The EU prototype

In the aftermath of the Brussels bombings, a few articles have appeared highlighting the dysfunctionality of Belgium as a country. John Lichfield, in the Independent, says that *"The atrocities committed by ISIS have exposed Belgium's failings as a society"* while in the Guardian, an article by Jason Burke, entitled *"Why did the bombers target Belgium?"* also raises questions about the country which hosts most of the EU's institutions. It talks of a country *"prone to instability"* with *"a wavering government….that has always had difficulties reconciling its French and Flemish-speaking communities."*

Lichfield goes further. Belgium has sent more Jihadis to Syria per head of population than any other European state and one question he asks provides a possible answer as to why:- *"Most Muslim youths in Britain or France do consider themselves British or French. What should a youth of Moroccan origin born in Brussels consider him or herself to be? A Fleming or a Walloon? Or a Bruxellois?"*

Is it surprising that immigrants have had problems integrating when the country itself is so divided? Lichfield goes on to say that *"The division of the country in all but name has undermined the national or federal institutions – including the police, justice system and intelligence services. Belgian politicians now think largely in terms of their "regions" or language communities, rather than problems on a national scale….A country which regards itself as supremely international has become dysfunctionally preoccupied with parish politics."*

At this point, the articles stop. Neither writer points out that the EU is, in many ways Belgium writ large. It's not just a concidence that most of the main EU institutions are based in the country. Belgium only came into being as a country in

1830, following a revolution which saw it gain independence from Holland. It was something of an experiment in building a nation from different communities and not a very successful one either. Right from its earliest days, there were tensions between the two ethnic and linguistic groups and over 180 years later, these tensions have, if anything, increased. The country's early prosperity came from its industry located in the French-speaking areas; the first king, Leopold I, was a German prince married to a French princess who spoke French at court. Now, the French-speaking industrial areas are suffering from high unemployment and the country's wealth comes predominantly from the Flemish-speaking region, whose inhabitants resent being taxed heavily to pay the benefits of unemployed French speakers with whom they feel little sense of solidarity.

Flemish separatist parties — some moderate and some not so moderate — have done well in recent elections and an opinion poll, taken less than 10 years ago, revealed that a sizeable percentage of the population did not expect Belgium to last much longer as a country. Apart from its massive bureaucracy, the only other factor holding the country together is the problem of the future status of Brussels (a predominantly French-speaking city located in Flanders) in any political partition of Belgium.

And herein lies the relevance to the debate on the future of our relationship with the EU. Supporters of withdrawal are often labelled by their opponents as retrogressive, locked in the past. If we look at Belgium, a very different picture emerges. After over 180 years, this attempt to weld two peoples into a single post-ethnic state is proving such an abject failure. What chance, therefore, of creating a strong enough sense of identity and community sufficient to merge 28 countries into a single country called Europe?

Never mind the issues about the failures of Schengen. What the tragedy in Brussels has highlighted is the failures of the

Belgian experiment and thus, withdrawal will enable us to escape from the misguided attempt to repeat this experiment on a continental scale.

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