

The Royal Question. - Continuation of the Cabinet Crisis. - MM. Devèze and Van Zeeland fail to form Government. - King Leopold's Proposal for Temporary Delegation of Royal Prerogatives to Prince Baudouin after Return to Belgium. - Socialist Insistence on King Leopold's Departure from Belgium after Transfer of Prerogatives. - Breakdown of Inter-Party Negotiations. - Dissolution of the Belgian Parliament. - General Elections called for June 4.

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Consequent on the resignation of the Eyskens Cabinet after the referendum of March 12 on King Leopold's return, and the inability of M. Eyskens and Count Carton de Wiart to form a new administration (see [10509](#) A), M. Albert Devèze (Liberal), Deputy-Premier and Defence Minister in the outgoing Cabinet, was commissioned on March 26 by the Regent (Prince Charles) with the task of forming a new Cabinet. M. Devèze was, however, similarly unsuccessful in his attempts to form a coalition of the three major parties—the Christians Socials (Catholics), Socialists, and Liberals—and, after a visit to King Leopold at Prégny (Switzerland) on April 8, relinquished the attempt to form a new Government. A *communiqué* issued at Prégny after M. Devèze's talks with the King stated merely that King Leopold had "confirmed his position as stated in his broadcast of March 16"—i.e., that the King would abide by the decision of the Belgian Parliament as to his resumption or relinquishment of his royal prerogatives.

M. Van Zeeland (Christian Social), the Foreign Minister, accepted on April 5 the Prince Regent's request to form a Cabinet, and, like M. Devèze, commenced consultations with the major parties. He was, however, unsuccessful in persuading the Liberals to enter a coalition, and accordingly announced on April 7 his intention of forming a predominantly Christian Social Cabinet with the anticipated support of a few independent Liberals. The previous day (April 6) a joint meeting of Liberal Senators and deputies had adopted a resolution, by 84 votes to nine with one abstention, affirming that the Liberal Party would not join or support "any Government that attempts to solve the royal question in a spirit of discord," and declaring that such a Government would be "backed only by a weak majority without the support of public opinion." On April 8 M. Van Zeeland declared that "trivial difficulties"—of which he gave no details—were preventing him from announcing the composition of his projected Ministry.

The determination of the Socialist Party to take the strongest action against any possibility of King Leopold's return was reaffirmed at an extraordinary session of the party's national congress on April 10. M. Spang, who before the meeting had conferred with King Leopold's secretary (M. Pirenne, then in Brussels), declared that the Socialist Party would fight "without respite or mercy" against any Government that was resolved to bring King Leopold back to the throne, and that in such an eventuality it would call on the workers to strike

and organize civil resistance throughout the country; after declaring that King Leopold's return might plunge the country into a relentless and merciless struggle of several years' duration, he emphasized that it was the "imperative duty" of the Socialist Party to examine every possibility of conciliation before it was "reluctantly forced into a showdown of strength." The meeting adopted a resolution reaffirming the party's previously expressed opposition to the King's return, and calling on all sections of the Socialist movement to "enter into the struggle at an opportune moment if a struggle is forced on us."

After further abortive inter-party negotiations on April 11-12, M. Van Zeeland visited Prégny on April 13-14 for audiences with King Leopold in response to what he described as an "urgent summons." On April 15, after M. Van Zeeland's return to Brussels, the Belgian radio broadcast a recording of a speech made at Prégny by King Leopold wherein the latter offered, as a compromise solution of the "royal question," to delegate his powers temporarily to his eldest son, Crown Prince Baudouin, prior to his return to the throne.

After declaring that it would be his constitutional duty to resume the exercise of his royal prerogatives if called upon to do so by the Belgian Parliament, the King pointed out that in many constitutional monarchies, notably in Holland and the Scandinavian countries, it was legally possible for the (Sovereign, in certain circumstances, to delegate his powers temporarily to the Crown Prince, and added; "The adoption by Parliament of an Analogous measure would permit me temporarily to delegate my prerogatives to the Crown Prince, and to terminate these delegated power, with the consent of the Government, at A moment which I deem commonsurate With the interests of the nation. It would obviously to necessary that this gesture should be accepted with confidence by the great majority of public opinion. I should furthermore seek assurances that such a delegation of power would take place in a peaceful atmosphere and with the loyal support of all political groups who are concerned to safeguard our traditional institutions."

The executive committees of the Christian Social, Liberal, and Socialist parties met in joint conference on April 20-21 to consider King Leopold's proposal. Whilst general agreement was reached in principle on a compromise proposal whereby the King would return from exile and then temporarily delegate his powers to Prince Baudouin, the Socialists insisted that the King, after the delegation of powers to his son, should reside outside Belgium, whilst the Christian Socials rejected this demand as implying the implicit banishment of the King from the country. The Christian Social executive, approved on April 21 a tentative agreement, subject to the approval of the Liberal and Socialist parties, whereby King Leopold would, after his return to Belgium and the repeal of the Regency Law of 1945, rule for 18 days before delegating his prerogatives to Prince Baudouin, whilst the Liberal Party executive likewise approved a similar resolution on April 22, pointing out, however, that it was subject to ratification by the national congress of the Liberal Party. The Socialists, however, continued to insist that the King should reside outside the country after the delegation of powers, and on April 24 M. Van Zeeland again visited Prégny to ascertain from King Leopold personally the latter's intentions in the matter of his residence after the delegation of his powers to Prince Baudouin. On returning to Brussels on April 25, M. Van Zeeland released the text of a letter he had received from the King wherein the latter refused to give any undertaking as to his movements after the transfer of his prerogatives, and in which he expressed his "astonishment" at the discussion which had arisen on this matter, declaring *inter alia* that he

could give no engagement to leave Belgium after the transfer, even temporarily, "without threatening the dignity of the monarchical institution."

Prior to M. Van Zeeland's visit to Prégny, the Socialist Party had demanded that King Leopold should give a written guarantee that he would not reside in Belgium after the delegation of power to his son. The King's refusal to give any such undertaking led on April 26 to the withdrawal of the Socialist leaders from the inter-party negotiations, this decision being conveyed to M. Van Zeeland in a letter signed by MM. Spaak and Buset, which declared that the Socialist Party, not having received the guarantees it regarded as essential, felt itself compelled to resume "full liberty of action," and, in the absence of such guarantees, regarded the King's proposal as "dangerously vague and incomplete."

The breakdown of the inter-party negotiations, and the continuing Cabinet crisis, led to further discussions between the Prince Regent and the party leaders. Renewed attempts by M. Van Zeeland to form a Cabinet on the basis of a coalition between the Christian Socials and the Liberals were frustrated when the Liberal Party announced on April 28 its unwillingness to serve under M. Van Zeeland, and at the same time urged the reappointment of the Eyskens Government which had resigned after the March referendum; it was also understood that a section of the Liberal Party insisted on the Socialists being a party to any agreement which might be reached in connexion with the King's return. On April 29, on the advice of MM. Van Zeeland and Eyskens, the Prince Regent decided to dissolve the Belgian Parliament and to call new general elections for June 4, a decree to this effect being gazetted on April 30. (La Nation Beige - La Libre Belgique) **(10597 A.)**