

## **Philippe Van Parijs**

### **Where Fourth for the School?**

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With EU enlargement looming, Brussels will soon need a fourth European School. But where? As close as possible to where EU employees currently live? In the countryside that surrounds Brussels? Both of these options would be disastrously short-sighted. If we don't want Brussels to fail as a harmonious, sustainable European capital, it is imperative to look for a site both within the Brussels Region and outside its South-East quarter.

Why inside the Region? Fundamentally because, while Brussels will and must increasingly be the capital of all Europeans, Belgium must not become their colony. In a democratic multilingual country, acute tensions between communities can only be durably avoided if, with the exception of its capital, its territory is partitioned into language areas and if one can realistically expect those who want to settle in one of these to have the humility to learn the local language and get their children to learn it. Such an expectation is not realistic in the case of high-income settlers whose jobs does not require them to learn the local language, whose children do not mix with local children in local schools, and whose uncertainty about how long they will stay weakens whatever incentive they might otherwise have had to invest in learning the local language.

If, for example, one tried again to establish in Flanders a major educational institution functioning mainly in one or more languages other than Dutch, it would soon attract a sizeable population with little prospect of adequate learning of the local language, as was the case when the Flemish

town of Leuven housed the French section of Louvain University. The memory of the latter's traumatic expulsion in the late 1960's should serve as a lasting warning against recreating analogous situations.

However enticing the green fields of Brussels' Flemish periphery may look to the naive eye, appropriating them to build the fourth European School would amount to dropping a time bomb. As the self-contained community of high-income, politically enfranchised but Dutch-ignorant foreigners would grow in size and self-confidence, it would be increasingly resented as a threatening colony of arrogant invaders who expect the locals to adjust to them rather than them to the locals.

Nor would choosing a site in the more remote Walloon Brabant be any wiser. As Belgium's history has never put them in that position, many francophones will find it difficult to imagine a massive inflow of settlers with little desire of learning their language. But as the power of French keeps declining, in European institutions and in the world, the Flemings' experience and sensitivity are better guides than their own to determine whether or not accepting a large European school on their territory would soon prove the source of bitter resentment. To rule out the Walloon option, however, there is another, far more straightforward argument: it would be sheer ecological nonsense to build a school for thousands of children over 30km from where their parents' jobs are and will remain.

Hence, it must be clear once and for all that the schools made necessary by the development of the Brussels-based European institutions will need to remain within the administrative boundaries of the Brussels Region. Having been picked as Europe's capital, Brussels will have to come to terms with the implied responsibilities. This will not be easy, and big blunders must be avoided at all cost. One of them would be to put the 4th where it might seem most obvious to put it.

A quick glance at a demographic map reveals that Europeans are heavily concentrated in the South-East quarter of the city. Housing costs are already much higher there than elsewhere. The average rent for large apartments, for example, is 75 percent higher in the seven South-Eastern communes than it is in the seven North-Western ones. Putting the fourth school in the South East would further contribute to driving the original and immigrant populations to the west bank of the canal and foster the formation of ghettos.

A couple of sites outside the South East have been mentioned, namely a large privately owned wasteland next to the former station of Tour & Taxis and the spacious premises of Laeken's Ecole des Cadets, in the processes of being gradually vacated by the Ministry of Defence but already coveted by the Brussels Police. For a large European school, there won't be many more sites to choose from. If Europe is to have a sustainable capital, we cannot afford to waste time naively looking elsewhere — nor to be too fussy.

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*The total population of the three existing Brussels-based European schools is over 7000 pupils. It is estimated that the number of school-age children of Brussels-based EU employees will be growing by about 500 a year in the coming 5 to 6 years. The decision to create a new school needs to be taken by the Board of Governors of the European Schools, an intergovernmental body that deals with all 11 existing European schools (in 7 countries) and is*

*responsible for staffing them and funding their running and equipment costs. The government of the host country is committed to providing the sites and the buildings. In Belgium, the commune concerned must deliver the building permit after consultation of the local community, and the Region concerned is responsible for a coherent planning of its territory.*