

= Vlaams Blok =

The Vlaams Blok (English : Flemish Block , or VB) was a Belgian far @-@ right and secessionist political party with an anti @-@ immigration platform . Its ideologies embraced Flemish nationalism , calling for the independence of Flanders . From its creation in 1978 , it was the most notable militant right wing of the Flemish movement . Vlaams Blok 's track record in the Flemish and Belgian parliament elections was strong . The election campaigns consisted mainly of the immigration and law @-@ and @-@ order theme , combined with the desire for Flemish autonomy .

All significant Flemish political parties were reluctant to enter coalitions with the Vlaams Blok . Following a 1989 agreement , known as the cordon sanitaire , the party was effectively blocked from entering any level of government . The Court of Appeal in Ghent in April 2004 ruled that some of the party 's organizations had breached the 1981 anti @-@ racism law and that the party sanctioned discrimination . The ruling was made definite on 9 November 2004 , and the party shortly after reorganised itself as the Vlaams Belang . By 2004 , the party had arguably become the single most popular Flemish party in Belgium , supported by about one in four of the Flemish electorate , as well as being one of the most successful radical right @-@ wing populist parties in Europe as a whole .

= = History = =

= = = Background , Flemish Movement = = =

The Vlaams Blok originated from the loose Flemish Movement , which historically has included an array of organisations seeking , to varying degrees , to promote Flanders . In the second half of the nineteenth century , Flemish nationalists operated within the established political parties , and had close ties with the political left . The early organised political expression of Flemish nationalism was triggered by World War I , and the introduction of universal suffrage and proportional representation in elections . The main party that initially represented the movement was the left @-@ wing nationalist Front Party , founded by former soldiers and sympathizers from the trench wars in Flanders Fields disaffected with their French @-@ speaking , often anti @-@ Flemish , officers that had been unable to communicate with their troops . From the 1930s , the main party became the Flemish National Union which turned to collaborate with the Nazis during World War II , as they had promised them increased Flemish autonomy . These circumstances would compromise the re @-@ emergence of Flemish nationalism after the war , although only a faction of the broader movement had actually pursued an agenda of collaboration .

The direct predecessor to the Vlaams Blok was the People 's Union , which was founded in 1954 as the successor to the Christian Flemish People 's Union electoral alliance , that had successfully run for election earlier the same year . The party had been careful to choose its leaders from nationalist circles that had not collaborated with the Nazis . While Flemish separatists had been suspicious of the People 's Union since its outset , it became clear by the 1970s that the party had moved to a moderate left @-@ liberal course , which led to the defection of its more radical members . The remaining nationalist hardliners finally rejected the party 's participation in a new five @-@ party government coalition in 1977 , and particularly the Egmont pact , believing it had conceded too much to the francophone government parties .

= = = Early years (1978 ? 1988) = = =

In late 1977 , the rejection of the Egmont pact by the hardliner faction of the People 's Union led to the establishment of two new (short @-@ lived) parties ; the radical nationalist Flemish National Party (VNP) and the national liberal Flemish People 's Party (VVP) , respectively led by Karel Dillen and Lode Claes . The parties contested the 1978 general elections in a coalition called " Vlaams Blok " , where they won 1 @.@ 4 % of the vote and one seat in the Chamber of Representatives (taken by Dillen) . On 28 May 1979 , the VNP and VVP finally merged to form a

new party named Vlaams Blok , and Dillen was nominated to be the party 's leader for life . The party initially recruited its members from Flemish nationalist organisations , such as the Taal Aktie Komitee , Voorpost , Were Di , and the Order of Flemish Militants , while some local groups also simply turned into local branches of the Vlaams Blok . In its inception , the party was widely regarded as a conservative separatist party , rather than an extreme right @-@ wing party .

The party did not have much electoral success at first , and was stable at one seat in the 1981 general elections . It stood candidates in very few communities , and was active almost entirely in the city of Antwerp . Having been founded mainly as a protest against the Egmont pact , the party revamped and broadened its platform after the pact collapsed . It did not make much progress in the 1985 general elections , and Dillen thus started the so @-@ called " Operation Rejuvenation " , allowing for an across @-@ the @-@ board change of the party leadership , integrating many leaders of nationalist youth and student organisations into the party council . The party 's youth organisation , the Vlaams Blok Jongeren (VBJ) , was founded in 1987 by among others Filip Dewinter and Frank Vanhecke .

Starting in 1983 , the Vlaams Blok increasingly began focusing on immigration (inspired by the success of other European right @-@ wing populist parties) , and on the international day against racism in 1984 held its first conference to discuss the " foreigner problem . " The same year , Dillen proposed a bill in the Chamber of Representatives to offer cash incentive for immigrants to return to their native country . In April 1987 , a group around Roger Frankinouille of the only right @-@ wing competitor to the Vlaams Blok , the anti @-@ tax Respect for Labour and Democracy , switched to the party . The party campaigned for the 1987 general election with the slogan " Own people first " (Eigen volk eerst ! , inspired by French National Front slogan " The French first ") , and saw a slight victory , winning their first seat in Senate (taken by Dillen) , and for the first time two seats in the Chamber (Dewinter and Annemans) . The party 's shift towards focusing on immigration was however criticised by some Vlaams Blok members , and ultimately also led to the defection of some top party figures . The party nevertheless made a clear choice of focussing on the immigration issue , which had , and would , give results in elections .

= = = Rise of the party (1988 ? 2004) = = =

The electoral success of the Vlaams Blok began after the younger generation in the party shifted the party 's emphasis from Flemish nationalism (separatism) to the immigration issue . In the 1988 local election in Antwerp the party first started to take off , going from 5 @.@ 5 % of the vote in the city to 17 @.@ 7 % , a success which drew much publicity . On 10 May 1989 , based on the Antwerp success , the presidents of all major Belgian parties (including the People 's Union) signed a cordon sanitaire (hygienic barrier) , where the parties agreed to never conclude any political agreements with the Vlaams Blok , nor make immigration a political issue . While the Vlaams Blok itself also largely rejected cooperation with other parties , it did increasingly consider such cooperation , particularly in elections in 1994 , 1999 and 2000 , only to find themselves effectively blocked by the cordon sanitaire . Although intended to keep the Vlaams Blok from gaining political influence , many argued that the agreement in reality gave room for the strong electoral surge for the party , as it was made into what could be seen as the only " true opposition . " The agreement was renewed in following years , and Vlaams Blok chairman Karel Dillen was used to call it the " insurance policy " of his party ;

" I was basically very happy with its existence . There was something a bit too much about it : everybody against us . If the sense is that there is a hunt out for us , then this will only drive people to take the side of the outlaw . "

In December 1988 , a major split occurred in the party , when a group who opposed the " Operation Rejuvenation " tried to squeeze the Dewinter @-@ VBJ faction out of the party leadership . Led by Geert Wouters , he accused Dewinter 's faction of being " Lepenists " , and of attempting to sideline the Flemish question to rather favour the immigration question . Dillen however sided with Dewinter , and Wouters and his group left the party and founded the nationalist pressure group called the Nationalist Association @-@ Dutch People 's Movement . In 1989 , the party won a seat in the

Brussels city council , as well as in the European Parliament . There , the Vlaams Blok agreed to form a parliamentary group together with the French National Front and the German The Republicans , called the Technical Group of the European Right . The group lacked an ideological coherence (stemming in part from Le Pen 's support for a Belgian state nationalism) , and was largely organised on pragmatic grounds simply to get financial support .

In the 1991 general election , the Vlaams Blok for the first time surpassed the People 's Union , going from two to 12 seats in the Chamber , and from one to five seats in the Senate , in what was afterwards referred to by its opponents as " Black Sunday " . In the following years , the party saw a systematic upwards trend in all elections it participated in . In July 1992 , the first Vlaams Blok motion was accepted in the Flemish Parliament , which rejected the right of francophone inhabitants in Flemish Brabant and Voeren to vote for Wallon institutions . In late 1992 , it was announced that Staf Neel , a popular Antwerp city councillor for 22 years for the Socialist Party went over to the Vlaams Blok , thereby causing the SP and CVP to lose their majority in the city council . In 1992 , the party ideologue Filip Dewinter and chairman Karel Dillen established the party 's comprehensive immigration program , titled the 70 @-@ point plan . The plan sought to close the borders towards non @-@ European immigrants , gradually repatriate those already in the country , and implement an " own people first " principle in all policy areas . Over the course of the 1990s , the party however increasingly distanced itself from the plan as it had alienated the party from gaining political influence , until it was finally officially discarded in 2000 .

In the 1994 European election , the party doubled its seats (Dillen and Vanhecke) with 12 @. @ 6 % of the vote , but failed to continue a European Right group , due to other nationalist parties having dropped out of the parliament , or refusing to join a group . National Front and Vlaams Blok MEPs nevertheless established an " alliance " called The Coordination of the European Right . In 1996 , party leader Karel Dillen , who had been nominated to hold his position for life , stepped down and personally appointed Frank Vanhecke as his successor . The choice of Vanhecke was seen a compromise between the Flemish nationalist wing around Annemans and the Lepenist wing around Dewinter , thus avoiding a potential internal struggle . In 1999 , elections were scheduled for the European Parliament , the Chamber of Representatives and Senate and the Flemish Parliament , where the Vlaams Blok overtook the position as the third largest Flemish party , winning more than 15 % of the vote in all elections , and a total of 45 seats in the various parliaments .

The Vlaams Blok continued to be particularly strong in and around Antwerp , where it received as much as 33 % of the vote in the 2000 local elections . In 2001 , the party was forced to alter its political program , as according to the laws for party financing , it was not compatible with the European Treaty on Human Rights . In the 2004 Flemish Parliament election , the party finally became the single largest party group in parliament . The party was invited by the formateur for government discussions , only to find that its differences with the other parties was insurmountable , resulting in the three traditional parties forming a majority government , retaining the cordon sanitaire . By this time , the party had nevertheless become the very most popular Flemish party in Belgium , being supported by about one in four of the Flemish electorate .

= = = Court of Cassation ruling (2004) = = =

In October 2000 , the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism , together with the Dutch @-@ speaking Human Rights League in Belgium registered a complaint at the Correctional Court , in which they claimed that three non @-@ profit organisations connected to the Vlaams Blok (its education and research office and the " National Broadcasting Corporation ") had violated the 1981 anti @-@ racism law . The publications which were referred to included its 1999 election agenda and 1997 party platform . The challenged passages included those where the party called for a separate education system for foreign children , a special tax for employers employing non @-@ European foreigners , and a restriction of unemployment benefits and child allowances for non @-@ European foreigners .

In June 2001 , the Brussels Correctional Court declared itself incompetent to hear the case , as it related to political misconduct . In February 2003 , the Brussels Appellate Court followed and gave a

similar judgement . The original plaintiffs then appealed , and the case was sent to the Court of Appeals in Ghent , which upheld the complaint ; the Vlaams Blok non @-@ profit organisations were fined , and it was deemed that the Vlaams Blok was an organisation that sanctioned discrimination . The Vlaams Blok lodged an appeal which was rejected , and in November 2004 , the ruling was made definite , when it was upheld by the Court of Cassation . The ruling meant that the party would lose access to state funding and access to television , effectively shutting the party down .

= = = Reactions = = =

The whole trial was seen by some as a political trial , inspired by the Belgian establishment . The federal parliament had notably amended the Constitution in order to create legal possibilities to condemn the party . The Vlaams Blok also pointed at the problem of political nomination of judges , and again claimed that the lawsuit had been a political process coordinated with the Belgian Ministry of the Interior .

The leadership of the Vlaams Blok seized the occasion of the ban to dissolve the party , and start afresh under a new name . Five days later , on 14 November , the Vlaams Blok disbanded itself , and a new party with the name Vlaams Belang was established . (Other proposed names included the Flemish People 's Party and Flemish Freedom Front .) The new party instituted a number of changes in its political program , carefully moderating some of the more extreme positions of the former Vlaams Blok . Nevertheless , the party leadership made it clear that the party would fundamentally remain the same .

Professor Lamine (KUL) , a former Vlaams Blok member and " advisor " of the party 's legal team , claimed that the party , for propaganda reasons , purposely undertook a weak defence , in order to lose the case ; " For the party leaders , losing was much more interesting . Winning just wasn 't an option . " Lamine himself had earlier stated that the party should have carried the trial to the European Court of Human Rights , but Vlaams Blok senator Joris Van Hauthem had already stated in 2005 , that ; " If we had gone to Strasbourg [ECHR] based on procedural arguments , we might have had a case . But Lamine already put in a private claim to overturn the Appeals Court verdict , on the basis of substantive arguments . If Vlaams Belang were to put forth a claim against the verdict as well , at Strasbourg , the Court will bundle both cases . Then we would lose the case for sure . Lamine has thus given us the final blow . "

= = Ideology = =

The main ideological and political strategies of the Vlaams Blok started out with its radical nationalist rejection of the People 's Union compromise on the Flemish autonomy issue , later to be followed by focus on immigration and security , exploitation of corruption and other scandals , and defense of traditional values . While the party was legitimized first and foremost by its defense of Flemish interests , its voters were mainly motivated by anti @-@ immigration and anti @-@ establishment protest .

= = = Flemish nationalism = = =

The main issue for the party was Flemish nationalism , and most issues that were added later , were in some way also connected to this . The Flemish nationalism promoted by the party (volksnationalisme) was according to its program " based on the ethnic community being a naturally occurring entity whose cultural , material , ethical and intellectual interests need to be preserved . " While the party primarily worked for an independent Flemish state (modeling the split on that of Czechoslovakia) , it for a long time also promoted the idea that the new state should merge with the Netherlands , and establish a Dutch @-@ speaking federation (Greater Netherlands) . From the 1990s however , the latter idea was downplayed by the party , as the Netherlands then turned into a " permissive , multicultural and social @-@ democratic state " according to one scholar (although this Dutch political situation would be sharply overturned in the 2000s) .

== Immigration , minorities ==

Immigration became an important issue for the Vlaams Blok from the late 1980s . Interconnected with the Flemish nationalism issue , immigrants were considered to be a threat to the Flemish ethnic community . In 1992 , the party established its 70 @-@ point plan , which included measures to stop all immigration , return most immigrants to their native countries by force , and legally discriminate against residing migrants in respect of markets such as labour , housing and education . The party 's opponents particularly saw its immigration program as a source of claims of racism , and the party thus in its latest years downplayed the relevance of the 70 @-@ point plan , and softened its written positions regarding immigration .

Concerns about crime and security was also linked to immigration , as the party particularly blamed Turks and Moroccans for various criminal activity , and sought a zero tolerance approach regarding law and order . The party was also strongly anti @-@ Islamic from early on , and in its 1993 program regarded Islam as " a doctrine , which preaches holy war , assassination , forced conversions , oppression of women , slavery and extermination of " infidels " , [which] will automatically lead to what we now call fundamentalism . " The party was anti @-@ Muslim and portrayed Muslims as fifth column of a cruel and expansionist religion , and after the 1990 Gulf War called on the government to introduce measures to keep Belgium from being Islamised .

The party was according to political scientist Cas Mudde only very rarely accused of anti @-@ Semitism ? and even then , it was strongly condemned by the party leadership . When Roeland Raes cast doubt on the scale of the Holocaust in a television interview in 2001 for instance , the party leadership immediately called an emergency meeting , distanced itself from him and forced him to resign . The party also took screening measures against its local candidates to reveal any possible extremist connections , and rather wanted to risk not being able to fill its lists , rather than filling them with extremists . Particularly , the party wanted to distance itself from Holocaust denial , as it actively sought to reach out to Jewish voters in Antwerp .

== Anti @-@ establishment ==

Another element in the ideology of the party was a populist fight against the political establishment , often manifested through political scandals which flourished in 1990s Belgium ; including corruption , food and even pedophile scandals . These included the Agusta scandal and the Marc Dutroux affair . The usual suspects were politicians in the three traditional party families ; especially the francophone parties .

== Economy ==

The party had no strong economic preferences , and generally supported a mixed economy . While it supported privatisation and tax reductions for small and medium businesses , it also sometimes supported protectionism and defended the welfare state , especially if allocated to the native Flemish population .

== Foreign policy ==

The party was the only major Belgian party that opposed Belgium 's membership of the European Union , as well as the idea of a federal Europe itself . It however defended a con @-@ federal Europe based on sovereign culturally homogeneous nation @-@ states . The European issue was however not an issue the party promoted much .

It also favoured the abolition of the United Nations , citing ; " The illogical composition of the Security Council . The unwieldy bureaucracy . The democratic deficit . " The party did also not have any faith in such a world community or international legal system , questioning the entire logic behind the UN . It rejected the view of any international consensus about concepts as democracy ,

justice , freedom and human rights , especially since most of its member countries are non @-@ Western and undemocratic .

= = International relations = =

The Vlaams Blok maintained good contacts with nationalist parties throughout Europe and other countries . The Vlaams Blok did traditionally have the closest contacts with Dutch and South African far @-@ right groups , including the Dutch Centre Party ' 86 , the Centre Democrats and Voorpost , and the South African Boerestaat Party . In the mid @-@ 1980s , it also established close relations particularly with the French National Front , as well as the German People 's Union , The Republicans and National Democratic Party of Germany . In the 1990s , it supported the minor Dutch Block party , which had modeled itself directly on the Vlaams Blok .

The party also became very active in establishing contacts with post @-@ communist parties in Eastern European countries , including the Croatian Party of Rights , Slovak National Party and IMRO ? Bulgarian National Movement . While not keeping official contacts , it was in addition very supportive of left @-@ wing nationalist parties such as the Scottish National Party , Irish Sinn Féin and Basque Herri Batasuna . Some of the parties it established contacts with most recently was the Freedom Party of Austria and the Italian Lega Nord , which after a period of distrust , maintained contacts since 2002 .

= = Election results = =

Note that the election results in elections other than those for the Flemish Parliament (and the Dutch @-@ speaking electoral college in the European Parliament) gives a somewhat wrong image of the party 's support , given that the party only ran in Flanders , the one half of Belgium .

= = = Chamber of Representatives = = =

= = = Senate = = =

= = = Flemish Parliament = = =

= = = European Parliament = = =

Results in the Dutch @-@ speaking electoral college is given in the parenthesis .