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# Local democracy : how to make a change

Belgium is a highly decentralised state where the Communes, what we called our local entities, existed before the nation state. As early as the 13th or 14th century, cities freed themselves from the authority of the Princes and obtained from them charters of freedom. The Commune is in my country a strong identity, and inhabitants are very attached to it. It is a level of power close to the citizen. I was a regional deputy for 15 years. I never had the same satisfaction as I have now in my local elected office. As a local elected representative, I am contacted daily by citizens. As a member of Parliament, this almost never occurred. I can see projects I am at the origin of being concretely implemented and this is what motivates me. The mandate of a local elected official lasts 6 years in Belgium. This provides stability in the mandate and a period of time that allows for action. I am personally on my sixth elected mandate and the fifth as deputy mayor.

I entered into politics at the age of 16. I was a student delegate when I was in secondary school and then at university. I have always had the will to be attentive, to serve others and to invest myself for what I believe to be the general interest.

Over the last 30 years, politics has changed a lot in Belgium. The population is much more demanding and sometimes even aggressive. Local elected representatives are much more contacted than in the past, especially since the emergence of e-mail. Responding to these and dealing with remarks takes much longer. On the other hand, there is a tendency in my country to have more and more complex procedures before a decision can be taken. There is also a tendency towards a decrease of local self-government. Belgium is a federal state. Regions (the equivalent of the Oblasts in Ukraine) have a lot of power. A regional centralism appeared and is now much stronger for the municipalities than the centralism of the former national state. And then, as everywhere since the financial crisis of 2008, financial means become scarce. Elected officials therefore have to take much more steps, to knock on many more doors in order for their projects to be achieved.

In my opinion, political commitment and taking responsibility are necessary to make a difference. Change is a permanent necessity. A bit like when riding a bike: if we do not pedal, we fall.

The danger when you are in charge is to allow yourself to be locked up in the dictatorship of everyday life. It is necessary to manage day by day what needs to be managed but it is also necessary to have perspective. It is necessary to be able to think and act in the long term. That is why I decided to advocate for the drafting of a communal development plan in my municipality; a plan for nature which sets out the actions to be taken to improve the protection of wildlife in my commune as well as biodiversity; many specific land-use plans (regulatory plans defining urban planning rules for the development of a given district for several decades); development models for selected neighbourhoods (indicative plans setting objectives for spatial planning, mobility, public infrastructures, etc.); and a plan for lightning which has set out objectives and programming for the renewal of public lighting for the next 35 years. Thanks to five-year plans, the two communal cemeteries have been renovated or are in the process of being renovated and are now managed without pesticides. In addition, I have obtained the programming and realisation of several storm basins, which are indispensable to avoid recurrent floods in some districts.

Change is never improvised. It is studied, it is prepared. Change also requires will and perseverance.

When we talk about change, we have to be aware that not all changes can come from public authorities, or from municipalities. In many areas the main actor is the citizen, for example when it comes to nature protection, energy saving, public cleanliness, not taking the car for very short trips. What a municipal administration, what elected officials can do, and what I do regularly, is to raise awareness and inform citizens, and support them in their efforts.

We must also constantly convince them, and communicate to this end, of the merits of the actions that we implement and obtain their support.

Thank you for your attention.

Marc Cools