

How did they get away with it?

It could be a nice life running Charleroi, if you didn't have too many scruples. **Peter Philp** examines why officials, prosecutors, even journalists kept silent over the misdeeds of councillors for 30 years

That's how we've always done it." A candid remark by Léon Casaert, former burgomaster of Charleroi and city councillor now under investigation for fraud, sums up what's gone wrong. After 30 years of one-party dominance, the Socialist Party's grip on Wallonia's biggest city is crumbling at last as hardly a week goes by without the 'Chicago of Belgium' featuring in the news with yet another scandal.

Decades of mismanagement have cost the Carolorégiens [Charleroi natives] dear and rebuilding confidence with the new leadership is difficult. But how did

it go on for so long? So deep-rooted is the institutionalised corruption that it continued even after the first scandals surfaced nearly three years ago.

The main reason, according to observers across the board, is the Socialist Party's (PS) lengthy dominance. Since 1977, the PS has regularly won elections with over 50 percent of the vote. "When any party is in power for so long the democratic mechanism that is meant to keep them in check slides," says Pascal Delwit, professor of political science at Brussels Free University (ULB). "The normal procedures and ethics lose footing and the entire establishment veers

off course."

Casaert's comment in the wake of the recent discovery of yet another 'black account', managed by him but not on the books, is a telling example. The old-guard politicians ran their business with impunity and lost sight of normal transparent democratic procedure. Eventually the electorate did wake up to the misdeeds that were being done in its name. The PS share of the Walloon electorate went down from 45 percent to 30 percent between the federal elections in 2003 and 2007, and the party retreated to lick its wounds. The Socialists have not taken part in the negotiations to form



REPORTERS

Steeped in scandal: the 'godfather' of Charleroi politics Jean-Claude Van Cauwenberghe, centre, with indicted ex-Walloon Parliament deputy Jean-Pierre De Clercq (left) and indicted ex-Charleroi Burgomaster Jacques Van Gompel (right)

a new federal government, yet it was only this summer that the party leadership took the step of properly purging the Charleroi council of its entrenched members. This points to a peculiar aspect of Walloon Socialist Party politics.

"The Socialist Party is very fragmented," says Delwit. "Traditionally, a lot of power resides institutionally with the local parties." So while the national party leadership saw its electorate crumble, it had little sway over who went and who remained in Charleroi. At first, some of the worst offenders got away with little more than a slap on the wrist while rabidly clinging to power – until the situation became untenable as the second burgomaster in less than a year fell, accused of corruption.

Another problem is one that most Belgian cities have had to struggle with at some point over the past 30 years. In 1977, more than 2,300 communes were amalgamated into fewer than 600. But local political figures were loath to give up their standing and many larger communes were run as a coalition of fiefs. "It became like a roundtable," says Delwit. "Each councillor was very territorial and there was an absence of overall vision." Many cities, including Charleroi, still suffer from the fragmented politics with each area grabbing as many concessions as it can without regard for the whole.

But what was the judiciary doing? Revelations in 2005 coincided with the arrival of a new crown prosecutor in Charleroi, Christian De Valkeneer. As a Brussels judge in another one-off Charleroi affair during the 1990s, he had had a taste of the goings-on down south. "With him came a change in priorities," says Didier Albin, author of two books on the scandals and a local journalist for 20 years. The previous crown prosecutor, Thierry Marchandise, gave priority to petty crime, a huge problem in Charleroi, and he didn't go after the graft. Because of friendships? "Perhaps," says Albin. "I do question the fact that there wasn't a single investigation or probe into the commune's affairs during his tenure." Albin also notes that De Valkeneer relied on his own initiative and newspaper reports to open investigations. Perhaps tellingly, there were no complaints from official bodies at any level.

So that leaves the fourth estate – the press. "As journalists we sensed that something was up, but we couldn't get our hands on the proof," says Benoît Wattier, a journalist with *Vers l'Avenir Sambre-Meuse*.

One of Wattier's colleagues recalls that

This is summary of the most important of the more than 50 dossiers documenting what are collectively known as Les Affaires of Charleroi.

The housing scandal In September 2005 an audit report of La Carolorégienne, one of the city's five council housing management companies, was leaked by an opposition councillor. Subsequent revelations disclosed widespread corruption. Four prominent old-guard Socialist politicians resigned in disgrace, along with the director. All were charged with offences. The affair brought down the godfather of Charleroi politics and Minister-President of Wallonia Jean-Claude Van Cauwenberghe. As yet, he faces no charges.

Sport subsidies Four months later, investigators started taking an interest in subsidies and sponsorships of local sports clubs by public companies financed by the commune. Illegal transfers, fictitious employees and suspicions of fraud put the burgomaster's head of cabinet behind bars. The charges revolved around his position as president of a first-division female volleyball club. Players' salaries

were paid via the city's parking department. Illegal sponsoring was identified. Another club president was charged for accepting kickbacks on a €550,000 stadium lighting project. The city councillor for sports, already in jail for the housing scandal, and four other public figures faced investigation.

The Wagner affair Industrialist-turned-property mogul Robert Wagner was found to owe €850,000 in European aid after failing to live up to the condition of the grant, namely the creation of jobs. He did not repay the money because, apparently, he was never asked to do so. The procedure was held up for reasons that were unclear. His friendship with Van Cauwenberghe was questioned. His property dealings around the airport were also suspect.

Burying the garbage In 2006 it was disclosed that a local waste disposal company, ICDI, headed by Lucien Cariat, an ex-environment councillor, had fictitious employees and fake minutes of board meetings, among other irregularities. ICDI was found to have illegally treated toxic waste and allowed garbage trucks from abroad to use its facilities.

The dossiers

'We sensed something was up. But we just couldn't get our hands on the proof'

Claude Despiegeleer, a flamboyant and dynamic councillor, now indicted, booked a whole Ryanair flight to Pisa for a press trip. At lunch, on the restaurant terrace, in full view of the journalists, he proceeded to haggle for and buy a suitcase of counterfeit watches from a street vendor, paid for by his secretary and presumably with city funds. The "gifts", as Despiegeleer described them, were seized at the Italian airport, but released by unspecified means.

"Could we have said something earlier? Maybe. Maybe we were manipulated,"

says Wattier. "But there was very little to go on. The damning report that blew the whole thing open was kept secret for three years [see box]. We would never have sat on evidence like that."

Since this summer's purges of Charleroi council, its new leadership, headed by Burgomaster Jean-Jacques Viseur, a Centre Democrat (CDH), is struggling with the resistance that a change of management brings: the school year started with undelivered supplies to local schools; only five of the police force's 16 motorbikes are on the road because of a lack of spare parts; city workers are on anti-depressants; a general strike was only narrowly avoided. "We have to establish a new attitude," says Viseur, talking about the non-delivery of school supplies at a meeting with city workers this month. "People must stop passing the buck and assume responsibility." ■