

# PEOPLE'S PARTIES IN CRISIS

## CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS IN BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS

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Since the Second World War, the Christian democratic parties in Belgium and the Netherlands have had a significant influence not only on the politics of their respective countries, but also on the European unification process. However, in the last two decades they have also had to overcome some fundamental crises. In the most recent parliamentary elections in 2010 and 2012 their popularity reached an all-time low. To a certain extent, what has happened to them and the way they have attempted to deal with these crises could provide an indication of the challenges ahead for other Christian democratic parties.



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## CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S PARTIES IN BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS

In total, there are five Christian democratic parties in the Benelux countries. In Luxemburg there is the Christian Social People's Party (CSV) and in the Netherlands the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). Due to the division of political forces along language lines, there are three parties in Belgium with Christian democratic roots: the French-speaking Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH), the Flemish Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V) and the German-speaking Christian Social Party. This analysis focuses on the two parties that are by far the biggest amongst these five, the CDA in the Netherlands and the CD&V in Belgium. Like the CDU in Germany, the Christian democratic parties in Belgium and the Netherlands have deep roots within society. Today, these two parties still have the most members of any party in the Netherlands and Flanders. The CDA

has around 65,000 members, the CD&V approximately 75,000.<sup>1</sup>

**Christian democratic politicians from the Benelux countries have played a leading role in the European unification and integration process.**

Since the Second World War, these parties have been the dominant political forces in their respective countries. Christian democratic politicians from the Benelux countries have also played a leading role in the European unification and integration process or have themselves been responsible for introducing initiatives aimed at furthering integration. Examples include Leo Tindemans, Wilfried Martens and Herman van Rompuy in Belgium and Norbert Schmelzer and Jan-Peter Balkenende in the Netherlands.

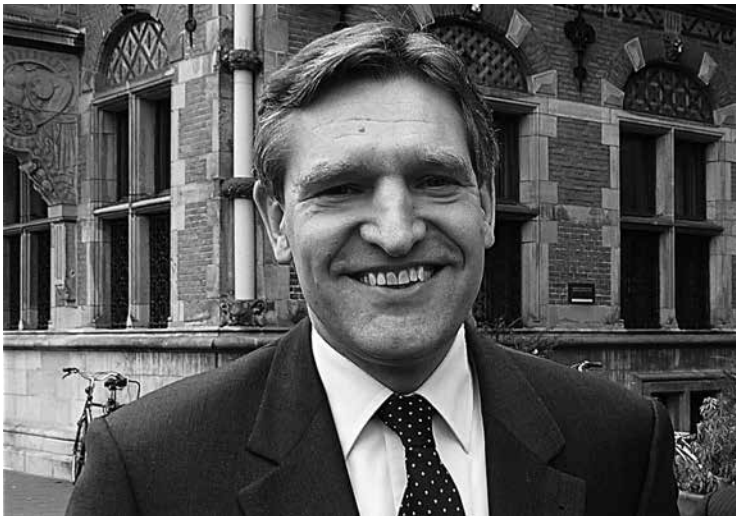
The Christian democratic parties in both countries were part of the “pillarisation” of Dutch and Belgium society along ideological lines. This term, coined by the Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart, could be best used to describe society and politics in the Netherlands, and to a great extent in Belgium, until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> In a pillared socio-political system, groups defined along religious and social lines exist in their own worlds, with their own social organisations. Party membership and voting behaviour are heavily influenced by ideology. Life was played out within each respective pillar, with the parties firmly entrenched in society through their own organisations and institutions (business associations, cooperative banks, schools, health insurance companies), as well as their own broadcasters and press. Both countries had clear Socialist, Liberal and Christian pillars. In the Netherlands, the Christian pillar was also broken down by denomination. However, since the 1980s the cohesive force exerted by these pillars has been steadily eroded, and in both countries it would now be more accurate to say that society has become de-pillarised.

The Dutch CDA was formed in 1980 from a merger of three denominational parties, the Catholic People’s Party (Katholieke Volkspartij, KVP), the Protestant Anti-Revolutionary

1 | Cf. Steven Van Hecke: “Christlich-Demokratische Parteien in Belgien”, in: Karsten Grabow (ed.), *Im Plenum – Christlich-demokratische Parteien in Westeuropa – Stand und Perspektiven*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2012, 49-62.

2 | Cf. Arend Lijphart, *Verzuiling, pacificatie en kentering in de Nederlandse politiek*, De Bussy, Amsterdam, 1968.

Party (Anti-Revolutionaire Partij, ARP) and the Christian Historical Union (Christelijk Historische Unie, CHU). This merger allowed the CDA to bridge the interdenominational differences that had divided Dutch society more strongly and for many more years than was the case in Germany. There had been close ties between the KVP, ARP und CHU since as far back as the 1960s,<sup>3</sup> even if they did not always serve in government together. After the Second World War, Christian-oriented parties, in alliance with the Social Democrats, were the dominant political force in the country. Since the Second World War, 11 of the 16 heads of government have been Christian Democrats. In the 32 years since it was founded, the CDA has formed part of the government for a total of 24 years, and in 22 of these it was the ruling government party. Thanks to its deep roots amongst the people, including social organisations but also the middle classes, the CDA was a typical people's party and a permanent feature of the Dutch "pillar system".



Sybrand van Haersma Buma, the new chair of the CDA, takes up the cause of modernising his party. | Source: pietplaat / flickr (CC BY-NC).

The Dutch Christian democrats are particularly well represented in the traditionally Catholic south of the country (North Brabant, Limburg), parts of the mixed

3 | Cf. Paul Lucardie, "Der CDA in den Niederlanden", in: Grabow (ed.), n. 1.

denominational and more rural Overijssel region and in Friesland. Traditionally, they have been less successful in the larger towns and cities and the densely-populated Randstad conurbation. Overall, the CDA performs disproportionately well in local elections.

Since its foundation, the CDA has regularly won around 30 per cent of the vote. However, the parliamentary elections of 1994 proved to be a bad result for the Dutch Christian democrats. After 17 years in government they lost the elections and fell below the 20 per cent mark for the very first time. Eight years later, after working on a new political programme and making sweeping personnel changes, the CDA was once again the most popular party, and their leader Jan-Peter Balkenende (2002-2010) was elected as prime minister. However, the local elections in 2010 showed that their support among the people was dwindling. They only got 15 per cent of the vote and finished third behind the Social Democrats and the Liberal right. In 2010 the CDA also suffered a historic defeat in the general elections, winning only 13.6 per cent of the vote. Nevertheless they became part of a minority coalition government under conservative-liberal Prime Minister Mark Rutte, supported by Geert Wilders' right-wing populist PVV (Party for Freedom). This was a highly controversial move within the party. Two-thirds of those members present at a specially-convened

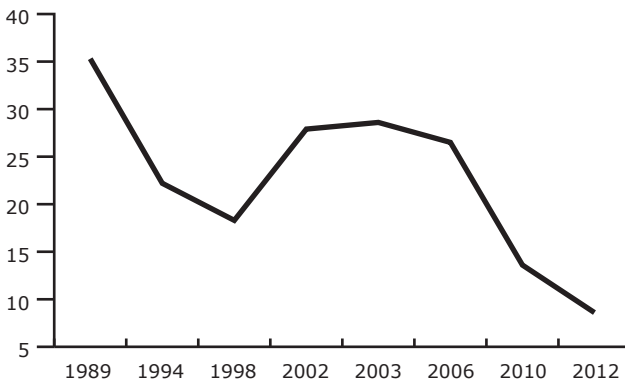
**With Ruth Peetoom, the CDA chose a chair person who represented the anti-PVV wing of the party, and who was openly in favour of change.**

party conference in Arnhem in October 2010 voted in favour of the coalition. The following months became a real test of the party's strength, with some leading party members resigning from their posts and openly criticising the direction the party was taking. The internal election in April 2011 to choose the party chairperson effectively became a vote on the party's future direction. In the end the party chose Ruth Peetoom, who represented the anti-PVV wing of the party. Since autumn 2011, the CDA has taken its first steps towards re-inventing itself. A strategic council was given the task of developing a new policy statement for the party and in January 2012 it presented the first draft of this document, which is meant to chart the party's future course.<sup>4</sup>

4 | *Kiezen en verbinden, politieke visie vanuit het radicaale midden*, CDA, Jan 2012, [http://cda.nl/Upload/2012\\_docs/rapport\\_SB.pdf](http://cda.nl/Upload/2012_docs/rapport_SB.pdf) (accessed 12 Nov 2012).

In the middle of this process of renewal there were new elections in 2012 following the sudden withdrawal of the PVV from the government. The CDA was caught at a bad moment: the party had to quickly put together a manifesto and select a main candidate to fight the election. The parliamentary group leader Sybrand van Haersma Buma was selected by the members with a large majority, but in the short time available to him, he was unable to close the gap on longer-serving party leaders such as Prime Minister Mark Rutte, Geert Wilders, the socialist Emile Roemer or the social democrat Diederik Samsom. In the parliamentary elections on 12 September 2012 the party had its worst-ever result, with only 8.6 per cent of the vote and 13 seats. Particularly noticeable were the poor results they achieved in the larger towns and cities, as had been the case in the previous election. In 2010, the CDA failed to gain ten per cent of the vote in any of the largest cities, while in 2012 they could not even manage five per cent. What was particularly sobering for the party was its apparent lack of popularity amongst the business community.

Fig. 1

**CDA Election results in the Netherlands (in per cent)**

Source: Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, CBS).

Like the CDA, the Belgium Christian democrats also had a long history of political dominance. The prime ministers of the country have been Christian democrats for 53 of the 67 years since the Second World War. Also like the CDA, the Belgium Christian democratic party is firmly entrenched in society and the pillar system through various organisations

(the ACW federation of unions, social insurance, etc.). Like the CDA, the CD&V was a classic party of the middle classes. The Flemish Christian democrats' strongholds are mostly in rural areas, particularly in West Flanders and the province of Limburg. Like the CDA, the party has problems in larger towns and cities. The party has traditionally done well in local elections and in 2006 had more than half of the mayors in Flanders.

In the Netherlands, Christian-oriented parties had come together to form a common movement, but in Belgium the Christian democrats chose to go the other way. Following the language disputes between the Walloons and the Flemish, which escalated when the Catholic University of Leuven was split into two, the Christian Social Party (CVP-PSC) split in 1972 into a Flemish wing (CVP) and a Walloon wing (PSC). After the split, the Flemish CVP remained the biggest party in Belgium and in Flanders, while in Wallonia the PSC, which was dominated by socialists, quickly dropped to third place. In the 1970s, Flemish Christian democrats enjoyed a purple patch with popular personalities such as Leo Tindemans and Wilfried Martens.

**In the 1970s, Flemish Christian democrats had a lasting influence on both Belgian and European politics.**

A decisive moment for both parties was the election defeat of 1999, which saw the Christian democrats being removed from government for the very first time. Both the CVP and the PSC had reached a historical low point. The PSC lost two of its twelve seats (of 150). One of the factors that many blamed for this was their poor management of the Dutroux affair. After 25 years in power, the CVP had gained a reputation as the "party of power" but fell victim to a mood for change in the country and lost nearly a quarter of the votes. In total, the Christian democratic parties went down from 41 seats to 32 and were behind both the liberals (41) and the socialists (33) for the first time. Both parties suddenly went through a difficult period of identity crisis. The new chairman of the CVP, Stefaan de Clerck, initiated a thorough overhaul of the party in terms of both organisation and ideology. The party changed its name to Christian Democratic & Flemish (CD&V), which strengthened its Flemish profile, and advocated increasing the rights of individual regions within Belgium. Between 2004 and 2007, the CD&V entered into a tactical electoral pact

with the small Flemish-nationalist N-VA. In the short-term, this strategy appeared to be working. In the regional elections of 2004 and the federal elections of 2007, the CD&V won the most votes and were the heads of government in Flanders from 2004 and at national level from 2007. But in retrospect, this alliance was a disaster for the CD&V. They were elected on a promise of comprehensive state reform, but after three years of negotiations were unable to make any real progress. The government fell in 2010. Many Flemish voters, who had become frustrated by the political elite and the refusal of the Walloon parties to support reforms, switched their allegiance to the N-VA, who had themselves pulled out of the electoral pact with the CD&V in 2008. In the 2010 elections, the Christian democrats suffered their worst-ever defeat (only 17.6 per cent of the vote in Flanders), while the N-VA under the popular and media-savvy Bart de Wever became the strongest party with 28.6 per cent of the vote. However, unlike the CDA, the CD&V was able to maintain the position as the number one party in the local elections of 14 October 2012, despite some losses, and have at least stemmed the downward trend for the time being. The CD&V is the strongest party in 130 of 308 local authorities. However, it is worth noting the poor results they achieved in the cities of Antwerp (5 of 55 seats) and Gent (4 of 51). Another worry for them is their poor showing in the polls amongst the business community (September 2012: 13 per cent).

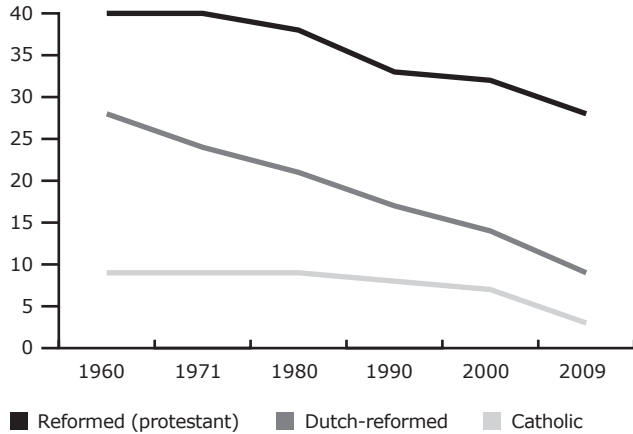
**The CD&V is the strongest party in 130 of 308 local authorities but has poor results in bigger cities.**

The PSC's reaction to election defeat in 1999 was more radical: In 2002 after many heated debates, the party, under its new chair Joelle Milquet, changed its name to the Humanist Democratic Centre (CDH). In doing so, the party was deliberately removing any reference to Christian democracy from the party name. The idea was to open the party up to support from the Muslim electorate and voters without religious affiliation. After years in which party members avoided talking about their religious views, some of the party's elected representatives have recently started speaking more openly about their beliefs. So far, renouncing the Christian aspect of the party has not really paid off. The typical decline in popularity of Christian democratic people's parties in big cities has been slowed in Brussels, but the party has been unable to improve its position

overall. It remains only the third or fourth biggest force among the French-speaking parties.

Fig. 2

**Church membership in the Netherlands (in per cent)**



Source: CBS, <http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?DM=SLN L&PA=37944&D1=0-1,3-5&D2=a&HDR=T&STB=G1&CHA RTTYPE=2&VW=T> (accessed 30 Nov 2012).

## THE CAUSES OF THE CRISIS

### Social Change

One of the main problems for the Christian democrats in both countries, and something that is happening more quickly than in Germany, is the secularisation of society and the subsequent breakdown of the traditional pillars. In the Netherlands, the number of Catholics has fallen from 40 per cent of the population (1971) to 25 per cent (2011), while in the same period, the two major Protestant churches have gone down from 33 per cent to 12 to 13 per cent (all the evangelical groups together make up around 17 per cent). The number of people regularly going to church has fallen even more dramatically.

The decline in Belgium appears at first glance not to have been quite so marked. Two-thirds of the population are still nominally Catholic, while in Flanders the figure is even higher. A more revealing picture can be found in church attendance statistics. Even in traditional Catholic areas like



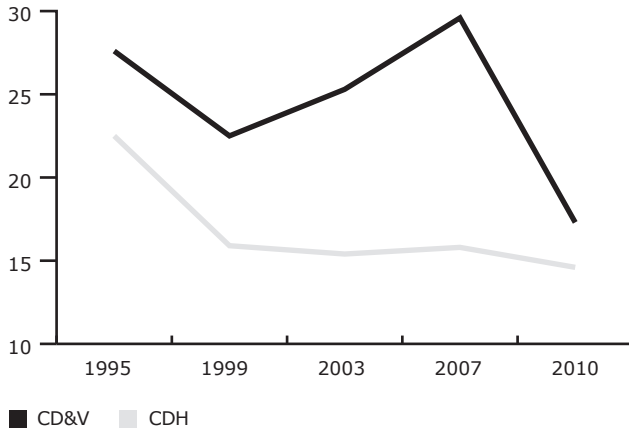
Flanders, only six to seven per cent of the people attend Sunday mass. The number of devout Christians in the more socialist and liberal Wallonia has always been lower than in Flanders, but the secularisation process over the last two decades has also been somewhat weaker.



Among the Christian democrats there is hardly anyone left who is capable of crossing swords with the eloquent Bart de Wever. | Source: David Cumps / flickr (CC BY-NC-ND).

Because of the Christian democrats' strong links to the Christian pillars of both countries, the growing secularisation in society has had the effect of shrinking their electoral base. The influence of people's religious affiliation on who they choose to vote for has also declined over time. In 2002 and 2006, 40 to 55 per cent of Christians voted for the CDA, but in the 2010 elections to the Tweede Kamer that figure had dropped to 25 per cent and by 2012 it was down to 20 per cent. For the first time ever, the CDA was not even the number one party amongst Christian voters: This position was now held by the conservative-liberal VVD. It was amongst Catholics that the CDA lost the most support. In 2002-2006, 44 to 51 per cent of Catholics voted for the CDA, in 2012 it was only 17 per cent. The CDA are the number one party only amongst those Christians who practice their faith on a regular basis, but here too they have lost a significant amount of support.

Fig. 3

**CD&V/CDH election results<sup>5</sup> (in per cent)**

Source: Official result.

The CDA has below-average and generally intermittent support amongst those voters with no religious affiliation. Between 2002 and 2006, 11 to 13 per cent of this group supported the CDA, but by 2010 that figure had dropped to three per cent and by 2012 it was only two per cent. They had been more successful in attracting Muslim voters but lost out here too after working together with the PVV.

The same sort of trends can be seen with the Flemish Christian democrats. 35 per cent of regular churchgoers voted for the CD&V in 2010 (17.6 per cent of the vote overall), which is still 27 per cent of those with a church affiliation, but they only got nine per cent of liberals or those without any religious affiliation.<sup>6</sup> To put this in context, 46 per cent of regular churchgoers voted for the CD&V in 2003 and 52 per cent in 2007. What is interesting is that the CD&V has been able to significantly improve its chances amongst adherents of other religions (especially Muslims). It scored rather well with this group in 2010. In 2003, only one per cent of adherents of other religions voted for the

5 | 2007 together with the N-VA. Results refer to the percentage obtained among French-speaking (CDH) and Dutch-speaking (CD&V) parties respectively.

6 | Koen Abts, Marc Swyngedouw and Jaak Billiet, "De structurele en culturele kenmerken van het stemgedrag in Vlaanderen", *Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek*, KU Leuven, Leuven, 2011.

CD&V. In 2010 this figure went up to 21 per cent. However, the success of Christian democratic parties amongst those without any religious affiliation is still limited. As a result, the secularisation of society is having a bigger impact on the parties here than on Christian democratic parties in other countries.

One of the consequences of the breaking down of the pillars is the growing unpredictability of the electorate. Within the space of a few years both the Netherlands and Flanders saw the emergence of new political movements which mostly proved to be short-lived, but which for a while seemed capable of developing into serious competitors. No single Dutch party can rely on core electoral support of more than ten per cent. The Netherlands have a strict system of proportional representation with no restrictions, which favours the establishment of small parties. This means that the CDA has little political room to manoeuvre to the left or to the right and has to face ever stiffer competition from other parties, including the Protestant parties ChristenUnie and SGP for the votes of practising Protestants, the VVD for the middle class vote, the D66 for left of centre voters, not to mention the social democrats of the PvdA.

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### **Change in the Political Culture and Hostility Towards the Political Elite**

Two other factors have served to accelerate the decline of the Christian democrats: changes to the country's political culture and a growing dissatisfaction with the political elite. Both parties benefited for many years from a *Regeringsbonus* – their high visibility as the incumbent parties in government – and were considered by many to be reliable custodians (*bestuurderspartij*). This meant that at times they were able to compensate for the losses brought about by the depillarising of society. However, as soon as this political elite began failing in their attempts to address the main challenges that faced their countries, this bonus changed from being an asset to a liability.

The Dutch Christian democrats lost out on both fronts. A large part of the population were no longer prepared to go along with what was initially a multicultural and later a pro-European consensus amongst the political elite (to which the CDA belonged), and this in turn led either to the creation of right-wing populist movements or the strengthening of existing ones, such as the Pim Fortuyn List and the PVV of Geert Wilders. Fortuyn, Wilders and the socialist leader Jan Marijnissen were able to win over support with their populist rhetoric and open hostility to the political elite. The Dutch Christian democrats were accused of having the “arrogance of power.”

The tone of the political debate changed completely. At the end of the 1990s, political debates amongst consensus-oriented political parties were mostly about specific issues, but with the rise of right and left-wing populist parties, the tone of the debates became much more polarising. At the same time, politics was starting to become much more about the media, with telegenic political personalities having much more of an influence. A good example of this was the 2012 election. Four weeks before election day, it was looking as if the social democrats would only get around 11 to 12 per cent of the vote. However, thanks to a successful round of TV debates by the party leader Diederik Samsom they were able to double their share of the vote in a very short space of time. The Christian democrats are struggling to adapt to these new circumstances.

**The Christian democrats are struggling to adapt to new circumstances like the rising significance of media.**

So far they have been unable to either limit the influence of the PVV in the political discourse or adjust to the increased importance of being media-savvy during campaigning. After so many years in government, many of their leading politicians are now worn out and no longer able to compete with the popular Rutte, Wilders or Samsom.

In Flanders, years without progress on state reform has cost the Christian democrats dearly. When the CD&V returned to government in 2007 as the largest Flemish party, it was on the back of a clear commitment to comprehensive state reform aimed at improving the situation in Flanders, i.e. more power and fewer transfers to the south of the country. However, their efforts at reform made little progress due to stubborn resistance from the socialists and

the EPP sister party, CDH. As a result, the CD&V lost many disillusioned voters, particularly to the N-VA. In 2010, 40 per cent of N-VA voters admitted that state reform was a key factor in their decision on who to vote for. Bart de Wever could not really be described as a classic populist, but he was able to attract significant support by attacking the political elite in Brussels who had become increasingly unpopular in Flanders.

It was also a disadvantage for the CD&V to be identified as a party of power. While many considered the party to be generally very competent and in possession of many talented people at all levels, it was still seen as part of the political elite that had (so far) failed to resolve a key issue. The same thing has happened to the Belgian Christian democrats as happened in Holland – a difficult period in government has left many of the party's leading politicians so worn out that there is hardly anyone left who is capable of crossing swords with the eloquent Bart de Wever.

### **Internal Party Problems, Unclear Policies**

The causes of some of the problems have their roots in the parties themselves. In analysing the CDA's election defeat in 2010, the former governor of Limburg, Leon Frissen, suggested that the party leadership had lost touch with the electorate.<sup>7</sup> The arrogance of power had pervaded the leadership and this had been a decisive factor in the election defeats of 1994 and 2010. The CDA faction had not adequately fulfilled its role as representatives of the people, party structures had not been successfully adapted to prevailing political developments and the party in general had failed to keep pace with the changes happening in society.

The party was also accused of not having a clear manifesto. The report complained that there was not enough constructive debate within the party and a lack of willingness to discuss awkward topics, with the result that more populist parties had been able to steal the initiative on controversial policy issues.

7 | Leon Frissen, *Verder na de klap – evaluatie en perspectief*, CDA, Nov 2010, <http://cda.nl/Upload/verder%20na%20de%20klap.pdf> (accessed 12 Nov 2012).

It did not help that some of the party's core beliefs had been affected by political developments. Changes to some of the party's views on European policy had annoyed some of their traditionally pro-European voters. Their decision to work with the PVV had also scared off some voters. Many of the CDA's supporters felt that the party had lost credibility because it had always stood for religious tolerance, but was now working with the anti-Islam PVV. By the time it came to the elections in 2012, many voters were not sure exactly what the party stood for. At that stage, the new policy statement was still being worked on and was thus unable to offer any real direction.

The very public internal squabbling that broke out when it began its cooperation with the PVV had a serious impact on the party. Old arguments between advocates of Christian social and liberal conservative policies flared up once again. There even appeared to be an underlying rivalry between Catholics and Protestants within the party. It was only at the beginning of 2012 that the internal debates over the party's future direction slowly started to die down, but by then it was too late to develop a positive manifesto in time for the elections.

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The Flemish Christian democrats have also been accused of lacking clear policies. By working with the N-VA, the CD&V were playing a very specific Flemish regional card, but by doing so were effectively neglecting other important issues. This is possibly one of the reasons why they lost their dominant position amongst middle class voters to the N-VA, which is now behaving like a classic liberal-conservative, business-friendly party regularly praising the German Economic Model.

After their latest election defeat, the CD&V were also accused of not making clear statements on policy in order not to scare off potential voters. Like the CDA, the Flemish Christian democrats also tried to take their cue from the very vague "Big Society" concept of an all-inclusive society as a key plank of their manifesto. But there were no deep discussions about fundamental principles, largely because of the absorption of political parties in the 18-month process of governmental negotiations since 2010. They were much

more concerned about alienating various voter groups by adopting positions that were too strict or about presenting an image of division shortly before the local elections by debating fundamental policy issues. Many party members proposed leaving detailed discussions on the party's future direction until after the local elections and the chairman of the party, Wouter Beke, suggested in an interview that the party would indeed discuss its future direction at some point. The party at least managed to maintain an image of unity to the outside despite the tensions in domestic politics<sup>8</sup> caused by the slow process of forming a government and the heated internal debates.

The lack of clear direction on the part of the CDA and the CD&V is also a natural consequence of so many years spent in government. Working in a coalition with other parties means making constant compromises. This is particularly true of the CD&V, who, because of the peculiarities of the Belgian political system at federal level, regularly had to work with four or five parties with completely different ideologies and so had to make often painful compromises. Since 2011, the party has been in a coalition, headed up by Walloon socialists who seem much less committed to fundamental reforms. As a result, it is difficult for the party to position itself against the N-VA as the true protectors of the interests of the Flemish business community.

## **RECOVERING FROM DEFEAT**

In the immediate aftermath of the election defeat and the internal arguments on the party's involvement in the government, the CDA started on a process of review. Since 2011 it has been looking at ways to overhaul the party in terms of structure, personnel and policies. The reforms carried out after the rout suffered in 1994 are being used as inspiration. Eight years after that earlier setback, the CDA emerged from the crisis stronger than ever and was able to return to power.

It started by making some personnel changes. Since the elections of 2012, virtually none of the leading party members that fought the election with Balkenende in 2010 have

8 | Olaf Wientzek, "Neue Regierung in Belgien im Zeichen der Krise", KAS Länderbericht, 12/2011.

**Internal party democracy has also been strengthened, with both Peetoom and Buma being selected in primary elections.**

remained in place. Out of the 41 deputies which represented the party in the parliament in 2010, only six remain in 2012. As a result of these changes, the CDA has lost many very experienced politicians. The party has had a new leader since June 2012, Sybrand van Haersma Buma, while the pastor Ruth Peetoom was chosen to be chair of the party in an internal election in April 2011, campaigning on a ticket of reform of internal party structures. Internal party democracy has also been strengthened, with both Peetoom and Buma being selected in primary elections. The (independent) youth movement G500 was not only invited to the party conference, but also took part in discussions on the party's future direction. It is hoped that this will make the party more attractive to younger voters.

The new policy statement,<sup>9</sup> whose title alone (Choose and connect – a political vision coming from the radical center) suggests that the party will not be pursuing a left- or right-wing manifesto, is meant to serve as a policy guideline for the party for the next ten to 15 years. In the statement, the party makes a clear commitment to being pro-Europe and supporting active integration and a positive attitude to religion in the public domain, and distances itself from the materialism of the VVD and the populism of the SP and the PVV.

The CD&V probably still needs to go through this process of introspection, even if on numerous occasions over the last decade it has sought to stimulate debate. For example, it recently attempted to breathe new life into the concept of the market economy. However, it is still unclear where the party stands on many controversial issues, such as the future of the country (many in the party want to see significantly more powers devolved to Flanders) and the economy (the interests of the business community versus stronger trade unions), not to mention migration and asylum issues.

It will be interesting to see how the parties interpret the Christian element in their policies in the future. As far as the CDA in particular is concerned, removing the Christian



reference from their name is not up for debate, in spite of the increasing secularisation of society. However, there are currently controversial discussions underway regarding the significance the Christian element still has and to what extent Christian values can be incorporated into the party's basic policies.

## **OUTLOOK**

Following their defeat, the CDA now has the opportunity while in opposition to go about renewing themselves and clearly defining what they stand for. The party will only be able to emerge from this in a stronger position – despite the difficult social conditions – if it manages to carry out this review without destructive internal squabbling in full view of the public.<sup>10</sup>

The CD&V, who, in spite of all their losses, have not had to endure the same bitter setbacks as the CDA, have two difficult years ahead of them before the super election year of 2014 (European, Federal and Regional elections). The party will have to demonstrate a track record on reform that will win over sceptical Flemish voters while serving in a six-party government led by Walloon socialists.

In the medium term it is clear that a decline in core voters, combined with a depillaring of society in both countries, will ensure that the media and the politics of personality will play a much more significant role in future election campaigns. Having media-savvy leadership figures could be decisive in future elections. However, even they will only be able to make up for the loss of core voters brought about by changes in society for a limited period of time. Being considered a "party of power" loses its impact after a few years and is then often seen as a negative thing.

Maintaining roots in social organisations is still important for both parties, even if new forms of participation will need to be considered. But this will still not be enough to make up lost ground, even if it is combined with improved internal party unity.

10 | Cf. *Rapport commissie Rombouts. Om eenheid en inhoud*, 27 Oct 2012, [http://cda.nl/Upload/2012\\_docs/Om\\_eeheid\\_en\\_inhoud-Digitaal\\_01.pdf](http://cda.nl/Upload/2012_docs/Om_eeheid_en_inhoud-Digitaal_01.pdf) (accessed 30 Nov 2012).

**Removing the Christian reference from the party name has not so far brought the CDH any concrete advantages.**

The "C" word should not be up for debate. Removing the Christian reference from the party name has not so far brought the CDH any concrete advantages. At the end of the day, it is the Christian branding that gives the parties their ideological basis and clearly differentiates them from other political parties. The CDH for their part are desperately seeking a new image, in order to distance themselves from the liberal-conservative, socialist and green parties. However, the Christian parties will not be able to rely on Christian values alone if they want to remain true people's parties. The economy and domestic affairs have grown in importance. The middle classes, the backbone of any people's party, will only be brought back into the fold if the parties can offer coherent economic and social policies.

Efforts to attract Muslim voters which began at the start of the new century could provide a model for other Christian democratic parties. The key objective now is to try to win back middle-class, values-oriented voters who are not necessarily affiliated to a particular religion. However, attempts to woo voter groups must not become an arbitrary campaign with the sole purpose of avoiding giving offense to any of the various social groups. Simply talking about an inclusive society will not be enough.

A long period of crisis or even the disappearance of the Christian democratic parties in Belgium and the Netherlands would be detrimental for the European integration process. Over the decades, politicians from both parties have played a key role in Europe as well as being partners that Germany could rely on.

It is unlikely that other Christian democratic parties will go through the exact same experiences as the CDA and the CD&V. Because of the way Belgium's political landscape is divided up, it can be considered something of a special case. The lack of a five per cent minimum in the Dutch election system means that the CDA faces a totally different kind of competition to, say, the CDU. Nevertheless, other Christian democratic parties can learn some valuable lessons from the experiences of the CD&V and the CDA. Growing secularisation, increased electoral volatility, especially a drop-off in the number of voters in larger towns and cities, are

all starting to have an impact on other Christian democratic parties as well. Most of the Christian democratic parties in Europe are also “parties of power” and the danger of these parties losing touch with their electorate is very real. The experiences of the CDA and the CD&V should serve as a warning. Christian democratic parties need to ensure that they make every effort to attract new voters, to improve internal party democracy and to ensure that the electorate knows exactly what they stand for.