

ment and not to become ministers, the idea being that this will give them a better chance of controlling the critical colleagues in their own parties.

Whether Rutte III will manage to see out a full term is of course difficult to say. For the moment, however, the next national elections in the Netherlands are scheduled for 17 March 2021.

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*Translated by Julian Ross*

## **Brussels, I Love You But You Make Me Cry**

Minister Pascal Smet of Brussels recently learnt a lesson when, in an interview with the European news site Politico, he compared Brussels with a 'whore'. Anyone can gripe about Brussels – and a great deal of it goes on – but do not touch the residents' love for their city. That means a return to 'one for all'.

Of course the minister's comparison was entirely misplaced, but the core of his argument holds. Brussels is a city which simultaneously attracts and repulses. *Brussels, I love you but you make me cry.*

That's something the capital has in common with many capital cities. Talk to a rural Frenchman about Paris and he will mix equal measures of disdain and pride. The social, geographical and cultural gap between town and country is one of the deepest fault lines in western societies. Only now that 'country' occasionally gains the upper hand – take Brexit and Trump, for example – are we acutely aware of it.

Traditionally cities are beacons of freedom and progress. That's why conservative MPs have always viewed them with suspicion. And that's why Belgium in particular maintained an anti-urban spatial planning policy in previous centuries. People were permitted to live anywhere, but preferably not in the big, chaotic city. Besides freedom, the metropolis was also always associated with alienation and dilapidation.

Now Brussels does have a problem. The city really is dilapidated in some places. A fitting symbol is the still new pedestrian zone. From Gothenburg to Seville the trend for car-free city centres has

been a formidable success. In Brussels it is an improvised, filthy mess, and sadly also a choice arena for anyone looking to cause trouble.

Brussels is certainly not the only metropolis in the world where poverty, disadvantage and migration form a brew which sometimes boils over. What is unique is that social disadvantage is located in the old city centre. Brussels has no suburbs. The districts where migrants showed up and settled decades ago are the city centre. Brussels is in that sense less hypocritical than other world cities. Here you cannot avoid confrontation with poverty and multicultural challenges.

Not that that has brought a solution any closer. Brussels has been too monstrously disfigured in an institutional sense for that. The Brussels Capital Region numbers 1.2 million residents and as the capital of Belgium is officially bilingual, with the Dutch-speakers forming a protected minority. It is one of three regions of Belgium and consists of nineteen municipalities, with as many mayors and six police zones.

Not only are there far too many mandates in the region and municipalities for the scarce political talent; the 'powers' also hold one another locked in a desperate standstill. There is movement, but, in the international perspective of urban renaissance, it progresses frustratingly slowly.

Flanders and Wallonia have long taken little notice of all that. Even the people of Brussels often consider this surreal amateurism rather charming and 'quaint'. That is changing. The fact that the labyrinth of Brussels has proven an ideal hiding place for jihadi terrorists has shown many city residents the ugly side of their political improvisation act. Recently scandals of self-enrichment among the many political mandates have been added to the picture. Again, citizens have discovered that there are limits to political permissiveness.

So, who knows, perhaps that double shock will be the kiss this beautiful city needs to awaken her from her deep sleep. Although, to be honest, it is far from clear which prince will emerge from the ballot box in October 2018.

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*Translated by Anna Asbury*