the name of New Flemish Alliance (*Nieuwe-Vlaamse Alliantie*, N-VA) which formed a union with the Flemish Christian democrats (CD&V). Socialists and Christian democrats have thus accentuated their nationalist credentials. In a recent article, Guido Fonteyn argues that members of the now-defunct Volksunie have more influence over Flemish politics than they did as a unified political party (Fonteyn 2004; also Braeweys 2004).

Volksunie had previously exported members to the Flemish liberal party (VLD) as well, such as Bart Somers and Hugo Coveliers who were both candidates for the presidency of the party in the recent party congress. Somers was the choice of the party establishment, but a number of candidates who want closer relations with Vlaams Belang ran against him. Coveliers was one such candidate. Coveliers openly advocated an electoral pact with Vlaams Belang for the 2006 communal elections. Jean-Marie Dedecker was another challenger. Dedecker proposes a vote within VLD to question the continuation of a *cordon sanitaire* around Vlaams Belang. Comments of one of the leadership candidates, Karin Brusselmans, display the electoral squeeze mainstream political parties face in Flanders: 'if VLD wants to survive, it should make a turn of 180 degrees. Enough of socialists and greens [as coalition partners], Vlaams Belang is the only option' (de Muelenaere 2004). At the end of the day, 50.4 per cent of the party members

voted for Somers at the party congress on 4 December, but the 38.3 per cent of votes the main contender Dedecker received indicates that the problems of VLD are not over. The party establishment is clearly aware of the electoral challenge from the far-right. Recently, the federal minister of the interior, Patrick Dewael (VLD), flirted with some of the ideas advocated by the Blok when he declared that, while he believes in equality among people, this does mean that all cultures are equal. And therefore he could not accept a culture that does not separate church and state, and puts women in a minority position.⁴ Of course, the target group in these comments was quite clear as the message aiming at the Muslim community was easily decoded. It is interesting to note that as a part of the difficult balancing game Flemish politicians are forced to play, Dewael also authored a book on the dangers of Vlaams Blok while he was the Minister-President of Flanders (Dewael 2002). VLD also opposes voting rights for non-European foreigners in communal elections – a position dear to Vlaams Blok voters. So while Vlaams Belang takes the extremist edge of some of its policies, mainstream Flemish parties are increasingly adopting elements of the party's discourse.

When the Crown Prince Philippe recently broke the royal tradition of silence on political matters and criticised Vlaams Belang, Flemish mainstream parties were unanimous in condemning his dabble into politics (*De Standaard*, 2 December 2004: 4, 5, 36, 37; *Le Soir*, 2 December 2004: 1–7). The French-speaking southern half of the country, on the other hand, welcomed Prince Philippe's remarks as a natural response by a concerned Belgian citizen speaking in a private capacity. This is an indication of how trapped Flemish mainstream parties feel in face of the surge in the far-right's popularity. In 2001, Manu Claeys tried to set in motion a more aggressive opposition to Vlaams Blok by asking political leaders to lead the counter-offensive against the far-right, but most politicians have been hesitant to embark upon such a large-scale initiative, fearing that it would be used by the Blok as a certification of its self-portrayal of David fighting Goliath (Claeys 2001). The only exception to this overall apprehensiveness is a current grass-roots petition movement asking Flemings to sign an open letter condemning Vlaams Belang, but so far the initiative remains low-key.⁵

As a result of these recent changes, it appears that Vlaams Belang will very likely form coalitions at the communal level following the 2006 elections. This could open the door to regional coalitions after the 2009 elections. According to Lieven De Winter: 'One Fleming in four has already voted for the Blok. The psychological threshold is already passed. For Flemish voters, a vote for the Blok is already seen as a legitimate option' (De Winter 2004). Furthermore, during its recent legal difficulties, Vlaams Belang managed to get all the attention it wanted on the changes within the party. Not only did the party affirm its status of a martyr at the hands of establishment for its core supporters, but it also softened the edges of its message thereby making it a mainstream option for Flemings.

However, it is also worth noting that the decision of the Court of Cassation did not require this major overhaul of the party; nor did it require the move towards economic neo-liberalism, nor did it call for changes in appearance. At the end of the day, despite the party's ability to use the court's decision to bring publicity, it is now clear that the Moureaux law draws a line in the sand. The ruling of the court establishes the parameters of legally acceptable political propaganda. So it would be misleading to attribute the overall makeover to the verdict only; this is more about a calculation to re-brand the product. One thing is clear though, Vlaams Belang is certainly no longer content with playing the role of an anti-establishment and anti-system protest party. It is getting ready for office.

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Notes

1. The changes were formally approved by the party congress on 12 December 2004.
2. In his analysis Vlaams Blok party documents and publications, Cas Mudde has found 'Islamophobia' to be 'the most important aspect of the party's xenophobic propaganda' (Mudde 2000: 13). Similarly, Hugo Gijssels and Jos Vander Velpen show the prevalence of anti-Islamic xenophobia in their analysis of Vlaams Blok propaganda and party documents (Gijssels and Vander Velpen 1992: 112–42).
3. Statement Dillen made at the Vlaams Blok party congress 25 March 1984, quoted in Gijssels (1993: 204).
4. *De Morgen*, 'Dewael vindt islamcultuur minder vaardig', 5 October 2004, 4. For a commentary on Dewael's remarks, see Yves Desmet, 'Waarom kardinal Danneels slimmer is dan Patrick Dewael', *De Morgen*, Saturday, 9 October 2004, 58.
5. The open-letter petition, 'Flemish citizen initiative', calls all Flemings to join forces in openly condemning a party that has legally been found to be racist (Vlaamsburgerinitiatief 2004).

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