

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN

MA in European Studies

# **The double face of Flemish extreme right:**

Public propaganda VS. the real soul of Vlaams Belang

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The VB slogan “*Own people first*” is an outrage.  
“Immigrants, foreigners and Walloons out!”  
sounds just like “Jüden Raus”.

Jacques van der Zee

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## **I. Introduction: The birth and rise of Vlaams Blok**

The Flemish voters are being deceived by an existing difference in the reality of Vlaams Belang. This difference takes the form of a gap between what the Flemish voters of Vlaams Belang believe they are voting for and what they are in reality voting for. There is an enormous gap between on the one hand the image of itself that Vlaams Belang is trying, with success, to bring to the Flemish population and on the other hand what this party and especially its leaders are about in reality. My intention in this thesis is to show that this gap exists and prove with facts in which areas it exists. I want to show the real soul of Vlaams Belang the nice suits and ties, the fake smiles and the deceiving of the Flemish citizen by telling them only what they want to hear. The difference between the image that Vlaams Belang tries to show of itself and their hidden true nature, is enormous.

### **1. Origins**

When the leaders of VU<sup>1</sup> signed the Egmont-pact<sup>2</sup> on May 25<sup>th</sup> 1977, a large percentage of its members felt betrayed, because amongst other reasons this pact supported the Belgian government and was therefore was not promoting Flemish independence. Karel Dillen, the man who would later create Vlaams Blok, had been active in VU until 1970. But towards the end of the 1960's, VU began to focus more on the achievement of a social and economic Flanders, than on an independent Flanders. This development was the origin of the frustration of the hard line VU supporters. Frequently, VU came in conflict with Flemish-nationalist paramilitary groups, like VMO<sup>3</sup>.

The frustration led to a breach of extreme right with VU, which was the opportunity for extreme right to form a political group. Two men stepped up as leaders for this new group, Lode Claes and Karel Dillen. After trying to form a party together, they decided on two separate parties, as Dillen was in favour of a 'hard , radical and nationalistic' party, while Claes wanted a conservative people party with a broad electorate.<sup>4</sup> In October 1977, Dillen

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<sup>1</sup> Volksunie (*People's Union*, VU) was a Belgian political party, formed in 1954 as a successor to the "Christian Flemish People's Union", an electoral alliance of Flemish nationalists

<sup>2</sup> The Egmont pact of 1977 is an agreement on the reform of Belgium into a federal state and on the relations between the linguistic communities in the country. The pact was not carried out due to the demission of the government, but important elements of the pact were used in later Belgian state reform, like the creation of three regions and three communities in Belgium.

<sup>3</sup> VMO, the Flemish Order of Militants was a Flemish nationalistic and later extreme-right propaganda and action group in Flanders from 1950 to 1983. VMO started as a reaction to the street violence directed against the Flemish nationalists in the years after World War II.

<sup>4</sup> GIJSELS H. & VANDER VELPEN J. *Het Vlaams Blok 1939-1988. Het verdriet van Vlaanderen.* (1989) Berchem: EPO pp.68

started the VNP, which stands for Flemish Nationalistic Party. The aim of the VNP was to achieve Flemish independence. Dillen had a broad electoral and ideological background behind his VNP, that was entirely linked to extreme-right organisations like VMO, Voorpost, Were Di and NSV. From the beginning, Dillen made it clear that he was mainly interested in the support of the hardest line of radical militants for his party. And indeed, VMO, Voorpost and Were Di were organisations composed of hardcore Flemish activists who were not afraid to use street violence and to form private militia to defend their points of view. Claes, on the other hand, started the VVP (Flemish People Party). Very soon however, this party knew divergences of ideology just like VU, the party it originated from.

At the eve of the parliamentary elections of December 1978, VNP and VVP decided to set aside their differences. They decided to form an alliance under the name Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc). The name Vlaams Blok was carefully chosen and not so innocent. It referred to the VNV, a Flemish political party led by Staf De Clercq that had collaborated with the Germans during the Second World War. Before that war, VNV had participated three times in the Belgian national elections and was called Vlaamsch Nationaal Blok<sup>5</sup>. The results of the 1978 elections brought an interesting result: From the Vlaams Blok alliance, no member of Claes' VVP had been elected, while Dillen of the VNP was elected in the district of Antwerp to be member of the parliament. The electoral result led to the end of VVP. The radical-nationalistic wing of VVP joined the ranks of VNP, after which VNP was officially renamed the Vlaams Blok.

## **2. Growing Success**

In its early years of existence the successes of Vlaams Blok were only limited, but the party took action in 1984 with two fundamental changes. First of all, Vlaams Blok decided that the immigration problem would become an important point in its program, next to the long desired Flemish independence. Secondly, a new generation of Vlaams Blok members took the lead of the party. Gerolf Annemans and Filip Dewinter became the new driving forces of the party, a function they still fulfil today. Dewinter remains up to today a fervent opponent of immigration in Flanders, while Annemans has always been more concerned with Flemish independence. The changes of 1984 led to the electoral breakthrough of Vlaams Blok a couple years later. November 24<sup>th</sup> 1991 would always be remembered as 'Black Sunday',

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<sup>5</sup> GIJSELS Hugo, *Het Vlaams Blok* (1992) Leuven: Kritak pp. 83-87

where Vlaams Blok suddenly jumped to 17,7% of the votes in the Antwerp communal elections and became the third party in Antwerp. From that day on, the nationalistic party was on the roll for an electoral success that would not stop. Already in 1992, Swyngedouw explained that “*Vlaams Blok succeeded in presenting itself as the representative of traditional values, like employment security, order, safety, and a better socio-economic position. In doing that, Vlaams Blok deliberately choose to leave its neo-fascist ideology aside, for it was not very presentable in times of elections*”<sup>6</sup>.

The alarming results of 1991 led to one of the most controversial political agreements in Belgium: the ‘cordon sanitaire’. In this agreement, signed on November 19<sup>th</sup> 1992, the Flemish political parties promised each other never to form an agreement of governance or a political decision with Vlaams Blok. Today, the question of the effect that this agreement in reality had, remains a much discussed point in Belgian politics. One thing is certain, the cordon sanitaire did not stop Vlaams Blok from growing throughout the elections, as it became the biggest party in Antwerp in 1994. Vlaams Blok also conquered a second seat in Strasbourg, that was taken on by Frank Vanhecke. In 1996 Frank Vanhecke replaced Karel Dillen as president of Vlaams Belang, while the electoral success continued in 1999, 2000 and 2004 as Vlaams Blok remained the largest in Antwerp and became the second largest party in Flanders.

Several attempts have been made by the other political formations to stop the electoral progress of Vlaams Belang. One of these attempts was the cordon sanitaire of 1992, but the effectiveness of this measure is doubtful. Other measures include an attempt to cancel the compulsory voting in Belgium, but also the introduction of voting for immigrants. Furthermore, there have been several attempts to sue Vlaams Blok in front on a judicial court for racism and discrimination. Until 2004, this demand has been refused on multiple occasions by the Belgian courts.

### **3. From Vlaams Blok to Vlaams Belang : VB changes to become . . . VB**

In November 2004, Vlaams Blok decided to change its name to Vlaams Belang after the verdict of the Court of Appeal of Ghent. Vlaams Blok was found guilty of being a

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<sup>6</sup> SWYNGEDOUW M. *Het Vlaams Blok 1980-1991: Opkomst, groei en doorbraak* In VAN DOORSLAER R., GOTOVITCH J., RAES K., SEBERECHTS F., SYNGEDOUW M., VOS L. & DE WEVER B. *Herstij van de 20<sup>ste</sup> Eeuw. Extreem-rechts in Vlaanderen 1920-1990* (1992) Leuven: Kritak pp. 32

discriminating party that encouraged and propagated racist thoughts. As a consequence to this verdict, Vlaams Blok was condemned to pay a total amount in fines of slightly over 45.000 €, which represents only a small amount compared to the 6.180.336 € the party received from government subsidies that year<sup>7</sup>. Also, Vlaams Blok was forced to change its official party program. All the racist elements it contained needed to be removed. Therefore, the party simply chose to rename itself, which enhanced the idea of change within the party towards the population. The judges claimed that “*Vlaams Blok is a political party that continually and systematically incites to discrimination*”... “*considers foreigners as criminals and as a threat to the own Flemish people*”.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, Vlaams Blok violated a fundamental value of the democratic society that we live in. The leaders of the party reacted furiously against the verdict and claimed loudly that it was an attack on the freedom of speech of the party. However, they seemed to forget that even in a democratic society that upholds the right of freedom of speech; when this freedom is used for propaganda that creates an image of hate towards foreigners, this freedom becomes a crime.

Despite the effects of this judgment and the negative publicity that was released around Vlaams Blok, it took the party only a couple of days to recover from the judicial blow. The party was quickly on its feet again and symbolised this by choosing a new name for the party. On November 14<sup>th</sup> 2004, only five days after the verdict of the court, the former Vlaams Blok decided to change its name to Vlaams Belang. The judges never forced the party to change its name, even though the leaders of Vlaams Belang like us to think they were forced in this decision. The change of name and the changes in their declaration of principles allowed Vlaams Blok to continue to exist as a political party in Flanders. In theory, and following the verdict of the court, the party also removed the discriminating and racist points of view from its program and became a more moderate party. The question remains, however, how much change the party really submitted itself to. It seems at the least doubtful that Vlaams Blok would simply give up some of its points of view, to accommodate a judicial decision it opposed. The fact that the party changed its name and adjusted its declaration of principles does not mean this new party suddenly accepts the rules of the game in a democracy. We can not suddenly speak of a new political party. Vlaams Belang is nothing else than the continuation of Vlaams Blok, with the same people, sharing the same beliefs.

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<sup>7</sup> SPRUYT Marc, *Slechte Verliezers*, (26/03/2007, <http://www.blokwatch.be/content/view/91/127/lang.nl/>)

<sup>8</sup> LIGA VOOR MENSENRECHTEN, (26/03/2007, [http://www.mensenrechten.be/main.php?item\\_content=107](http://www.mensenrechten.be/main.php?item_content=107))

Despite the verdict, Vlaams Belang continued to improve in the electoral results. Once again, it seemed that the attempts to slow the electoral progress of Vlaams Blok have backfired. The leaders of Vlaams Blok of course seized this opportunity to spread the word that this high percentage was the result of the disagreement of the Flemish people with the verdict of the Court of Ghent. A study by two scholars of the University of Antwerp concludes, however, that the verdict of the Court has not made a big difference on the results of the elections. *“No new electors have been attracted as a consequence of the verdict, but neither was there an outflow of electors”...“Although no new electors were attracted, the existing electors were reinforced in their conviction to vote for Vlaams Blok.”*<sup>9</sup>

In Belgium, there is no political formation more to the right on the political spectrum than Vlaams Blok, meaning that for hardcore rightist voters there is no alternative party to walk over to. In my thesis, I will argue that because of that missing alternative Vlaams Blok has the possibility to polish off the sharp edges of its program that might scare the average citizen. Vlaams Blok is able to present itself to the Flemish electorate as a reasonable party like any other party, while it leaves its racist ideology and fascist ties hidden from the public.

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<sup>9</sup> S. WALGRAEVE, M. NUYTEMANS en P. VAN AELST, *De verkiezingscampagne van 2004. Oorzaken van veranderingen in stemintenties doorheen de campagne* Universiteit Antwerpen, 2006 (28-03-2007, [http://www.gemeente2006.be/Gemeente06\\_onderzoeksnota.pdf](http://www.gemeente2006.be/Gemeente06_onderzoeksnota.pdf))

#### **IV. The true nature of Vlaams Belang : Analysis**

There has been no substantial change between the former Vlaams Blok that was condemned for racism and the new Vlaams Belang. The change of name is nothing more than a façade that keeps judicial problems away for the party and that helps it to win more votes, by presenting Vlaams Belang as a democratic, right-wing political party. The next part of this thesis will show that there is a difference between what Vlaams Belang claims to be and what Vlaams Belang really is. It will show that there is also a darker side to this party and that it is not as harmless as it likes to present itself. Not only does Vlaams Belang have a darker side, the party also keeps its extreme-right thoughts and ties with radical right collaborators from the Second World War cautiously hidden from the general public. Vlaams Belang does that to present itself, in the form of an opposition party, as a credible alternative for the implemented policies of the ruling government.

##### **1. Change of name! Change of soul ?**

Dirk Voorhoof and Ann Braeckman are both scholars at the University of Ghent and published a report with proof and argumentations in which they explain that not much has actually changed inside Vlaams Belang, after the verdict of Ghent<sup>10</sup>. They concluded in their work that Vlaams Belang is a party just as racist as Vlaams Blok. Vlaams Belang still portrays foreigners as criminals, responsible for the feelings of insecurity; as profit takers of the social security system who abuse of the hard-working population; and as religious fanatics who are unable to integrate in the society they live in. The presupposition that Vlaams Blok only changed on paper is confirmed in the conclusions of Voorhoof and Braeckman. *“Vlaams Blok still develops a discourse that embraces the earlier publications and allocations, based on which they were condemned for racist discrimination<sup>11</sup>.”*

##### **1.1. Ideological Background & Declaration of Principles**

Many Flemish citizen believe that Vlaams Blok had no other choice than to change considerably after the verdict of Ghent. Internally, Vlaams Blok was divided between those who wanted to adjust the political viewpoints of the party in accordance with the verdict of the Court, and those who believed that Vlaams Blok should go on the offensive and maintain its hard position. The ideological groups behind Vlaams Blok, like Voorpost and Were Di,

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<sup>10</sup> D. VOORHOOF en A. BRAECKMAN, *De veroordeling van drie Vlaams Blok VZW's in toepassing van de antiracismewet. Implicaties voor de VRT*, Universiteit Gent, (28-03-2007, [http://pswserver1.ugent.be/dv/documents/AdviesVRT\\_RvB\\_zendtijd\\_000.pdf](http://pswserver1.ugent.be/dv/documents/AdviesVRT_RvB_zendtijd_000.pdf))

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid. l.c.*

insisted on this offensive position<sup>12</sup>. Convinced that after the verdict, Vlaams Blok should go on the offensive and should not start polishing off the sharp edges of its program, they were there to prevent that the party became what they called a 'Vlaams Blok Light'. This led to a conflict of ideas inside Vlaams Blok: The hardcore members still believed that radical viewpoints were the motto of the party, while the followers of the softer approach believed that it was time for Vlaams Blok to take a milder course and finally take the power in Flanders. They knew, however, that the ideological background of Vlaams Blok, Were Di, Voorpost and other hardcore members, would never accept the party to follow the line of a softer ideology.

To guarantee the support of both groups inside the party, the leaders of Vlaams Blok decided to mix the two viewpoints. With a new name for the party, a new program, softer values on paper, and the theoretical removal of all racist and discriminating contents from its declaration of principles, Vlaams Belang was born. However, to stay in line with the hardcore ideological background, the party only polished off its sharp edges towards the general public. In its heart and soul, Vlaams Belang remained the same party of racism and hate. But the disguise worked. Vlaams Belang published its new program and its new declaration of principles in November 2004, in which not a single trace of racism or discrimination was left.

While the press and the Flemish citizen showed themselves willing to believe this change of attitude and values inside the party, the new declaration of principles proved that in fact Vlaams Belang was not renouncing to the old ways from when it was called Vlaams Blok. The new declaration of principles is indeed nothing more than a copy of the viewpoints that Vlaams Blok propagated in 1995. This illustrates perfectly the pretended changes inside Vlaams Belang towards the public, while it remains true to the old values to keep the ideological background quiet. This statement is best corroborated by the fact that the guards of the radical side the party, Were Di and Voorpost, expressed no complains on the new declaration of principles, although they had vividly expressed their will for Vlaams Belang to choose the offensive option after it was condemned for racism and discrimination.

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<sup>12</sup> Voorpost and Were Di are both organisations constituted of members that form the hardcore ideological background of VB and that function as guards of the VB ideology. They are always prepared to ring the alarm if VB is following a too soft or moderate course.

## 1.2. Symbolism

An analysis of the new symbols of Vlaams Belang provides some ironical similarities with a past that the party pretends to have buried when it changed to Vlaams Belang. The new logo of shows a lion head inside an open bloc. Since the lion is the Flemish symbol, this logo literally means Flemish Bloc or Vlaams Blok. Also, the name Vlaams Belang has been copied from the VU electoral campaign of 1987. Again, Vlaams Belang chooses for a clear reference to its past.



A study of the lion head inside the bloc is even more surprising. The lion is the symbol of Flanders, but also the symbol of many Flemish organisations. The lion that Vlaams Belang uses in its new logo is not that of the Flemish Community, but rather an exact copy of the lion used by the Sint-Maartensfonds and by Were Di. Sint-Maartensfonds and Were Di are both Flemish organisation of former fascist SS-collaborators, united to keep that fascist tradition in Flanders alive. With this subtle reference to its dark side, Vlaams Belang maintains the support of its extremist ideological background. The public does, however, not pay attention to these details and ignores the meaning of the new Vlaams Belang symbol.

Although the previously mentioned study by Voorhoof and Braeckman provides clear facts on the true nature of this 'new' Vlaams Belang, some reactions of the party leaders confirm that there is no difference between Vlaams Belang and Vlaams Blok. In the new party program of 2004 Gerolf Annemans, the number two leader of Vlaams Belang asserted: "... *Vlaams Blok was transformed to Vlaams Belang, with the same political agenda and the same program.*"<sup>13</sup> This phrase is now also part of the new program of Vlaams Belang. Filip Dewinter, the undisputed number one of the party claimed in November 2004: "*We are the judicial and political inheritors of Vlaams Blok. We have only 'transformed' Vlaams Blok into Vlaams Belang. It is the same political fraction, with identically the same people.*"<sup>14</sup> Finally Frank Vanhecke, president of Vlaams Belang, leaves no doubt on the situation as he declared on the same day: "*We change our name, but not our manners. We change our name, but not our program.*" ... "*We change our name because we have to, but make no mistake: we remain*

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<sup>13</sup> G. ANNEMANS, *Vlaams Belang Programma*, (28-03-2007, <http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/index.php?p=21&id=2>)

<sup>14</sup> F. DEWINTER, *Vlaams Belang Actueel* (28-03-2007, <http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/index.php?p=0&id=49>)

*that party different from all others...*"<sup>15</sup>. The verdict of the Court of Ghent never compelled Vlaams Blok to change its name, so the president of Vlaams Belang is a liar, claiming the obligation to change the name of his party.

I have summarized several arguments that prove that there has been no change in the new Vlaams Belang. The party, the people, the viewpoints and the program remain the same as when the party was called Vlaams Blok. I conclude that the ideologies, the preferences, the ideas and the viewpoints of the present leaders of Vlaams Belang, originating from when they were still members of Vlaams Blok, are still valid today even if the party is now called Vlaams Belang. To symbolise this, I will refer to the abbreviation VB when I speak about Vlaams Belang. VB refers both to Vlaams Belang and to Vlaams Blok, since there is no substantial difference between the two parties. Vlaams Belang is nothing more than a continuation of what Vlaams Blok has started.

## **2. Connected with the Past**

Some parts of the history of Belgium have been marked by a presence of the Flemish Movement of which no Fleming should be proud. From country betrayal by collaborating with the German invaders to adherence to the Nazi-ideology and the national-socialistic movement propagated by Adolf Hitler during the Second World War, many historical figures of the Flemish Movement have a past as dark as the backside of the moon. Many of today's VB leaders and parliamentarians used to have close ties with this dark side of the Flemish Movement, but they also continue to be linked with it today.

### **2.1. The founder of VB**

In 1978 VB was founded by Karel Dillen. This man firmly believed in the efficiency and the good will of fascism and of the national-socialistic ideology, that was propagated by Hitler during the Second World War. According to Dillen, fascism merely has a negative connotation, because people ignore the full historical context of the word. When he created VB in 1978, Dillen made it absolutely clear that, in his opinion, VB nationalism was founded on the idea of



Karel Dillen as a young man doing the Hitler salute

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<sup>15</sup> VLAAMS BELANG, Toespraak Frank Vanhecke op het stichtingscongres Vlaams Belang. Internet, 13 november 2004, [www.vlaamsbelang.org](http://www.vlaamsbelang.org).

ethnicity. In 1990, Dillen declared that “*the Flemish nationalist are the descendants of the collaborators of 40-45*”.

Dillen was a good friend of the French negationist Maurice Bardèche and translated a book from Bardèche. In this book, the acts of cruelty committed to the Jews in the Second World War are denied and claimed to be largely exaggerated. Negationism is the denial of the Holocaust of World War II. In the book that Dillen translated, he claims that the Holocaust and the German concentration camps are only a myth, constructed with the help of Hollywood. Furthermore, it was not an uncommon fact to see Dillen give financial support to organisations like Sint-Maartensfonds, even in the period that he was a member of the European Parliament. Sint-Maartensfonds still exists today and is an organisation that regroups Flemish former SS-collaborators, who supported the fascist ideology.

Karel Dillen sympathised with VMO, though he was never part of the violent, extreme-right Flemish propaganda and action-group. In 1978, VMO was led by Bert Eriksson. That year VMO undertook the secret mission to exhume the body of former VNV-leader Staf De Clercq, who died in 1942. Remember, the VNV was the Flemish extreme-right party of collaborators, led by Staf De Clercq in World War II. VMO secretly exhumed De Clercq from his anonymous tomb, to inhumate him in his family grave. At this commemorative ceremony for Staf De Clercq, the man addressing the crowd of members of VMO was Karel Dillen. He praised De Clercq for being “*One of our people’s greatest*” and “*a permanent example of leadership for today’s Flemish nationalists*”. These actions might date from several years back, but in the summer of 2004 VB still came to flower the monument for Staf De Clercq.

Karel Dillen is from the same generation as the previously mentioned Bert Eriksson. Dillen was a good friend of Eriksson and respected him and his ideology. He did not seem to mind that Eriksson was a member of the Flemish Hilterjugend during WWII and that since then, he had auto-proclaimed himself as being a neo-Nazi: “*Of course we are Nazi’s and racists. Do you have a problem with that?*”<sup>16</sup>. Eriksson was the leader of the Flemish paramilitary extreme-right group VMO for 13 years from 1971 to 1983, which was the year in which VMO was prohibited by the Belgian justice<sup>17</sup>. After one year of prison, Eriksson was

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<sup>16</sup> M. SPRUYT, *Wat u moet weten over het Vlaams Belang – Het beste van Blokwatch*, 2006, EPO, p. 83

<sup>17</sup> NIEUWE ENCYCLOPEDIË VAN DE VLAAMS BEWEGING (1998) Uitgeverij Lannoo, Tielt, p. 1080

welcomed back to the free world by several VB-members, like Filip Dewinter. I have recollected a number of fragments from interviews with Bert Eriksson that prove the relationship and the close attachment between the extreme-right VMO and VB. On his relations with VB and in particular with Dillen and Annemans, Eriksson states: “*Karel Dillen is worth a hundred carats. But that is not important. What is important is that their program is our program*”.<sup>18</sup> On his opinion about Hitler and his national-socialism, Eriksson says: “*I am absolutely convinced that Adolf Hitler was seeking to establish a lasting peace in Europe*”... “*Hitler was a prophet*”... “*As an adult human being you can not believe six million Jews were killed in World War II. At least, I do not believe it*”.<sup>19</sup> Finally, not more than six years ago, Eriksson had this to say about VB: “*It relieves me to know that fifty percent of VB today is still constituted of former members of the VMO. That is a good sign*”.<sup>20</sup>

Eriksson died less than two years ago, in October 2005. Out of fear for negative comments from the political world, but also to the discontent of the hardcore ideological background of VB, the party did not send an official delegation to the cremation of Eriksson. Nevertheless, Filip Dewinter paid a last visit to Eriksson in the days before he died. Many VB members were unofficially present as well, although this is denied by the party. In its magazine, VB decided to publish an ‘in memoriam’ for the deceased neo-Nazi. This consideration is quite a strange way to show that the party has abandoned its racist ideologies since it changed its name to Vlaams Belang.

## 2.2. Filip Dewinter

Lommel is a quiet village like any other in Flanders, with the exception that Lommel possesses a military cemetery, where 40.000 German Wehrmacht soldiers from World War II are buried. Amongst these, there are also 38 Flemish collaborators who enrolled in the ranks of the SS-Wehrmacht during the war. Each year a number of Belgian citizen, nostalgic of the Nazi regime that once ruled their country, meet at this cemetery. They do not do that to flowers the graves of their German relatives, but because they support the fascist Nazi ideology that the 38 buried collaborators once embraced as well. On November 7<sup>th</sup> 1988, a

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<sup>18</sup> B. ERIKSSON, *Interview in Humo, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1987* In: M. SPRUYT, *Wat u moet weten over het Vlaams Belang – Het beste van Blokwatch*, 2006, EPO, p. 86

<sup>19</sup> B. ERIKSSON, *Interview in Panorama BRT, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1976* In: M. SPRUYT, *Wat u moet weten over het Vlaams Belang – Het beste van Blokwatch*, 2006, EPO, p. 86

<sup>20</sup> B. ERIKSSON, *Interview in Het laatste nieuws, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2001* In: M. SPRUYT, *Wat u moet weten over het Vlaams Belang – Het beste van Blokwatch*, 2006, EPO, p. 88

team of reporters filmed this happening and reported on the presence at this meeting<sup>21</sup>. Several members of the VMO, Voorpost and of course Bert Eriksson were all there to honour the national-socialistic movement, Together with Filip Dewinter and Gerolf Annemans, today's number one and two figures of VB. In 1988, both Annemans and Dewinter were already members of the federal parliament for VB. Only four days earlier Dewinter had declared on camera that he had nothing to do with national-socialism. Of course this Nazi-respecting ideology of Dewinter is not very presentable for a member of parliament, so Dewinter never dares to show it publicly anymore. But the gap between what VB is and what VB claims to be is pretty spacious.

Many current members of VB were formed in the ranks of VMO. Like Eriksson said in 2001: *"It relieves me to know that fifty percent of VB today is still constituted of former members of the VMO. That is a good sign"*<sup>22</sup>. Dewinter is one of those VB members and used to be a member of the violent Flemish paramilitary VMO. He was also the leader of the nationalistic



Dewinter's solution to insecurity

student movement NSV and created the NSV department in Brugge. Dewinter had the reputation of being a very aggressive man. In a documentary of Jean-Claude Defossé we see Dewinter, easy to recognize despite the fact that he is wearing a helmet, marching in the ranks of the VMO during a manifestation for the expulsion of foreigners<sup>23</sup>.

Filip Dewinter has a lot of friends in the ranks of Nazi's, anti-Semitists, and other fascists, like Bert Eriksson, Staf De Clercq or other men convicted for treason like Cyriel Verschaeve or August Borms<sup>24</sup>. Furthermore, Dewinter was the guest speaker on December 1<sup>st</sup> 2001 at a gathering of the former SS-collaborators of Sint-Maartensfonds. That evening Dewinter would start his speech with the words: *"My honour is truth"*. This is nothing less than the oath of the German SS-soldiers during World War II<sup>25</sup>. It seems a bit contradictory that at the same time Dewinter was also working hard to win the votes of the Jewish population of Antwerp, to become city mayor. The Jewish population is very large in Antwerp, but also very powerful

<sup>21</sup> J-C. DEFOSSE, *La face cachée du Vlaams Blok* (documentary, 2004)

<sup>22</sup> B. ERIKSSON (2001) *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> J-C. DEFOSSE (2004) *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Filip Dewinter declared this in a debate in 1992 at the Antwerp University of UFSIA.

<sup>25</sup> M. SPRUYT, *Ibid.* p. 84

and can be an important asset for a city mayor candidate. Once again, a VB leader is masking his true ideology and his background to attract more voters for his cause.

### 2.3. Other VB figures

Some other current and former VB members are worth discussing as well. Jacques Georgin was an FDF militant, attacked by a commando of the VMO, while he was hanging electoral campaign leaflets in Brussels. Severely injured by his VMO aggressors, Georgin died from the consequences of his injuries. One of the VMO aggressors, Roeland Van Wallegem, was arrested and condemned for complicity to unintentional murder. This would however not prevent the inculpated Van Wallegem to become member of the parliament for VB.

Xavier Buisseret used to be a member of parliament for VB, since he was elected in 1995. Before that, he was the leader of the VMO and was also one of the editors of 'HARO', the VMO magazine that openly supports the negationist ideology, openly attacked immigrants, published texts of Hitler, Göring and Goebbels<sup>26</sup>, and dedicated multiple articles to its disbelief of the Holocaust.<sup>27</sup> Xavier Buisseret resigned from VB in 1997 and from his functions in the parliament, when he was condemned for paedophile acts on two thirteen and seventeen years old girls within the offices of VB. With his resignation, VB wished to set an example of the kind of people that were not welcome in the party. Buisseret is however still active in the party, but he only works within the VB walls, hidden from the public.

Wim Verreycken has been a member of parliament for VB since 1989 and only recently resigned. Like many other members of VB, Verreycken has participated in the violent riots of the VMO militia. Video fragments show him marching in the ranks of the VMO and insulting families of the victims of the Nazi regime. When VMO was forbidden and dissolved as a private militia, Voorpost to continue the work of VMO. While Verreycken was still Senator of VB he attended the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Voorpost. At the meeting, he led the crowd in the singing of the official song of VMO, standing proudly in front of a birch cross: the symbol of Sint-Maartensfonds, the Flemish organisation for Nazi-collaborators during World War II<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> VOS, Louis (1998) *The extreme right in post war Belgium: From nostalgia to building for the future*, In: Larsen, Stein Ugelvik (Eds.) *Modern Europe after Fascism. 1943-1980s* New York, Columbia Press, p. 1373

<sup>27</sup> HARO Magazine (<http://www.blokwatch.be/content/view/410/47/lang.nl/>)

<sup>28</sup> J-C. DEFOSSE (2004) *Ibid*

One of the co-founders of Voorpost and editor of the negationist magazine HARO is Roeland Raes, who has been a member of the federal Senate for VB since 1995. While he was still a VB-Senator and vice-president of VB, Raes attended a celebration of Sint-Maartensfonds in 2001. In 2004 Raes even gave a lecture at a meeting of this same former SS organization. Famous racist exclamations of Raes towards Jews include the following: “*Jews are a problem that we do not consider very often, because we have less Jews in Belgium than in The Netherlands. But they have their own country, so a Jew belongs in Israel.*”<sup>29</sup> Raes betrayed himself when he expressed his negationist ideology in an interview that was filmed by the Dutch media organization NCRV: “*The systematic deportation has happened. But whether it was really planned that they would all die during the war, that is another question*”... “*I seriously put the official number of casualties in doubt and doubt also that all the camps were built for extermination.*”<sup>30</sup> Shocked, the Flemish newspapers of the following morning were entitled: “*VB vice-president denies the holocaust*”<sup>31</sup>. Negationism is a forbidden ideology in Belgium since 1995. The party made Raes resign and pretended that it could not tolerate this kind of ideology inside its ranks. When, in 2005, the RTBF reporter Jean-Claude Defossé paid an unexpected visit to the VB headquarters in Brussels with a crew of reporters, he discovered the same Roeland Raes still working actively for VB, but of course underground.<sup>32</sup> Once again it was proven that the gap between what VB claims to be and what VB really is, is pretty spacious.

Francis Van Den Eynde has been a member of parliament for VB since 1991 and he still is today. He is also one of the co-founders of Voorpost. In 2001, the federal parliament discovered that Van Den Eynde is supporter of the Nazi-regime, as he attended the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the former SS’ers of the Sint-Maartensfonds, in Antwerp. In 1988, Van Den Eynde was also one of the speakers at the meeting of the Austrian fascist organisation AFP, created by a Flemish SS-officer of World War II. VB also maintains close ties with this AFP.

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<sup>29</sup> R. RAES, *Interview in Algemeen Dagblad* In: *Een portret van Roeland Raes* (<http://www.student.rug.ac.be/als/portret.htm>)

<sup>30</sup> R. RAES, *Interview in Network Magazine* (February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001)

<sup>31</sup> DE MORGEN, edition of February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2001

<sup>32</sup> J-C. DEFOSSE (2004) *Ibid.*

It is no coincidence that Frank Vanhecke was appointed<sup>33</sup> the new president of VB in 1996, replacing Karel Dillen. Vanhecke had a much more acceptable past than the two other candidates, Annemans and Dewinter. In his younger years, Vanhecke ‘only’ committed acts of violence with Voopost against Francophones in the suburbs of Brussels. In reality, Vanhecke also has ties with the negationist ideology, but he just does not shout it out as much as the others. In the German neo-Nazi newspaper *Deutsche National-Zeitung*, Vanhecke however declared in relation to the negationist ideology: *The falsification of the history of World War II fills me with abomination*<sup>34</sup>. As new president of VB, Vanhecke is polishing off the sharpest edges of the VB program to attract new voters and to pretend that VB has become a more moderate party after it was condemned for racism in 2004.

### **3. Internal VS. External VB Communication**

The internal communication of VB is the news that the party brings to its members in a monthly magazine on different topic. This magazine is called *Vlaams Belang Magazine* (VBM), and used to be called *Vlaams Blok Magazine*. Their external communication is the propaganda that VB uses to attract citizen. It is directed to non-members of VB in the hope that these adhere to the ideas of VB. This external communication is formulated in a journal called *Vlaams Belang Krant* (VBK) and used to be called *Eigen Volk Eerst krant* (Own People First journal). It is important to remember here that there is not party more to the right than VB. Therefore, there is no alternative for hardcore rightist voters; they can not walk over to another extreme right party. VB knows this and is free to deliberately change its program into a softer discourse in order to attract more moderate voters as well. If this is true, there should be a difference between the internal and external communication of VB.

#### **3.1. Internal VB Communication**

In VBM, the most discussed topic are the elections, which is a topic related to an occasion and not a specific part of the VB ideology. Next to elections, the most discussed topics, are: ‘general policies and governance’, ‘immigration’ and ‘security’<sup>35</sup>. The top spot is reserved for

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<sup>33</sup> In VB the new president of the party is not elected, but appointed by the old president who chooses his successor. Different studies analysing the internal democracy within the Flemish political parties have revealed that VB is by far the party with the least internal democracy. For a party like VB, that constantly claims that the fundamental rules of democracy in Flanders and in Belgium are being violated, the party itself has no notion of internal democracy. Once again the discrepancies between the propaganda and the ‘real VB’ are illustrated.

<sup>34</sup> M. SPRUYT, *Ibid.* p. 147

<sup>35</sup> DE WIT O., FRANSEN W., GREEVEN G., JORISSEN M., KUYPERS F., ROBBERECHTS K., ROMBAUT H., SMETS G., SWINNEN J., VAN DER AUWERA N. & VERMUNICHT S. *Het Vlaams Blok*

‘general policies and governance’, because it is composed of the negative critique from VB towards the other political parties and their policies, regarding current events. Other topics that also appear are ‘the independence of Flanders’ and ‘Europe’. In its internal communication, VB filters the current events of society and then relates its own program viewpoints to these topics. However, the same topics are often brought up in every edition of VBM. The most discussed groups in the VBM articles are: ‘government and its members’, ‘VB and its members’, ‘other parties and their politicians’ and finally ‘foreigners’<sup>36</sup>. In virtually each VBM article, the opinion of a member of a co-worker of VB serves as the standard opinion. Only in extremely rare cases the internal VB communication pays attention to the opinion of ‘the man on the street’.

The discourse in the internal VB communication is almost entirely negative. The most negatively treated subjects are non-VB politicians, followed by the media, political parties other than VB, foreigners, and finally Belgian Francophones. For example, a VBM edition of 2005 stated: “*Since decades, all sorts of North-African and African foreigners come to Europe through legal and illegal ways and don not adapt themselves to the cultural society, but do adapt themselves in a socio-economic way to benefit from our welfare system.*”<sup>37</sup> Together with this negative attitude in their internal communication, it is remarkable that in 94% of all articles, VB criticizes but does not offer an alternative solution to the discussed problem.<sup>38</sup> Vlaams Belang takes a very negative tone in its internal publication, but hardly ever proposes solutions.

### 3.2. External VB Communication

In VBK, which is directed to every Flemish citizen, the most frequently discussed themes are: ‘security’, ‘general policies and governance’, and ‘immigration’<sup>39</sup>. In each edition of the journal, these same topics are addressed. Sometimes other items as ‘social policy’, ‘Flemish independence’ are also discussed. VBK pays much attention to the current events of society and relates them to the VB ideology in the journal. This method is used to inform the citizen of the general ideology of Vlaams Belang. The groups that VBK talks about the most are the

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*binnenste buiten : Het verschil tussen realiteit en profilering* Leuven: Faculteit Sociale Wetenschappen, Departement Communicatiewetenschappen (2002-2003), p. 57

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 61

<sup>37</sup> VLAAMS BELANG (2005) *Vlaams Belang Magazine*, nr.12 , 25-12-2005

<sup>38</sup> DE WIT O., FRANSEN W., GREEVEN G., JORISSEN M., KUYPERS F., ROBBERECHTS K., ROMBAUT H., SMETS G., SWINNEN J., VAN DER AUWERA N. & VERMUNICHT S *Ibid.* p. 64

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 51

government and the members of government, followed by foreigners, and finally VB and its members.<sup>40</sup> In a majority of its articles, VBK pays the most attention to the opinion of VB members, but the opinion of the ‘man on the street’ is much more consulted than in VBM. One article out of five is dedicated to this opinion.<sup>41</sup>

Just like in VBM, the negative tone of the articles is also present in VBK. The members of government and the non-VB politicians are portrayed in a negative way in every single article in which they are discussed, while VB-politicians and VB-members are depicted in a positive way every time. The VBK edition of March 2007 stated: “*Security is a basic right. The extremely weak policies of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice have abandoned the weakest members of society*”<sup>42</sup>. Also the other political parties in Belgium, foreigners, and Belgian Francophones are treated in a negative way 9 times out of 10. The VBK edition of March 2007 stated: “*Not only does Wallonia count six times more unemployed people than Flanders, but Walloon workers are also more often sick on an average basis compared to Flemings, and finally every Fleming annually pays 2100€ to Wallonia*”<sup>43</sup>. Just like in VBM, no concrete solutions are proposed in the external VB communication, except when the article specifically discusses a VB policy. In every other case, the articles are limited to criticism.

### **3.3. Comparing internal and external communication**

The first difference between the two forms of communication is that they talk about different themes. The focus in the external communication lays on themes like policy, security and Flemish independence, where the internal communication focuses more on elections, policy and immigration<sup>44</sup>. The internal communication addresses the subject of elections a lot more, although this theme appears in the external communication as well, but only to present the party members of VB. In the VBM, it is assumed that the reader already knows who the people of the party are and therefore more stress is laid on the ideology of VB.

A second difference is that the external communication shows a lot more connections to the current events<sup>45</sup>. It criticises the way government policies handle the current events and then

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54

<sup>42</sup> VLAAMS BELANG, *Vlaams Belang Krant maart 2007*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> DE WIT O., FRANSEN W., GREEVEN G., JORISSEN M., KUYPERS F., ROBBERECHTS K., ROMBAUT H., SMETS G., SWINNEN J., VAN DER AUWERA N. & VERMUNICHT S. *Ibid.* p. 67

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

relates those current events to the VB ideology, explaining that all the negative events would not happen if VB decided. Furthermore, VBK appears only during times of electoral campaigns, indicating that VB tries to persuade people of the value of its ideology with the publishing of VBK.

A third difference are the subjects that are most discussed in both publications. VBK talks more about the government, the immigrants and the members of VB. VBM focuses first on the government as well, but then on VB, and then other political parties<sup>46</sup>. Many subjects that are treated in the internal VB communication, like social movements, foreign political parties and media personalities are simply not mentioned in the external publications. The reason for this has to do with the complexity of articles. Where VBM can treat more complex subjects, VBK needs to contain more simple and basic topics, to make sure the people it is trying to seduce understand what VBK says. This conclusion is also strengthened by the fact that VBK pays more attention than VBM to the opinion of the 'man on the street'. The only apparent similarity between the journal and the magazine is that neither of them proposes concrete solutions or alternatives when it criticizes.<sup>47</sup>

From the comparison between VBK and VBM, it can be concluded that VB uses different communication strategies, depending on the people the party is addressing. Both publications target specific groups of people and their contents, as well as the way they bring the VB ideology depend a lot on the targeted group. VBM is directed towards VB-members who do not need to be persuaded anymore. The magazine can therefore afford to discuss more complex issues, as its readers do not need to be convinced of the VB ideology anymore. VBK, on the other hand, has to attract the people to VB and has to remain direct and not too complex. As a result, VBK is more a tool of propaganda and becomes less objective in its contents than VBM. Because the magazine addresses the members of VB, it can analyse the topics in a deeper way and can touch a wide variety of topics. The journal is focused on the entire Flemish population, so the use of propaganda language and the linking of the VB ideology to current events show that the journal tries to convince the population to adopt the VB ideology. VB has no problem in modifying its message depending on the group it is addressing. When the goal is to convince people, VB automatically treat less topics, but at the

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68

<sup>47</sup> DE WIT O., FRANSEN W., GREEVEN G., JORISSEN M., KUYPERS F., ROBBERECHTS K., ROMBAUT H., SMETS G., SWINNEN J., VAN DER AUWERA N. & VERMUNICHT S *Ibid.* p. 71

same time it will link them to its program. It will constantly criticize the actual government and its policies, without offering suiting alternatives. The important conclusion here is that VB is able to change its electoral message to attract more voters. Depending on the group it is addressing, VB will bring a different message. Confronted with the softer VB program for electoral purposes, the hardcore rightist voters will not walk over to another party for two reasons. One, there is no other far-right alternative on the political spectrum. Two, their VB ideology remains in VBM, the communication that is specifically directed to them, and not to the rest of the Flemish population.

Since the verdict of the Court of Appeal of Ghent, where VB was accused of being a political party promoting racist ideas and spreading discrimination, the discourse in its publications has not changed. For example, the late 2005 edition of VBM showed a burning car and big letters on top saying : “*Stop immigration*”<sup>48</sup>, referring to the violent troubles in the suburbs of Paris. VB instantly tried to assimilate this image with the Belgian society and discriminated immigrants by associating violence in general with immigration. The tone that VB uses is still the same and the change of name of the party has not come with an improvement in this area. The fragments placed above, cited as examples, prove that VB still uses discrimination of selected groups of people in its propaganda.

#### **4. Discrepancies between the VB program and VB behaviour.**

The point of this last part of my thesis is to consider some points of the official VB program and compare them with VB parliamentary proposals, VB viewpoints in their internal propaganda to its members and with official statements by party leaders. Each discussed topic will first discuss the official party program and then it will indicate the inconsistencies with official VB sources. With this comparison it is once again my goal to look for discrepancies that indicate the double face of Flemish extreme-right.

##### **4.1. Freedom of expression**

VB always claims to be the ultimate defender of the right to free expression. With every direct or indirect attack towards the party, VB always claims that it is being victimised by the other political formations in the country and that its right to free expression is being violated. As such, VB has been claiming for over two years now that the verdict of the Court of Appeal

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<sup>48</sup> VLAAMS BELANG (2005) *Vlaams Belang Magazine*, nr.12 , 25-12-2005

of Ghent, that ruled against VB for being a racist party, was an attack to VB's fundamental freedoms of expression and association<sup>49</sup>.

#### **4.1.1. In the VB program**

Quite ironically, the 'new' VB program that was established after the verdict of the Court of Ghent states explicitly that everybody who is living on Flemish territory may enjoy the freedom of religion as well as the freedom of philosophy of life. VB also guarantees the right of free expression, right to information, the prohibition of censorship and the right to the free development of the personality<sup>50</sup>. Together with this freedom of expression, VB also states in its program that it is in favour of a free media, independent from political pressures and free from censorship on the contents.

Furthermore, the VB program asserts the democratic values as one of the most important points in its program. Following on that statement, VB wishes to achieve the independence of Flanders from Wallonia to restore the democratic equilibrium that has been lost today. VB supports a democratic society in which the rights of every citizen, no matter the political preferences, will be guaranteed. VB claims that today the power to govern the country lies with small pressure groups, like trade unions, courts or party headquarters, while the power should lie more with the parliament, which is representing the will of the Flemish citizen. All these points have been taken directly from the official VB party program.

#### **4.1.2. The 'real soul' of VB**

While VB may claim that the Court of Appeal of Ghent was a ruling against its freedom of expression as a party, some leaders of the party showed their true face on the day of the judicial decision. Walking out of the court, Gerolf Annemans physically threatened the judges of the Court: "*The names of all the main judicial actors of the VB-trial are marked in my memory forever. They are warned for the rest of their career.*"<sup>51</sup> For a leader of a party that guarantees the democratic values like the separation of powers it is very disturbing to threaten the judicial branch, especially for someone who is a member of the legislative power and strives to become a member of the executive power. The leaders of VB reacted furiously against the verdict and claimed loudly that it was an attack on the freedom of speech of the

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<sup>49</sup> VLAAMS BELANG (2007) *Vlaams Belang Programma* (10-04-2007, <http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/index.php?p=21&id=2>)

<sup>50</sup> VLAAMS BELANG (2007), *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> G. ANNEMANS, *Uitspraak 15-04-2007* (10-04-2007, [http://nl.wikiquote.org/wiki/Gerolf\\_Annemans](http://nl.wikiquote.org/wiki/Gerolf_Annemans))

party. However, they seemed to forget that even in a democratic society that upholds the right of freedom of speech; when this freedom is used for propaganda that creates an image of hate towards foreigners, this freedom becomes a crime.

Different proposals that VB has made within the parliament over the last years exceed all the boundaries of moral correctness in being obviously discriminating on the basis of the ethnical background of the person involved. The VB proposal to limit the unemployment compensations for immigrants, as well as their financial child support to a maximum of three children can hardly be called anything else than racist. VB may say in its program that it supports the freedom of religion, but on the other hand it has tried on several occasions to have the number of mosques inside the city centres reduced<sup>52</sup>. Furthermore, in 2004 VB officially tried to forbid the traditional political debates at the ‘Gentse Feesten’<sup>53</sup>. For a party promoting free expression and media without censorship this demand was rather ironical. On the right to free expression and when he was still in function, former VB president Karel Dillen once stated that somebody should: “*put all the journalists in front of a canon and I will shout: fire!*”<sup>54</sup> In fact the hate that Flemish extreme-right nationalists nourish for all types of media is just as old as Flemish extreme-right nationalism itself<sup>55</sup>.

While VB pretends to the basic principles of democracy, the question remains how much democracy a party like VB, that has no internal democracy, can really guarantee. Research has proven that VB is by far the party with the least internal democracy of all the Flemish political parties. In fact VB can easily be called an undemocratic party<sup>56</sup>. For one thing, the VB president is not elected, he is appointed by the former president. Secondly, there is no influence of the VB members in party decisions. The decision-making within the party occurs top-down, meaning that the large basis of members takes no initiative, but only listen to orders from the party-top that is very limited in number of persons. Finally, the party never

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<sup>52</sup> F. DEWINTER, *Vlaams Belang programma* (10-04-2007, <http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/index.php?p=1&id=168>)

<sup>53</sup> The Gentse Feesten is a music and theatre festival in the city of Ghent (Belgium). It starts on the Saturday before July 21 (Belgium's national holiday) and lasts ten days. The last day (always a Monday) is known as *De dag van de lege portemonnees* (*The day of the empty wallets*) alluding to the fact that many people have spent their last penny at the festival. Their ten days of political debates reach a high level of thought, with intellectuals and professors discussing the most recent societal problems.

<sup>54</sup> KAREL DILLEN, *Interview in Gazet Van Antwerpen*, September 30th, 1991

<sup>55</sup> P. DE MOOR, *Brieven aan mijn postbode, Will Tura en Peter Vandermeersch*

<sup>56</sup> J. JAGERS, *Eigen democratie eerst! Een comparatief onderzoek naar het intern democratische gehalte van de Vlaamse politieke partijen*. In: *Res Publica*, 2002, Nr. 1, Universiteit Antwerpen, 2002

votes. All important decisions are taken unanimously by the leaders of VB.<sup>57</sup> While it claims to be in favour of referenda to the population regarding important decisions that would be implemented and this way create a more democratic society, VB remains unable to guarantee the respect of the democratic values within its own party. Once again the difference between what VB claims to be and what VB really is, is proven.

## **4.2. Socio-Economic Policy**

The socio-economic policy of VB, or rather the inexistence of this policy, has always been very criticised by other parties. For example, VB was often accused of caring only about the rights employers and not about employees. The right to strike, trade unions and labour rights in general were never much liked by the VB leaders.

### **4.2.1. In the VB program**

It is noteworthy that in the new VB program, not a word is said about the potential difference in perception between employers and employees. VB states that the wage policies in Flanders should be separated from those in Wallonia, since the wages and the unemployment in Wallonia are both higher than in Flanders. This is a disguised message to attract both the Flemish employees and employers to vote for VB, together as one group with the same interests against the Walloon economy. VB explicitly confirms this as it states that '*Flemish employers and employees will both benefit from the economic policy VB*'<sup>58</sup>, which it promises to be both positive for the wages as well as for the companies.

The critique that VB has on trade unions is mentioned in the program, but this critique is given in a very careful way. Instead of admitting its real point of view, the VB program talks about the fact that trade unions have shown their historical significance and that today they have to deal on too many occasions with problems in the political parties instead of assuring the interests of the employees. The VB program only touches the subject of reforming the trade unions briefly as it states that these reforms are necessary to fight against corrupted union policies. It also expresses the desire to create independent Flemish trade unions, as the

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<sup>57</sup> M. SPRUYT, *Ibid.* p. 40-46

<sup>58</sup> VLAAMS BELANG, *Vlaams Belang Programma: Een welvarend Vlaanderen – Werkgevers en Werknemers* (14-04-2007, <http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/index.php?p=21&id=7>)

existing trade unions are related to the traditional political parties and sometimes exclude members of the Flemish-nationalistic movement<sup>59</sup>.

Another curious fact related to the VB socio-economic policy is that their former viewpoints on the right to strike have completely disappeared from the VB program. VB has always been very sceptical about the effect and the use of strikes by employees, but it seems that this point of view was not welcome in the new VB program, though it was an explicit part of the VB program before the party choose to rename itself. Nevertheless, there are still plenty of newspaper articles available on VB's opinion on the subject from the period after the verdict of Ghent that prove that VB is still opposed to the free use of the right to strike. The only difference is that they do not wish to express it anymore in their official program.

#### **4.2.2. The 'real soul' of VB**

VB has always been a party more concerned with the rights of the employers. The Belgian economic newspaper 'De Tijd' is a politically independent paper and came to this conclusion as well after analysing the texts that resulted from the VB economic congress of November 24<sup>th</sup> 2005. Before this economic congress, VB promised to listen to employers and employees all around Flanders in order to consider the opinion of everyone. The truth is that almost only employers were consulted. While VB likes to state proudly that they took into account the opinions of roughly 3000 Flemish enterprises for its congress<sup>60</sup>, the truth is that 3000 were contacted by VB, but only 178 of those responded to the VB initiative by sharing their viewpoints for the economic congress<sup>61</sup>. Furthermore, the preparatory texts that VB has used for its congress are all texts coming from the employer side of companies, while the side of the employees, like trade unions, is not even mentioned. Today VB has the reputation of being more concerned with the right of the employers and is actively trying to pretend it cares for the rights of the employees just as much, in order to win their votes as well.

Here again the double face of VB is very flagrant as on the one hand it tries to charm the employees to win their votes by making the new VB official program 'employee-friendly', but on the other hand VB is also discussing the fact that it wants to reduce the liberties of the right to strike and the liberty of action of the trade unions. VB has always been opposed to

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<sup>59</sup> VLAAMS BELANG, *Vlaams Belang Programma: Een welvarend Vlaanderen – Vakbonden* (14-04-2007, <http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/index.php?p=21&id=7>)

<sup>60</sup> VLAAMS BELANG, *Vlaams Belang Magazine juni 2005*

<sup>61</sup> M. SPRUYT, *Ibid. o.c. p. 180*

strikes and trade unions. In the eighties and nineties, a VB representative in parliament demanded the prohibition of strikes in key economic sectors, as well as in the sector of public transport. In those years, VB used to go to the point of calling strikes a crime. These proposals were made both in 1983 and in 1997, which might seem like some time ago, but it highlights the way of thinking within the party. Moreover, the parliamentarian who demanded the prohibition is still one of the leaders of VB today. In October 2005, a VB parliamentarian declared that *“strikes are useless. They frighten investors and slow down the economy. It is inadmissible that employees shut down a street.”*<sup>62</sup> Afraid to lose the votes of the employees, the new official VB program does not speak about strikes; not a word in 75 pages. At the same VB economic congress the topic was discussed and the official consensus that emerged was that the right to strike should be restricted.

A last flagrant contradiction is related to the results of the same VB economic congress of 2005. The official VB publication that was produced during the congress had the following to say about immigration: *“In the long run, it is possible that undesirable jobs are filled in by non-EU citizen.”*<sup>63</sup> Undesirable jobs are jobs for which society has trouble to fill in the job opportunities. The point is that this statement is a complete rejection of the VB viewpoints regarding immigration. Since its origins, VB has never stopped to call for the expulsion of immigrants and for work for the Flemish people. Suddenly after this congress in 2005, to accommodate the Flemish economic sector, VB renounces its most ancient claim by stating that non-EU immigrants could fill in the jobs that the Flemish citizen do not fill in.

### **4.3. Brussels**

The official VB program regarding Brussels is very clear. Flanders should become an independent nation and this independent Flanders should have Brussels as its capital<sup>64</sup>.

#### **4.3.1. In the VB program**

The idea behind this VB claim is easy to understand: Since Brussels is geographically entirely surrounded by Flemish territory, Brussels is a part of Flanders and should therefore become the Flemish capital. On the other hand, the fact that 90% of the population of Brussels is French-speaking is of course not mentioned nor dealt with in the official VB program.

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<sup>62</sup> F. VAN GAEVER, *Interview in De Morgen, Oktober 2005.*

<sup>63</sup> M. SPRUYT, *Ibid. o.c. p.175*

<sup>64</sup> VLAAMS BELANG, *Vlaams Belang Programma: Vlaamse staat – Brussel, hoofdstad van Vlaanderen* (13-04-2007, <http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/index.php?p=21&id=1>)

Nevertheless, VB believes firmly that since Brussels is historically a Flemish city, it should be part of an independent Flanders. VB wants Brussels to become Flemish again.

In an independent Flanders, Brussels would become the capital of the new Flemish nation, and instead of being a bilingual area, the official language would be Flemish. The French speaking people would only enjoy language facilities. VB wishes to make the French-speaking citizen of Brussels Flemish citizen, even though these people do not consider themselves as Flemish citizen. Within Brussels, VB would then create a ‘Council of the French-speaking people in Brussels’ that would be responsible for French-spoken cultural activities and French-spoken educational system<sup>65</sup>. In other words, the 10% Flemish speakers would rule over the 90% French-speakers who would become something like a protected ‘minority’ in Brussels. For a party claiming to be the protector of the basic principles of democracy, this is at the least an awkward way to deal with representation of the local population.

Finally, around Brussels, some municipalities enjoy what is currently known as facilities. Despite the fact that these municipalities are in Flanders and are not part of Brussels, their citizen have the possibility to receive administrative procedures in French instead of Dutch. Since the 1960’s the majority of the population in these municipalities has become French-speaking. VB calls for the immediate abolishment of those facilities because these municipalities are on Flemish territory. Brussels would then become a Flemish speaking area with facilities for the French speaking people<sup>66</sup>.

#### **4.3.2. The ‘real soul’ of VB**

A few years ago, many current VB leaders and parliamentarians used to march in the ranks of the VMO and Voorpost to protest violently against French-speaking people in Flanders. Under the slogan ‘*Franse ratten, rol uw matten!*’<sup>67</sup> Filip Dewinter, Gerolf Annemans and others rallied in the streets to propagate their hate towards French-speaking people in Flanders. Voorpost is in favour of an independent Flanders in order to form one nation with the Netherlands and consequently Voorpost declares that its goal is to make Brussels Flemish again. However, the Voorpost methods for achieving this goal are not always innocent, as

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> VLAAMS BELANG, *Vlaams Belang Programma: Vlaamse staat – Brussel, hoofdstad van Vlaanderen* (13-04-2007, <http://www.vlaamsbelang.org/index.php?p=21&id=1>)

<sup>67</sup> Slogan of the VMO meaning: French rats, roll your mats! (i.e. Get out!)

they include the organisation of rallies in the municipalities enjoying facilities to set buildings on fire during these rallies<sup>68</sup>.

Today's double face of VB regarding the matter of Brussels is quite flagrant. Since Brussels is in Flanders, VB is doing everything it can to win votes there as well. However, the local population consists in 90% of French-speaking people and this local population can not be convinced to vote for VB if it is exposed to the traditional VB message of hate towards French-speaking people in Flanders. VB has found the perfect solution to this problem. While in the rest of Flanders the VB lion shows claws and fangs towards French-speakers in Flanders, the VB lion in Brussels is disguised as a sheep, friendly to French-speakers. In Brussels and only in Brussels VB distributes its propaganda in both French and Dutch. Furthermore, the VB propaganda in Brussels never utters a word about Brussels as capital of an independent Flanders, nor about the abolishment of facilities in the municipalities around Brussels, nor about the fact that VB wants to turn Brussels Flemish again. Those three points are however clearly stated in the official VB program and form an important part of the VB propaganda in the rest of Flanders. Once again, this proves the double message of VB with the sole aim to attract more voters during the elections. The VB trick seems to work. In the documentary of Defossé, we see French-speaking people in Brussels going from door to door, to distribute the VB propaganda, ignoring totally what messages and ideology this propaganda contains.<sup>69</sup> This shows how uninformed the VB voters and supporters generally are. VB has touched them by adjusting its program to one of their needs. The rest of the VB program is consequently of lesser importance to them.

Brussels as capital of Flanders has been an irrevocable and long-standing goal of VB. The question is however how long VB will actually pursue this goal. A recent poll addressed to the Flemish citizen has revealed that seven people out of ten do not want Brussels to become the capital of Flanders. Of those people, no less than 95% would see Antwerp as the capital of Flanders. This poll was only conducted very recently, in March 2007<sup>70</sup>. It will be interesting to see if from now on, VB will attach less importance to this point of their program, in order to do what they seem to do best: adapt their apparently flexible program to the likes and dislikes of the population with the only goal to obtain more votes.

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<sup>68</sup> J-C. DEFOSSE (2004) *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> J-C. DEFOSSE (2004) *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> DE MORGEN, *Zeven op tien Vlamingen wil Brussel niet als hoofdstad* (13-04-2007, <http://www.demorgen.be/dm/nl/nieuws/belgie/404690>)

## **V. Conclusion**

VB is not the political party it claims to be. There is an enormous difference between the party the Flemish citizen believe they are voting for and the true face of VB. The game that VB is playing consists on the one hand in the careful concealing of its extremists elements that could potentially frighten the average Flemish citizen, and on the other hand in the changing of its program and its electoral message, depending on the crowd it is addressing. Meanwhile, in its heart and soul, VB remains true to its extremist origins to satisfy its ideological background and its hard line supporters. The only goal of this trick VB is playing on the Flemish citizen is to convince more people to embrace the VB ideology. VB can afford to hide its extremist elements and to soften its electoral discourse, because the hard line ideological background of the party knows the real soul of VB. Furthermore, VB is the only extreme-right political formation in Flanders, meaning that these hard line supporters of VB have no alternative party to walk over to.

Different elements in this thesis have illustrated that VB deliberately changes its program and hides its extremist elements. First of all, VB has not changed as a party the day it became Vlaams Belang. A new declaration of principles that only theoretically removed its racist and discriminating contents, a new party symbolism that refers to the extremist ties of VB and several declarations of the party leaders prove that the softer image VB pretends to have adopted is fake. Vlaams Belang is just as racist as the convicted Vlaams Blok.

Secondly, different VB representatives have a particularly dark history. VB is doing everything it can to keep this dark side hidden from the Flemish public. VB was founded by Karel Dillen, a man who recently passed away, but believed in the good spirit of fascism, supported the negationist thought and had several close connections with collaborators or organisations for collaborators of World War II. Filip Dewinter, the most powerful and most influential man within VB today, honoured the national-socialistic movement, was a member of the VMO and also spoke at a celebration of an organisation of former SS-collaborators. Different VB members and representatives also have ties with the negationist ideology, like Roeland Raes, Xavier Buisseret and current VB president, Frank Vanhecke. Others are tied to organisations of former SS-collaborators, like parliamentarians Wim Verreycken and Francis Van Den Eynde.

Thirdly, a comparison between the internal and the external VB publications reveals that VB deliberately changes its electoral message, depending on the group of people it is addressing. The internal publications are addressed to the VB members only, they discuss more complex issues and they contain the hardcore VB ideology. The external publications are a propaganda tool, addressed to the whole population. They discuss only a limited number of less complex subjects and produce a softer and more acceptable version of the VB ideology. The people VB is trying to convince of its ideology receive a lighter and modified version of the real VB program, often related to the problems that these people encounter in their daily lives. VB intentionally misleads the Flemish citizen, by confronting them with a VB program that has been adjusted to their personal needs.

Finally, the official VB program shows some surprising discrepancies with the true face of VB. The party program presents VB as the supreme defender of the basic principles of democracy and the freedom of expression, but in reality the behaviour of different VB leaders proves the contrary. In the area of socio-economic policy, the new VB program tries to break with its reputation of a party favouring the rights and needs of employers. But the results of the VB economic congress of 2005 show that VB is still opposed to the right to strike, that VB wants to limit the influence of trade unions and that the opinion of employers is still more important to the party than the opinion of the employees. Finally in Brussels, VB is trying to seduce the French-speaking electorate with bilingual propaganda in which not a word is said about the official VB program for Brussels: A Flemish-speaking city, capital of an independent Flanders, where the French-speaking population would only enjoy language facilities.

Many people believe that VB should be allowed to take the power, even if it is simply to show how disastrous the situation would become under their leadership. I personally like to compare this solution of VB taking the power to a sinking petroleum tanker. Once the tanker is sinking, people start to realise the gravity of the situation. As a result, measures will be taken to prevent this catastrophe from happening in the future. But a sinking petroleum tanker also causes irreparable damage to the environment because of the leaking oil. Just like the tanker, VB will also cause irreparable damage by implementing certain policies and naming people to certain positions. Do we really need this extreme eye-opening situation, before we realise the potential damage this party will cause ?

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