

5 The Decline and Fall of the Communist Party of Belgium

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INTRODUCTION

With the exception of a short post-war period, after having secured 12.6 per cent of the vote at the 1946 general elections, the *Parti Communiste de Belgique* (PCB) has never occupied a strong position in Belgian politics. Nevertheless, observers acknowledge that the party's real influence, at least until the beginning of the 1980s, exceeded its electoral performances as a result of its involvement in such bodies as the socialist trade union organisation, the *Fédération générale du travail de Belgique* (FGTB). Communist influence was also discernible in certain associative movements such as the Peace Movement (CNAPD).

During the 1980s, however, the PCB suffered a considerable decline in influence. As far as elections are concerned, in the 1985 general elections it lost its entire parliamentary representation. Until then, it still had two deputies and one senator out of a total of 397 parliamentarians in Belgium. In the light of this decline, the events which took place in the communist world in 1989 and 1991 did not so much disrupt as reinforce, or even exacerbate, trends which were already underway in the PCB.

In order to analyse and understand the reaction of the PCB to the events of 1989 and 1991, this chapter will examine:

- the structural reorganisations which took place inside the PCB during the 1980s;
- the distributive curve of electoral results since the mid-1970s;
- the evolution of party membership since the mid-1970s;
- the reasons for the PCB's failure to respond to and adapt to social transformations during the 1970s and 1980s;
- the PCB's position in regard to international matters, notably its silence when faced with the events of 1989, the August 1991 coup and the subsequent disappearance of the Soviet Union;
- internal discussions over the future of the PCB.

THE *PARTI COMMUNISTE DE BELGIQUE* BEFORE 1989

The Evolution of the PCB's Internal Structure

An analysis of the internal structural changes undergone by the PCB prior to 1989 is important for two reasons. On the one hand, it serves to demonstrate the difficulties faced by the party in its attempts to adapt to the evolution of Belgian society. On the other hand, the final stage of 'regionalisation' of the party in 1989 – which led to the creation of a French-speaking and a Dutch-speaking (Flemish) party – was the expression of a desperate attempt by the leadership to take advantage of numerous changes and upheavals taking place throughout the world and bring the PCB's policies and organisational structures up to date.

The PCB was in fact the last Belgian political party represented in Parliament to maintain a national structure. The first modification of its organisation and its functioning took place on the occasion of a Special Congress held in December 1982. Powers which had formerly been attributed to national organs – the Party Congress, Central Committee and Political Bureau – were from this point onwards divided between the national level and the regional or community level, in accordance with Article 15 of the new statutes:

The federal organs of the PCB are competent in all matters of regional and community interest so far as their elaboration and execution are concerned.

National organs of the PCB are competent in regard to:

- (a) all problems concerning the Belgian road to socialism; ...
- (b) all matters which would remain of national interest in a federal state and, more particularly, international policy;
- (c) any questions still to evolve which by virtue of the law remain within the remit of the central government and national parliament; ...
- (d) management of party finances and patrimony as well as the policy of cadres.¹

These changes led to the creation of regional and federal structures – a French-speaking Council and Bureau on the one hand, a Dutch-speaking Council and Bureau on the other – running parallel to the existing national structures. The reforms, which were intended to make up for lost time in regard to regionalisation, in fact resulted in the weighing down of the party's functioning and led to complete paralysis. A state of 'permanent Congress' developed, since members of each of the new organs had to meet in order to renew the PCB's political line and its leadership. Moreover, this attempt at organisational renewal was soon overtaken by the political evolution of the country and by conflicts between competing community interests which appeared and began to multiply inside the PCB. Finally, after numerous discussions which left the party effectively paralysed, the decision was taken in 1989 to create two parties.

For some time, owing to its weakness in terms of both membership and electoral results, the Flemish wing of the PCB resembled a '*groupuscule*' rather than a political party. In fact, the Communist Party had never achieved a breakthrough in Flanders, not even when the PCB's power grew in 1936, nor after the Second World War. By the end of 1986, there were hardly more than 1200 members of the

Flemish party, a number which continued to decline; by 1993, it had fallen to well under 1000. For this reason, the analysis which follows concentrates on the situation in Wallonia and Brussels.

The French-speaking part of the PCB comprises the Brussels and Wallonian 'regional' sections.² Its leading organs are the French-speaking Congress, Council and Bureau. The French-speaking communists are organised into 13 federations of varying importance which, to a large extent, correspond to the electoral districts of the French-speaking provinces of Belgium. Historically, the most important federations are those of Liège, Charleroi, Brussels, and of the Borinage and the Centre. They cover essentially the great traditional industrial centres where the PCB once achieved its best electoral results.

The PCB's Electoral Performance

The 1970s were years of relative national stability for the Belgian communists. It appears that they benefited only marginally from the general improvement in the electoral performance of major West European communist parties at the start of the decade, all of which achieved some important successes and managed partially to renovate their political programmes. In Wallonia, the elections of 1971, 1974, 1977 and 1978 saw the PCB obtain respectively 5.9, 5.8, 5.3 and 5.8 per cent of the vote. In Brussels, in the same elections, it obtained 2.8, 4, 2.7 and 3 per cent. It was from 1981 onwards that a significant contraction in the party's support began to appear. Subsequently, the drop was not just confirmed, but grew worse and became faster, as evidenced in the municipal elections of 1982, the European elections of 1984 and the general elections of 1985 and 1987. As shown in Table 5.1, within the space of ten years the PCB lost more than two-thirds of its electoral support in a relatively consistent fashion across the French-speaking community.

The different types of elections bear witness to the homogeneity and continuity of the communist decline. The collapse in support was particularly important in the old

Table 5.1 PCB performance in municipal, general and European elections, 1976–88

Municipal Elections

<i>Region</i>	<i>1976 (%)</i>	<i>1982 (%)</i>	<i>1988 (%)</i>
BRABANT			
Bruxelles	3.53	1.53	0.85
Anderlecht	3.57	1.78	0.66
Boitsfort	4.43	2.01	1.77
HAINAUT			
Charleroi	4.41	3.82	2.44
Courcelles	13.65	11.12	15.16
Mons	14.04	6.56	2.04
Dour	10.43	3.55	–
La Louvière	7.89	7.42	4.27
Tournai	16.29	7.31	6.21
Mouscron	10.29	3.26	–
Rumes	16.37	10.88	6.34
LIÈGE			
Liège	5.78	4.43	3.04
Seraing	12.16	8.39	5.20
Trooz	12.73	11.98	9.95
Herstal	7.71	5.16	2.71
NAMUR			
Namur	1.76	1.33	0.58

General Elections

<i>Districts</i>	<i>1978 (%)</i>	<i>1981 (%)</i>	<i>1985 (%)</i>	<i>1987 (%)</i>
Bruxelles	2.80	1.95	1.00	0.80
Hainaut	8.71	6.30	3.64	2.40
Namur	2.42	2.18	1.14	0.50
Liège	5.65	4.10	2.62	1.80

Table 5.1 continued

European Elections		
<i>Districts</i>	<i>1979</i> %	<i>1984</i> %
Brabant	2.10	0.85
Hainaut	7.70	4.31
Namur	2.80	1.43
Liège	5.40	3.02
Luxembourg	2.70	1.23
French Community	5.07	2.75

industrial centres (based on metallurgy, iron and steel, mining, textiles) such as Liège and Hainaut. In the province of Hainaut, the PCB lost three-quarters of its electorate within nine years. This fall was even more clearly shown in the results of municipal elections, which revealed the loss of credit of its local militants.

In Mons, one of the main cities in Wallonia, the PCB vote fell from 14.04 per cent to 2.04 per cent between 1976 and 1988. Over the same period in Dour, an old workers' town, the PCB went from recording 10.43 per cent of the vote to being unable even to present a list of candidates. In Mouscron, an industrial centre in western Hainaut, the party similarly went from receiving 10.29 per cent of the vote in 1976 to being unable to present candidates in 1988. However, thanks to some long-established local personalities, the PCB was able to put up some resistance in certain places like Courcelles, Le Roeux and Quaregnon.³

The province of Liège registered equally impressive losses. In Seraing and Herstal, two of the main industrial towns where communist presence had a long history, the PCB vote fell from 12.6 per cent to 5.2 per cent and 7.71 per cent to 2.71 per cent respectively between 1976 and 1988. Again,

the influence of a few individuals led to better results in some areas, such as Trooz. However, in the province of Namur and the district of Brussels, the results of the 1988 municipal elections fell below the threshold of electoral credibility, even in places like Anderlecht and the city of Brussels, where communists had been elected in 1976.

The Evolution of PCB Membership since 1975

The evolution of the membership of a political party is obviously an important indicator of its state of health, all the more so for a party which bases – or is theoretically supposed to base – its actions on grounds other than electoral performance. Besides, for parties of the left, membership constitutes a basic index in that the relationship between supporters and electors is generally more stable than in other parties.

According to estimations based on our research, the membership of the PCB in 1975 amounted to somewhat less than 6000. Taking 1975 as a base, it can be seen that within a period of thirteen years the PCB lost at least half its membership. With the exception of the turning-point of 1982–3, when the party lost 11 per cent of its members, the overall fall took place in a regular and continuous fashion. Consequently, by 1988 there remained about 2500 members in Wallonia and 500 in Brussels. By 1993, combined membership in Wallonia and Brussels had fallen to under 2000, with a pronounced collapse evident in the Brussels Federation.

An analysis of the age structure of party members is also very revealing. In 1987, the PCB conducted an internal study of the Walloon federations. Breaking down percentages by age-groups of five years revealed various aspects which require emphasis (see Table 5.2). First, the average age of PCB members is notably high. If the middle of each five-year age group is taken as the mean, then the overall average age of PCB members in Wallonia in 1987 was 51. Secondly, if age-groups are distributed by ten-year intervals, rather than

Table 5.2 Age distribution of PCB members in Wallonia, 1987

<i>Age group</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
20 years and less	1.1
21–25 years	3.3
26–30 years	6.0
31–35 years	8.9
36–40 years	12.0
41–45 years	8.7
46–50 years	7.6
51–55 years	8.7
56–60 years	11.1
61–65 years	10.9
66–70 years	6.2
over 71 years	14.8

five, then just 1.1 per cent of members are 20 years of age or less, whilst 9.3 per cent fall into the 21–30 age group, 20.9 per cent into the 31–40 group, 16.38 per cent into the 41–50 group, 19.8 per cent into the 51–60 group, 17.1 per cent into the 61–70 group, 9.8 per cent into the 71–80 group, and finally 5 per cent are in the 81–90 age group. The very low percentage of those under the age of 30 (10.4 per cent), together with the overall high average age, indicates a failure of membership renewal and highlights the problems of survival faced by the PCB even in the short term.

The PCB's Responses to Social Changes

Historically, the Belgian Communist Party took root mainly in the Walloon coal basins, which were densely populated by industrial workers, and in certain branches of the tertiary sector in Brussels. The economic crises which emerged in the 1970s severely hit these regions and devastated whole industrial sectors, such as iron and steel works,

metallurgy, and mining. It was precisely in these sectors that the communists were best integrated. In addition to industrial decline, the actual organisation of work was subject to important changes. New working principles were developed on the basis of greater responsibility being given to the holders of specific posts. Furthermore, the very conception of the roles assumed by workers changed.

All these changes exerted a strong influence on the nature of class consciousness amongst the workforce. Indeed, within the space of a few years, the PCB lost its classical frame of reference. In common with a large part of the European labour movement, the PCB underestimated the scale and consequences of the economic, social and cultural transformations that were taking place. As demonstrated by its electoral results and fall in membership, the PCB failed to take into account the new realities which followed upon these developments. An analysis of the socio-professional origins of the party's membership provides further evidence of the ever-widening gap between the PCB's policies and changes in Belgian society. Ultimately, the PCB appeared unable to offer any response to these complex developments.

The results we have calculated must be interpreted with a certain amount of caution. In the first place, the occupational categorisation does not take into account the age of members. Consequently, we do not know whether the party members who were interviewed were still active at the time of the inquiry. Given the age profile of PCB members, this element should not be neglected as the source of potential distortions to certain of our extrapolations. A second warning should be added: the totals were obtained from information given by members on their membership counter-foil, which lists nine options. This may have led to certain inconsistencies, such as in cases where party members have had several different professions.

Even given these reservations, the massive representation of private-sector [blue-collar, manual] workers is a clearly established fact. Half of the Walloon members of the PCB (49.6 per cent) belong to this category. If public-sector

workers, who amount to about 10 per cent, are added, then the total of [blue-collar, manual] workers reaches 60 per cent. This over-representation highlights the under-representation of other sectors, in particular professional employees (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3 Socio-professional origins of PCB members in Wallonia

Private-sector employees	11.7%
Public-sector employees	10.0%
Teaching profession	6.7%
Para-medical profession	2.3%
Culture industry personnel	2.0%
Students	1.8%
Free professions	6.3%

Table 5.4 General election results since 1954

	<i>National</i>	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>Brussels</i>
1954	3.6	1.5	6.8	3.7
1958	1.9	1.0	4.5	2.7
1961	3.1	1.0	6.5	3.6
1965	4.6	1.7	9.8	4.1
1968	3.3	1.4	7.0	2.4
1971	3.1	1.6	5.9	2.8
1974	3.2	1.6	5.8	4.0
1977	2.7	1.0	5.3	2.7
1978	3.2	1.9	5.8	3.0
1981	2.3	1.3	4.2	2.1
1985	1.1	0.5	2.5	1.2
1987	0.9	0.5	1.6	1.0
1991	—	—	—	—

POLITICAL CHOICES AND THE DECLINE OF BELGIAN COMMUNISM

The downward curve of electoral results and the collapse of membership not only contributed to the crisis of the Belgian Communist Party, but also revealed the extent of the crisis. There are various objective factors, external to the party's organisation, which contributed to the PCB's decline: far-reaching socio-economic transformations which led to the effective disappearance of the working class as a class, and thereby deprived the party of its main source of electoral support; the large-scale settlement in the Brussels region of a Maghrebine population which showed little interest in the slogans and activities of the Communist Party; the increasingly negative image associated with the Soviet Union from 1975 onwards; new international tensions following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan; and, finally, parallel crises in other Communist Parties in Western Europe which had a knock-on effect on the PCB.

Nevertheless, these factors cannot in themselves provide a full explanation of the PCB's collapse. Instead, emphasis must be placed on the essential role of political choices made by the party leadership. The most significant characteristic of the PCB's political practice has, undoubtedly, been the search for consensus and compromise between supporters of different political lines. The leadership kept manoeuvring under pressure from a strong pro-Soviet minority, only to end up paralysed by its internal divisions and personal quarrels which became all the more difficult to manage in that they revolved around a small number of people. Besides its impact on the whole organisation, the permanent search for compromise blocked the emergence of new leaders who might have been more sensitive to the claims of the new social classes. It is indicative that the PCB's president, Louis Van Geyt – a centrist upholder of consensus – assumed the party leadership in 1973 and remained in post into the early 1990s.

In regard to the PCB's political line, a permanent discrepancy existed between, on the one hand, ringing resolutions with an accent on innovation, and highly traditional practice on the other. Thus, in the matter of relations with the CPSU and the international communist movement, the Belgian communists often distanced themselves from Soviet policy during the great 'affairs' which shook the communist world, condemning, for example, the intervention of Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia, the trials against intellectuals in the USSR, the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet army, and the 'coup' in Poland. But the forms taken by these condemnations were compromises from the outset, difficult to achieve and reflective of the party's internal equilibria.

In August 1968 the PCB sent an open letter to the Communist Parties which had participated in the intervention in Prague. In it, the PCB declared that it was 'not able to approve the military intervention ... and underscores that in the present case [the intervening forces] have acted in such a way as to give the impression that the political changes which would enable the achievement of disarmament and the dismantling of military blocs cannot be made'.⁴ After the 'Moscow accord', the Liège deputy, Marcel Levaux, reiterated 'to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia the solidarity of the Belgian communists with the normalisation [*sic*] of the situation and, more particularly, with the withdrawal of troops, and with the development and consolidation of socialist democracy and the defeat of reactionary forces'.⁵ The term 'normalisation' was a most unhappy one given the connotation it was later to acquire. However, its use was not due to chance. Levaux represented the pro-Soviet tendency in the PCB and felt it necessary to evoke the 'reactionary forces' which political observers were still seeking among the main actors of the Czech drama more than twenty years after the Prague events.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Belgian communists were more cautious and offered an official reaction only on 7 January 1980, more than ten days after

the first entry of Soviet troops. Moreover, the whole communiqué has to be read in order to discover the PCB's reprobation, wrapped up in attacks on the United States:

after having inspired the NATO decision on the implementation of strategic missiles in Europe, the USA and some of its allies have found a pretext in the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan to give a new impulse to their Cold War policy.... The Communist Party of Belgium proclaims its solidarity with Afghan progressive forces [*sic*] which are struggling to free their country from underdevelopment and to ensure its stability in the context of full independence and national sovereignty..... It regrets that the Soviet Union has deemed it necessary to intervene in the internal affairs of the country up to the point of bringing into action an expeditionary corps.⁶

The formulae used were so tepid that they provoked internal polemics within the PCB. Step by step, however, the party began to show a more critical attitude towards the Soviet policy in Afghanistan, although it simultaneously refused to support any resistance movement.

Disapproval of the coup in Poland was more outright: 'the recourse to military power established in Poland on Sunday and the draconian measures it has taken are considered by the PCB as being incompatible with socialism in an advanced country. Consequently, the Political Bureau expresses its disapproval. It stresses the necessity of resuming urgently dialogue with *Solidarity* and the removal on both sides of all obstacles to such dialogue'.⁷ The equivalence of 'both sides' provoked some internal discussions in the PCB, but the party's condemnation remained unequivocal.

In spite of slight differences, these three examples show that the positions adopted by the PCB have always involved the condemnation of repressive policies in the countries of Eastern Europe. However, 'regrets', 'disapproval' and 'condemnation' were never adopted as positions on more than just an occasional basis. In the course of debates over Soviet policy, the key concept which was repeatedly referred to was

'critical solidarity'. Whether the first or second term of this expression carried greater weight depended on the partner in discussions. It should be added that such discussions, as well as the compromises reached, never fully penetrated the PCB rank and file, large parts of which remained blindly devoted to the USSR.

The analyses performed before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power implied that the USSR, in spite of all its duly denounced defects, was always seen by the party leadership and members as an indispensable counterweight to American imperialism. The PCB always refused to put both blocs on the same level, since they were regarded as being of a different nature. This kind of analysis left the persistent impression that, in spite of efforts to mark a distance, the PCB remained quite obliging towards Moscow. At any rate, positions taken on international relations were characterised by extreme caution, which made them look more and more like the diplomatic statements of a chancellery than the resolutions of a revolutionary party. Moreover, no thoroughgoing study was ever devoted to the nature of the socialist countries. The leadership preferred to avoid themes which could generate tensions inside the party.

Following the 1981 general elections, there could be no denying the crisis within the PCB. An open discussion began in the party newspaper, *Le Drapeau Rouge*, between what could be seen in somewhat schematic terms as two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, there were supporters of an 'ouvriériste' pro-Soviet line, in favour of Communist Party activity in factories. They were concerned primarily with issues of organisation and structure (democratic centralism, meetings of sections and cells, etc.), the functioning of the party as a whole and ways to improve it, and solidarity with the socialist countries. The Liège and Charleroi federations fell into this category. On the other hand, there were supporters of an autonomous policy towards Moscow being adopted, together with a new political practice oriented towards participation in the new social movements. Such an approach was favoured most clearly in Brussels and in the Flemish wing of the PCB.

Throughout the 1980s, the two opposing trends co-existed without either being able to establish a clear advantage. Even after the disappearance of the PCB from parliamentary life in 1985, and after the upheavals which occurred in the USSR that year and in Eastern Europe in 1989, the Belgian communists remained unable to escape the paralysing organisational logic within which they were caught. Only the theoretical review, *Cahiers Marxistes*, belatedly and rather timidly attempted to launch a debate. The Brussels federation and the Communist Youth also tried to move the party's positions towards greater critical independence from the socialist countries and sought a renovation in the PCB's political line. However, they were able to gain only minor concessions. Many militants seeking to reform the party from within were discouraged by the inertia of the leadership. Internal divergences consequently grew and intensified as it became more apparent that the Soviet bloc was suffering from severe sclerosis. It appeared by the mid-1980s that the PCB was in full social, political and electoral decline.

FROM GORBACHEV TO THE EVENTS OF 1989

The state of advanced decay in the PCB which preceded Gorbachev's coming to power explains to a large extent the party's silence and lack of reaction to the earthquake which *glasnost* and *perestroika* represented for the communist world. In fact, for the PCB it was already too late to expect any benefit from a 'Gorbachev effect' or to see, as occurred in other communist parties, an acceleration of transformations which had begun to take place.

The coming to power of Gorbachev hardly altered the course of events in the PCB. In spite of openly proclaimed support for the new secretary-general of the CPSU, and the 'justified' criticism of past errors, the PCB leadership felt no need to formulate any analysis which questioned its own past positions. Nevertheless, Soviet foreign policy

became subject to such turnarounds that even those parties which had been 'critical' of the Brezhnev policy rapidly came to appear timid and even complacent when compared with the new positions being adopted by the CPSU. Once again in Communist Party history, major changes were initiated from Moscow.⁸

The Belgian leadership systematically expressed its satisfaction at the new Soviet initiatives and adopted them as its own, but without enacting any deep modifications in its political line or submitting its own past policies to critical examination. A complete silence was maintained on the numerous modifications entailed by the transformations in Soviet foreign policy.

Indeed, remaining silent was the main characteristic of the approach adopted by the Belgian communists during the events of 1989. The party carried on functioning 'normally'. This silence can be explained in the following terms. As has already been noted, the party's moribund state made it impossible to assemble a sufficiently large number of militants and diffuse the new slogans. Moreover, astonishment at the 1989 events was so great that it left many communists speechless. At the leadership level, to have underscored the revised analyses of the past would have necessitated a profound questioning of its own political actions and responsibilities – two practices which were rather unusual in the communist world. Many 'reformers' amongst the PCB membership were so disgusted at the leadership's 'conservatism' that they left the party.

At a moment when the entire basis of the communist world was being shaken and many leaders were being replaced, there was nobody in the PCB able to embody a credible leadership which might take up the torch. For all concerned, the easiest course of action consisted in carrying on as if nothing had happened. In November 1989, for instance, the PCB leadership decided to send an observer to the 14th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party, in spite of the contrary advice of a very strong minority. Its report contained no concessions:

The 14th Congress certainly has the right to adopt a triumphalist tone. However, we have no alternative but to record that in so doing it has been forced to sacrifice an essential aspect: its credibility. Indeed, how can we avoid being struck by the differences between the speeches which were given ... highly praising the merits of 'multilaterally developed socialism' and the trivial concrete reality experienced by the population which we can observe daily in shops and markets?⁹

Even when faced by the Ceaucescu regime, which was criticised privately by a number of leaders, the PCB leadership refused to break off relations with the Romanian Communist Party. For several years, the PCB president, Louis Van Geyt, refused to answer Ceaucescu's repeated invitations, but in the interests of diplomacy and in order not to create waves, the Political Bureau decided to send one observer. This most cautious diplomacy, which was often criticised within the party, was quite typical. Of course, these political gestures remained invisible to the outside world on account of the PCB's considerably reduced importance in Belgian politics.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the PCB held a Conference in March 1990 and a Congress in November of the same year. On neither occasion did it confront openly the changes taking place in the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the peoples' democracies. Surprisingly, the 1990 Congress resolution asserted that 'the critical and collective analysis of the history of real [*sic*] socialism and of our attitudes towards it will have to be pursued [*sic*] in the party organisation'.¹⁰ Meanwhile, preparatory discussions for the March 1990 Conference revealed that the division between the two dominant trends in the party had been exacerbated and, for the first time, two different resolutions were presented to delegates. However, after two days of arduous discussions and negotiations, only one document was finally submitted to the Congress. This was another typical example of the famous '*compromis à la belge*'.

The content of the approved document was, to the say the least, rather fuzzy and it contained no specific commitments. In order not to displease anyone, it expressed as many grounds for satisfaction as for dissatisfaction. On the one hand, the document acknowledged that communist parties in their traditional form had ceased to exist and that their functioning – as classically defined by the principle of democratic centralism – had to be revised according to a new scheme of self-governing pluralism. On the other hand, however, the concrete implications of this analysis were never specified. The chapter on elections was similarly ambiguous, and left much room for interpretation: ‘It is certainly essential to maintain a presence in the electoral field (through political campaigns, by depositing party lists, by means of cartels and more lasting alliances, or through other appropriate forms), but it is still more important to endeavour to help citizens and workers to take their destiny into their own hands’.¹¹

Nevertheless, the March 1990 conference granted certain federations the right to pursue the establishment of ‘Red/Green’ fora. This initiative resulted from the efforts of Brussels militants to start a dialogue and, eventually, to conclude an electoral alliance with the ecology movement. However, the Green Party – faithful to its logic of ‘neither left nor right’ – refused any collaboration with a decaying party. Brussels communists decided, in response, to attempt to group together a range of militants involved in various associative movements, as well as individuals disappointed by traditional left-wing organisations. In spite of these efforts, though, the Red/Green Forum was unable to escape its own ghetto and failed to attract militants from new horizons. Instead, the Red/Green Forum appeared to be little more than a club for thinking and reflection.

Another original initiative entailed the transformation of the PCB daily newspaper, *Le Drapeau Rouge*. On 1 January 1991 it adopted the less overtly militant title of *Libertés*, intended to reflect the new pluralist approach of the left. However, the real extent of the change was open to doubt,

since the editorial staff remained unchanged and the paper continued to be financed by the Communist Party and housed in their building. In fact, the experiment came to an end after just a few months. Faced with serious financial problems, the PCB decided to withdraw help for the new paper, even though it had begun to establish a basis of support which extended beyond the boundaries of the communist family. Subsequently, in December 1992, the PCB began to publish a new monthly review, *Avancées*, intended to open channels towards other progressive forces, but which failed to establish a readership of more than a thousand in the French-speaking part of the country. A new weekly, *Makrant*, was also launched in Dutch-speaking Belgium, but with a membership of no more than 150 the Flemish party had by then effectively ceased to exist.

In regard to the PCB's name, no debate ever really took place. In contrast to other communist parties (such as the Italian, British, Finnish and Swedish examples), and in spite of its being reduced to a very small group, the Belgian party decided to remain 'communist'. This decision was more than merely symbolic. The discrepancy between the manifest symptoms of an existential crisis within the PCB and the timidity of the choices it made, as well as the resolutions it adopted, offered a highly significant pointer to the likely future of the Belgian communists.

REACTIONS TO THE AUGUST 1991 COUP IN THE SOVIET UNION

The Belgian Communist Party reacted in two stages to the events which occurred in Moscow on 19 August 1991. The Bureau of the Union of Belgian Communists offered its initial response on 20 August, prior to the end of the attempted putsch, when it declared:

The Belgian communists fully share the emotions and anxieties felt by all democratic and progressive opinion

.... It is not by putting recent freedoms and political pluralism into parenthesis, nor by restoring censorship, ... that the new self-proclaimed leadership of the USSR will solve the economic and social problems which *perestroika* was unable to bring to an end.¹²

The lack of any explicit condemnation of the coup attempt (which was never even described in such terms) was striking. In addition, the communiqué offered no support for the restoration of Gorbachev to power. A second communiqué, dated 2 September, made explicit mention of the 'coup', and offered the judgement that

through the implication of essential sectors of its apparatus in the failed coup, the CPSU has ultimately demonstrated its inability to participate in the profound democratic changes which are desired by the Soviet Union's people.¹³

For the Belgian communists, the events of August 1991 carried numerous implications for left-wing political organisations. Primarily, the conditions under which progressive forces would be able to develop their ideas and their strategies for action were profoundly modified, and future progress would require a rapid and lucid response. The shock caused by the attempted coup and by the indictment of the CPSU induced at least the most open section of the PCB, the Regional Bureau of the Brussels Federation, to reflect on the party's past errors of analysis. The Brussels Federation, which for years had been the most innovative section of the PCB, issued a document which argued that whereas numerous members believed that historical 'cousinship' with the international communist movement was a burden, very few were really free of it. The document set out four main errors of analysis committed 'even by the most critical amongst us':

- A. The surplus produced in eastern bloc countries has been seized upon by the Nomenklatura.... We should

have discerned more clearly that it indeed constituted society's most dominant and exploitative pole.

- B. ... We have not understood concretely the real social impact of dissidence, nor its links (even paradoxical ones) with part of the Nomenklatura (technocratic, modernist), nor the mass support enjoyed by a good number of dissidents.
- C. By falling back on 'our' democratic way to socialism we have either implicitly or explicitly considered that, if democracy did not exist in eastern bloc countries, then this was the result of their particular history, which was different from ours. Except on a few points, it was estimated that this [democratic way] was neither a priority nor a necessity for an underdeveloped country.
- D. ... We have not understood that the identification of the party with the state has deprived the party of any meaning and turned it into a caste of thrusters and parvenus (if not mafiosi). What we must understand today is that the dissolution of this state-gadget is the necessary condition for the emergence of real parties, of pluralism and of democracy ...¹⁴

Although this document expressed the sharpest criticism ever formulated by Belgian communist leaders, it remained isolated within the party and found little echo in the media.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

As far as elections are concerned, the PCB has continued its long and slow agony. At the European elections of 1989, following a tight vote at the Brussels Congress, the Communist Party decided not to present a list of candidates. In Brussels, several leading PCB figures called on electors to vote for Raymonde Dury, head of the Socialist list. In Wallonia,

Communists campaigned in favour of the Socialist candidate, José Happart, who represented the tough regionalist option. At the general elections of November 1991, most PCB federations decided not to put forward candidates. Only a few Walloon federations presented candidates in the districts of Mons, Charleroi, Soignies and Thuin. This amounted to what a preparatory document issued by the party called a 'strategy with variable geometry'. In reality, however, such a designation represented an attempt to conceal the profound divisions of opinion which still existed in the heart of the PCB over its future. Moreover, the same document admitted that 'another central question is whether at the present stage of our reflections we are together able to elaborate ... programmatic statements'.¹⁵

The few lists of candidates which were presented at the elections obtained results which varied between 1 and 1.5 per cent of the vote. In the entire French-speaking part of the country, the PCB obtained 5713 votes, a figure which is difficult to compare meaningfully with the 51,046 votes obtained in 1987 because of the very small number of lists presented.

Thus, it appears that with the disappearance of the USSR and also of its financial support, the PCB had reached a state of clinical death. Nothing appeared able to save it from disappearing completely. The little real estate which remained as part of its patrimony was likely to enable it to fulfil its social obligations towards its last remunerated permanent officials. However, without any short-term or long-term objectives, deprived of financial support, and emptied of all substance, the French-speaking wing of the PCB seemed to lack even the power to dissolve itself and sponsor the birth of an alternative political movement. Indeed, it is difficult to see what new arguments could have induced the last remaining die-hards to bring their struggle to an end, which implied that the PCB's death agony could be protracted.

On the other hand, the Brussels Federation did attempt – albeit without much success – to open itself to ecologists and other associative movements. Its Regional Bureau expressed the opinion that it should transform itself 'into

something like a political foundation which, without any sense of shame, assumes its political references and first and foremost uses all available means to support projects aimed at reconstructing a force and a movement which carried ideals which were scoffed at, but which were and remain ours'.¹⁶

By early 1993, the PCB encountered difficulties in even organising a party conference. The preparation of the May 1993 Conference in Brussels, the first to be held since November 1990, was severely hindered by the party's effective collapse: some federations were not prepared to participate in what amounted to little more than a simulacrum. However, the conference did take place. Remarkably, in a short introductory report, three of its four pages were devoted to analysing the crisis of capitalism.¹⁷ The conference concluded by calling for continued 'critical analysis' and consolidation of the party, in line with the direction established at the 1990 Conference (see Table 5.5).

Only the Brussels Federation sent a resolution calling for the Communist Party to be dissolved and proposing the foundation of a new, more loosely organised, structure. The idea behind the new structure would be to help participate in the reconstruction of the left in Belgium by fostering a

Table 5.5 Members of the Political Bureau, 1993

Pierre Beauvois (Centre), President. 48-year-old civil engineer.
Michel Godard (Brussels), 46-year-old civil servant and director of the theoretical review <i>Les cahiers marxistes</i> .
Robert Houtain (Ourthe Amblève), 53-year-old teacher.
Pierre Lisens (Liège), 44-year-old technician.
Maurige Magis (Charleroi), 44-year-old director of the monthly review <i>Avancées</i> .
Jules Pirlot (Liège), 44-year-old teacher.
Jean-Claude Raillon (Charleroi), 48-year-old teacher.
Jean-Marie Simon (Borinage), 46-year-old professional.

Table 5.6 *Parties of the left*

In addition to the Communist Party, there are two other parties of the left in Belgium:

Parti ouvrier socialiste (Socialist Workers' Party, POS-SAP), a Trotskyist party which is a member of the Fourth International. Publishes a bi-monthly review, *La gauche*.

Parti du travail de Belgique (Belgian Labour Party, PTB-PvdA), a Maoist party. Publishes a weekly review, *Solidaire*.

new political culture, creating new networks, and developing and renewing Marxist analysis through *Les cahiers marxistes*, a theoretical review which had been closed to the PCB in the past.¹⁸

Meanwhile, pitched into a profound debate about the very future of their party, the Flemish communists appeared torn between straightforward dissolution and a 'transformation into an open political organisation with a Marxist imprint which, together with other progressive forces, will seek to elaborate an alternative policy and red-green movement' (see Table 5.6).¹⁹

CONCLUSIONS

It is obvious, after examining its electoral results and data on its internal functioning, that the PCB has been in deep crisis since the early 1980s. From its foundation, the PCB sought to articulate its action around certain poles of influence in Belgian society – notably, the great Walloon bastions of heavy industry which lay at the heart of Belgium's industrial growth and development. Since 1945, these political and trade union fiefdoms of the labour movement – mainly located in the regions of Hainaut and

Liège – have been in a slow decline which accelerated from the mid-1970s onwards until by the early 1990s they had almost disappeared.

The Communist Party sought to establish its influence in these sectors through both political and trade union activity. Faced by the accelerated decline of these traditional industrial sectors, the PCB was unable to provide any solution: the social basis upon which its influence was based effectively collapsed. The sharp fall in the party's membership (over 50 per cent in 15 years) reflects two key factors: the occupational background of its militants was strongly linked to the traditional blue-collar working class, with little penetration of the emerging professional classes, and the party's age profile was sharply skewed towards older members. The PCB's failure to make inroads into emerging social classes and its absence from new fields of political struggle was patently obvious.

However, these external factors are insufficient on their own to explain the parlous state of the PCB in the early 1990s. The party's consensual practice in internal as well as international politics led it into a state of permanent caution in regard to its political orientations. Balanced between a more '*ouvriériste*' and pro-Soviet trend and a younger, more 'intellectual' current, the PCB refused to commit itself to the stances of either group. Neither the 1989 revolutions nor the events of August 1991 challenged the logic of this position. On the contrary, the PCB refused to initiate a genuine debate on the social and political nature of these events or on its own position in response to them. This new failure to respond to events represented perhaps the party's final opportunity, although by the time the 1989 events took place it was probably already too late to rescue the PCB. The absence of any reaction to the upheavals in Eastern Europe, together with a lack of renewal of its membership, led it down the road of slow disintegration, which took place in an atmosphere of complete indifference. By the early 1990s, virtually no one in Belgium knew or cared about the Communist Party.

NOTES

1. *Statuts du parti communiste de Belgique*, text adopted by the second session of the 24th Congress of the PCB, Brussels, 18 December 1982, p. 15.
2. The case of Brussels poses problems not just in regard to the PCB, but for the whole of Belgium. Brussels is the only bi-communal region in Belgium, and in consequence presents a difficult problem for a party which seeks to maintain a national leadership. To simplify matters, it should be remembered that the Brussels Federation intervenes simultaneously as a French-speaking component in the French-speaking federal organs, as a Dutch-speaking component in the Flemish federal organs, and as a region in its own right on all questions referring to the regions and regionalisation.
3. It should be stressed that these more favourable results often took place as a consequence of electoral alliances which were sometimes of a surprising nature. In Quaregnon in 1988 an alliance was set up between the PCB, the Liberal Party, and the Christian Democrats with the intention of overthrowing the Socialists' absolute majority.
4. 'Lettre ouverte du parti communiste de Belgique aux partis communistes URSS, de Bulgarie, de Hongrie, de Pologne, et de RDA', *Le Drapeau Rouge*, 23 August 1968.
5. Marcel Levaux, 'D'un mal peut sortir un bien?', *Le Drapeau Rouge*, 30 August 1968.
6. 'Communiqué de bureau politique', *Le Drapeau Rouge*, 8 January 1980.
7. 'Pologne: nette désapprobation du parti communiste de Belgique', *Le Drapeau Rouge*, 18 December 1981.
8. See José Gotovitch, Pascal Delwit and Jean-Michel De Waele, *L'Europe des communistes* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1992).
9. Hubert Cambier, 'Souveraine... la Roumanie choisit l'isolement', *Le Drapeau Rouge*, 28 November 1989.
10. 'Quatrième Congrès du parti communiste, Montignies sur Sambre, 3-4 Novembre 1990', *Faits et arguments*, 95 (December 1990), p. 7.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
12. *Avancées démocratiques* (Communist Party bi-monthly periodical), no. 98 (September 1991), p. 15.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
14. PCB document, November 1991, pp. 2-3.
15. *Questions pour la campagne électorale*, Brussels, 8 July 1991.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
17. 'Note introductive', *Conférence francophone du 15 mai 1993 du parti communiste* (Brussels, 1993).
18. *Communication de la régionale de Bruxelles du PCB à la Conférence du 15 mai 1993* (Brussels, 1993).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 4.