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The Times May 09, 2005

The language battle that is tearing Belgium apart

FROM ANTHONY BROWNE IN BRUSSELS

LANGUAGE wars between French and Flemish-speakers in Belgium have reignited, sparking riots, bringing the Government to the brink of collapse and prompting some commentators to say that the country is "finished".

The dispute, over whether 120,000 French-speakers living in Flemish areas should have the right to elect French-speaking politicians, arouses high passions in a country split between the two languages.

As the apparently innocuous spat in an electoral district just outside Brussels escalated out of control, demonstrations ended in violent confrontations with police. Senior government ministers cancelled all other work for emergency negotiations, but failed to broker a deal over the weekend.

"It is clear — there is no progress," Laurette Onkelink, the Francophone Socialist vice-premier said.

The unresolved dispute will now be handed over to the federal parliament to try to broker a deal.

"For the Government, for the majority and the country, this week will be pivotal," Johan Vande Lanotte, the Institutional Reform Minister, said.

Such is the anger on both sides of the linguistic divide that the French-language Le Soir newspaper wondered on its front page: "Is Belgium finished?"

The linguistic schism is so deep that no political party yet straddles the language divide. There are two separate Socialist parties, one French and one Flemish, a dialect of Dutch. There are two national theatres, and universities and hospitals are either French or Flemish, with doctors sending patients to a particular hospital on the basis of their language.

Belgium — the last surviving artificially created state in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia — has tried to resolve the tensions by dividing itself into three semi-independent regions. In the north is the Flemish-speaking Flanders, where the largest

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political party is the separatist Vlaams Berlang; in the south, the poorer French-speaking Waloonia; and embedded within Flanders is Brussels, the only region of the country that is officially bilingual, although in practice it is more than 80 per cent Francophone.

The latest dispute has arisen because Brussels is surrounded by a commuter belt in Flemish territory and French-speakers living there want to have the same language rights as if they lived in Brussels.

In Flemish communities, all official business and advertising has to be in Flemish, making it difficult for French-speakers to have dealings with their local authority.

The Flemish, who make up 60 per cent of the 10.5 million population, complain that in many areas, most notably Brussels, French is taking over. Brussels was historically a Flemish city — and is still the capital of the Flanders region, as well as the national capital — but it has become almost totally Francophone, making the Flemish resentful that they have difficulty using their own language in their own capital.



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