

## THE VIVANT EXPERIMENT IN BELGIUM

Yannick Vanderborght\*

In the days following the multiple elections of June 13, 1999, Belgian newspapers were unanimous: VIVANT, a two-year old party entirely unknown until a few months earlier, had achieved more than an honourable result by attracting about 130,000 votes (i.e. about 2%) at each of the elections that took place that day.<sup>1</sup> The remarkable fact was that the party platform practically reduced to a single proposal: the introduction of an unconditional basic income. Founded in 1997 by high-tech businessman and member of BIEN Roland Duchâtelet, VIVANT took part in elections at any level for the first time. With no public funding or elected representative, the party had made its name by a large-scale campaign, essentially financed with Duchâtelet's personal means. He would later confess that his contribution to the campaign had reached the impressive amount of Euro 2,500,000. Through huge posters, advertisements in the press and massive doses of leaflets, VIVANT had been successful in attracting attention on its central proposal. 'You will receive an income at the age of 18', 'Mum, VIVANT will give you an income', 'Free yourselves with the basic income', 'Choose your liberty with basic income': with VIVANT, basic income was making a conspicuous and controversial entrance in Belgium's public debate.<sup>2</sup>

Since the mid 1980s, the idea had mainly been supported by the two green parties, the Francophone ECOLO and the Flemish AGALEV.<sup>3</sup> ECOLO adopted the idea of an unconditional and sufficient basic income as a medium-term objective at its first socio-

---

\* Université catholique de Louvain, Chaire Hoover d'éthique économique et sociale (3, Place Montesquieu, B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, vanderborght@etes.ucl.ac.be). This paper was written within the framework of the PAI project 'The new social question' (Belgian Federal Government, Prime Minister's Office, Federal Office for Scientific, Technical and Cultural Affairs). I wish to thank Jo Buelens, Roland Duchâtelet, and Albert Mahieu for providing me with information. I also wish to thank Axel Gosseries, Philippe Van Parijs, and Jeroen Vergeylen for useful comments.

<sup>1</sup> Results for the Chamber of Deputies. Source (for all results): Ministry of the Interior (CD-ROM, July 2, 1999). Registered voters: 7,343,466; actual voters: 6,656,709. Voting is compulsory. Belgium's electoral system is based on Proportional Representation. For further comments on VIVANT's results, see below and 'Vivant prend un siège, le FN une claque', *La Libre Belgique*, 15 juin 1999; 'Kleine partijen presteren wel als verwacht. Vivant is enige partij met ambitie', *De Morgen*, 14 juni 1999; 'Kleine partijen tellen niet mee', *De Standaard*, 14 juni 1999. See also 'Le scandale de la dioxine provoque la défaite de la coalition sortante', *Le Monde*, 15 juin 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See 'La création controversée d'un "parti de l'emploi" en Belgique', *Le Monde*, 1 juillet 1998.

<sup>3</sup> AGALEV: currently 7.0% of the vote (Chamber of Deputies); ECOLO: currently 7.4% of the vote (Chamber of Deputies).

economic congress in 1985, but it has always been a ‘theoretical horizon’ rather than a policy proposal. In the party’s last economic programme, basic income is symptomatically presented as ‘one of the points of reference as regards the politics of income redistribution’.<sup>4</sup> As far as AGALEV is concerned, basic income has tended to be more visibly promoted as a short-term reform. According to its most recent programme, ‘the basis of the new green social security will consist in a guaranteed basic income for everyone’.<sup>5</sup> The related idea of a Negative Income Tax (NIT) was somewhat more popular in other political circles. It was discussed in the seventies, in a radical version, within the Flemish liberal party (PVV) and the Flemish employers organization (VEV), and resurfaced in a more modest version during the last electoral campaign, when the Francophone liberals (PRL) led by Secretary of State Eric André pushed forward the idea of a low NIT (for workers only) as a way of reducing unemployment traps.<sup>6</sup> However, it is not even mentioned in the new federal government’s agreement co-signed by the two liberal parties, the two socialist parties and the two green parties.

Before the birth of VIVANT, the pure basic income proposal had mostly been discussed in the academic and intellectual milieu. In the French-speaking part of the country, the debate had been launched in 1985 by the so-called ‘Collectif Charles Fourier’, a group based at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve which included, among others, Philippe Van Parijs and Philippe Defeyt (now federal secretary of ECOLO).<sup>7</sup> For several years, another version is being defended by Jean-Marc Ferry, a French philosopher teaching at the Francophone University of Brussels.<sup>8</sup> In Flanders, the debate has been fostered by left-wing journals like *Komma* and the *Vlaams Marxistisch Tijdschrift*<sup>9</sup> and by social scientists such as Walter Van Trier (University of Leuven) and Jacques Vilrocx (Flemish University of Brussels).

So, the VIVANT phenomenon might provide an interesting opportunity to assess the political chances of basic income in Belgium whether from the point of view of its electoral potential or of the receptivity of politicians and commentators. It may also provide some insight, more broadly, into the prospects of basic-income-focused parties in any industrialized country.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Changer d'économie. Le programme économique d'ECOLO*, Bruxelles : ECOLO – Luc Pire, 1999 : 7), our emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> URL : <http://www.agalev.be/partij/programma/index.html> (January 2000).

<sup>6</sup> See for example ‘L’impôt négatif creuserait la pauvreté et les inégalités’, *Le Soir*, 16 février 1999. On NIT in Belgium, see also VLEMINCKX, A. (1978), *De negatieve inkomstenbelasting*. Brussel : Diensten van de Eerste Minister.

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Defeyt was elected federal secretary in November 1999. He repeatedly restated his commitment to basic income, including in his recent book *Le droit d'être actif. Pour une écologie du temps* (with BOUCHAT, T.–M., Gerpennes : Quorum, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> See FERRY, J.–M. (1995), *L'Allocation universelle. Pour un revenu de citoyeneté*, Paris : Cerf.

<sup>9</sup> See respectively ‘Naar een scheiding van arbeid en inkomen?’, *Komma*, n°22, april 1985, and *Vlaams Marxistisch Tijdschrift*, vol. 28, n°1, maart 1994.

## Composition and historical background of the movement

Since the early nineties, Roland Duchâtelet is head of a micro–electronics company which has a turnover of millions of Euro.<sup>10</sup> He is a civil engineer and graduate in economics ; he also holds a MBA. Now in his early fifties, he has accumulated a sizeable wealth. This success does not prevent him from scrutinizing the redistribution mechanisms of western welfare states. In 1994, he published a book (*Belgium Inc. Report to the Shareholders*<sup>11</sup>) in which he suggested an alternative socio–economic model based on the introduction of a full basic income. He presented his views at the 1994 BIEN congress in London.<sup>12</sup> Duchâtelet also got in touch with various political organizations to which he presented his reform proposals. Everywhere, he says, he met with a polite refusal. He concluded that there was only one way out : to set up his own party. In the Spring of 1997, he founded VIVANT, ‘the oxygen of politics’.

The advertising campaign he soon launched was not long in bearing fruits. Roland Duchâtelet was invited by the press to explain his projects. In every interview, when asked about his motivation, he answered along the line : ‘If I don’t do it, who will ?’.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes compared to the American multimillionaire Ross Perrot, Duchâtelet objects that he is not seeking power for himself. His ambition, he asserts, is to feed the debate on the future of European welfare states, with the hope that his ideas will be taken up by others.

VIVANT’s founder took care of all party’s expenses, which allowed him to make the affiliation free, and to rapidly register many new members. In September 1998, about a year after its birth, VIVANT announced being 2,000 members strong. On the eve of June 13, 1999, the party proclaimed having passed the 5,000 members mark – that is even more, for example, than ECOLO.<sup>14</sup> At first sight, one could think that this number of members is not significant since membership is free. However, at the party’s second congress of May 8, 1999, more than 700 people came along to hear speaking on ‘basic income and all its facets’.<sup>15</sup> A considerable number for such a young party.

There is not much information about the exact composition of VIVANT’s public. However, two elements are worth noting. Firstly, at the two congresses or at the local meetings, it seems that the party especially attracted a rather old public. An observer at the party’s first congress in

---

<sup>10</sup> Turnover for 1997 : 22.3 million US\$ (source : *La Libre Belgique*, 16 août 1998). For a detailed description of Duchatelet’s career, see : ‘Wij hebben de kerstman eigenlijk niet meer nodig’, *InterMediair. Het Weekblad voor de Actieve Professional*, 22 december 1998.

<sup>11</sup> DUCHATELET, R. (1994), *N.V. België. Verslag aan de aandeelhouders*. Groot–Bijgaarden : Globe. For a summary, see Winter 1999 issue of BIEN’s Newsletter.

<sup>12</sup> See DUCHATELET, R. (1994), ‘An economic model for Europe based on consumption financing on the tax side and the basic income principle on the redistribution side’, paper presented at the 5th International Conference on Basic Income, London, September 1994.

<sup>13</sup> See for example ‘Ik verkoop alleen ideeën’, *Knack*, 1 juli 1998.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Vivant schaaft zich rond het basisinkomen’, *De Morgen*, 10 mei 1999.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*.

November 1998 noted that most participants were aged between 35 and 60.<sup>16</sup> Duchâtelet himself, after the elections, recognized he failed in his attempt to approach the youth.<sup>17</sup> It may be asserted, however, that all Belgian political parties are in the same situation : all of them are confronted with serious difficulties in mobilizing people under thirty. Secondly, on the socio-professional level, the composition of VIVANT's public seems quite heterogeneous : self-employed, professionals, doctors, managers, pensioners, catering workers, housewives and unemployed people.<sup>18</sup> According to Duchâtelet, 'a negative experience with life'<sup>19</sup> is the common feature of these categories of people. In other words, many members encountered problems with social security organisms, others had to give up the idea of hiring personnel because of tax pressure, still others went bankrupt for the same reasons. In the press, VIVANT was therefore sometimes presented as a party of protesting, 'frustrated' voices.<sup>20</sup>

## VIVANT's Programme

At the end of 1997, huge posters with eye-catching slogans and VIVANT's logo appeared in the Belgian cities. From the outset, this seduction attempt was intended to support the spreading and media diffusion of a complete and well-documented programme. Each slogan squared with a concrete reform proposal, which was clearly explained in various papers, leaflets and brochures. VIVANT's programme,<sup>21</sup> very strongly inspired by Duchâtelet's former proposals, was structured around three main claims, the first one being the most fundamental one. Here is the core of it :

### *(1) Introduction of a Basic Income for every citizen*

Given that 'our society is able to produce enough resources for everyone',<sup>22</sup> VIVANT is calling for the introduction of an unconditional minimum income. Granted to every citizen during his/her whole life, paid on a monthly basis without reference to other resources, the working situation or the marital status, VIVANT's basic income is nevertheless adjusted as the age of the recipients increases. The amounts proposed are the following :

---

<sup>16</sup> 'Vivant houdt eerste congres', *De Morgen*, 30 november 1998.

<sup>17</sup> 'Vivant moet ingrijpend besparen', *De Morgen*, 17 juni 1999.

<sup>18</sup> 'Ik verkoop alleen ideeën', *Knack*, 1 juli 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Duchâtelet, personal communication, September 28, 1999.

<sup>20</sup> See for example "'Vivant", le parti de Roland', *La Libre Belgique*, 16 août 1998.

<sup>21</sup> For a more complete overview of this programme, see among others *Le Vivant*, n°5, Octobre / Novembre / Décembre 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Electoral leaflet, 1999.

- children <18 : Euro 125 (compared to a current average level of family allowance of Euro 90) ;<sup>23</sup>
- from 18 to 24 : Euro 375 ;
- from 25 to 64 : Euro 500 ;
- from 65 : Euro 750 (compared to a current average level of state pension of Euro 795).<sup>24</sup>

It is thus definitely a full basic income that is at stake. In this model, mothers are empowered to receive their children's basic income until their majority. Moreover, a transitional period is promised to those who have paid their contributions for an old-age pension higher than Euro 750.

In its defence of basic income, VIVANT takes the usual arguments. It particularly emphasizes rationalization and simplification of the social protection system, more effective struggle against poverty and exclusion, the end of stigmatizing controls on beneficiaries, an increase of individual freedom, and an effective way of suppressing unemployment traps.

### ***(2) Abolition of the income tax and social security contributions***

This second proposal is aimed at strongly reducing the labour costs by putting an end to the tax on earnings lower than Euro 1,250 and to social security contributions for both wage-earners and employers. A flat tax of 50% would apply to earnings above Euro 1,250.

The expected positive effects of such a measure are strongly stressed : higher net wages for the low paid, less underground activities, less businesses leaving the country.

### ***(3) Compensatory increase of Value Added Tax (VAT)***

Finally, in order to fund the proposed basic income and compensate the government's loss of revenue, VIVANT advocates a massive increase of VAT. With (2) in place, this increase should be calculated in such a way that prices remain constant. In other words, 'the decrease in the labour cost and the increase in VAT are offsetting one another, and retail prices remain the same'.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, VIVANT proposes the introduction of a so-called 'social VAT', the rate of which varies according to the nature of the product (more for luxury and polluting products, less for highly labour-intensive services...). The programme also states that this measure should be implemented at the European level.

---

<sup>23</sup> Source : JACOBS, D. (1997), 'Transferts de solidarité en Belgique : ordres de grandeur', *La Revue Nouvelle*, n°5–6, vol.CV, pp.170–172.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Le Vivant*, n°5, Octobre / Novembre / Décembre 1998.

## Perception by observers and the political world

Before examining the straightforward electoral results, it is instructive to consider how analysts, the media and political circles have perceived VIVANT's programme. Ever since the birth of the party, the Flemish newspapers have been paying some attention to Duchâtelet's views. The Francophone newspapers, instead, have generally confined themselves to critical judgements on the very nature of the party. According to political expert Pascal Delwit, whose remarks were carried by *Le Soir* (main Francophone daily paper), VIVANT's vision is just 'absurd' and its programme, based on basic income, 'ultra-liberal'.<sup>26</sup> In the same way, the new left-of-centre daily *Le Matin* described the basic income-based programme as a 'simplistic message' and the plans of VIVANT's candidates as a 'disparate, disorganized catalogue of protests'.<sup>27</sup> *La Libre Belgique* (centre-right) first dismissed the party as a 'simple marketing product', a 'cheat',<sup>28</sup> while adopting subsequently a more balanced position. In short, these newspapers tended to denounce a discourse perceived as demagogic. However, *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique* became more cautious as the elections were approaching.

The tone was quite different in the Flemish press. Far from calling the programme 'simplistic', the left-of-centre daily *De Morgen* explained to its readership that VIVANT had 'only one theme [basic income], and a rather *complicated* one'.<sup>29</sup> The Christian Democratic *De Standaard* organized a confrontation between Roland Duchâtelet and Bea Cantillon, a senator and social policy professor at Antwerp University vigorously opposed to basic income.<sup>30</sup> The weeklies *Humo* and *Knack* each published a long interview with Duchâtelet.<sup>31</sup> Even though articles on VIVANT were not frequent and often focused mainly on its founder's motivations, the approach was rather positive.

The same contrast applies to the TV channels : while the Flemish public channel VRT news presented VIVANT's programme and briefly explained the principles of basic income, the Francophone public RTBF kept completely silent. 'This is because of political pressures', says Duchâtelet, who was also struck by the difference in press coverage on the two sides. In his view, the contrast is symptomatic of the differences between two cultures : 'the Flemish, he asserts, are

---

<sup>26</sup> See 'Le paysage politique s'enrichit d'une vieille utopie', *Le Soir*, 15 juin 1998.

<sup>27</sup> See respectively "'Vivant" versus Vlaams Blok', *Le Matin*, 2 juin 1999 and 'Vivant, objet politique non identifié', *Le Matin*, 16 avril 1999. See also 'L'extrême démagogie', *Le Matin*, 30 novembre 1998.

<sup>28</sup> "'Vivant", miroir aux alouettes', *La Libre Belgique*, 10 décembre 1997.

<sup>29</sup> 'Vivant, met hulp van positieve boodschap en vele miljoenen', *De Morgen*, 31 mei 1999, our emphasis. According to *De Morgen*, the basic income proposal cannot be demagogic : actually, " everyone has once flirted with the concept " (*Idem.*).

<sup>30</sup> 'Realisme of utopie. CVP-senator Bea Cantillon kruist de degens met Vivant-voorzitter Roland Duchâtelet', *De Standaard*, 6 avril 1999.

<sup>31</sup> See respectively 'Roland Duchâtelet spiegelt dromen voor maar drukt er ook de kop in', *Humo*, 10 februari 1998 and 'Ik verkoop alleen ideeën', *Knack*, 1 juli 1998.

more rational and down-to-earth than the Walloons'.<sup>32</sup> Albert Mahieu, VIVANT's only elected representative, also thinks that 'a businessman [like Duchâtelet] who is in politics arouses more suspicion in the French-speaking population'.<sup>33</sup>

Even more enlightening with regard to the political chances of basic income in Belgium is the attitude of the political world, which remained quite indifferent to the newcomer's proposals. The only exception was the Francophone Christian Democratic Party (PSC), whose think tank took the trouble to analyse the economic feasibility of VIVANT's basic income proposal. The conclusions were clear : 'such a large-scale reform is not sustainable, be it in terms of financial feasibility, as regards the conditions of economic development, or in terms of social acceptability'. Basic income is said to be 'an ultra-liberal plan aimed at reducing social security to a sort of social assistance'.<sup>34</sup> *Le Soir* echoed this report in an article the title of which was : 'PSC buries VIVANT and its basic income'.<sup>35</sup> Taking a similar stand, an official of the Francophone Socialist party declared, speaking of VIVANT's programme : 'nobody can believe that'.<sup>36</sup> The ecologist formations, in which one can find the most people in favour of basic income, remained very critical of Duchâtelet's proposals, always keeping the distance.<sup>37</sup>

All this – the reading of the press in particular – should made us expect that the electoral results were much better in Flanders than in Wallonia or Brussels, and yet VIVANT scored higher in the southern part of Belgium.

## Electoral results

On June 13, 1999, Belgians had to elect their representatives at various levels of power : the three Regional Councils, the two Federal Chambers (Senate and Chamber of Deputies) and the European Parliament. VIVANT entered candidates for all elections, in all districts of the country. All the main formations being split along linguistic lines, it was in fact one of the only parties to do so.

On average, the results varied between 2% for the European elections and 2.4% for the Walloon Regional Council. VIVANT was more successful in urban districts : it obtained 3% in Ghent, Leuven and Charleroi, 4% in Verviers and 5% in Mouscron. The maximum result (7.1%)

---

<sup>32</sup> Roland Duchâtelet, personal communication, September 28, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> Albert Mahieu, personal communication, September 30, 1999.

<sup>34</sup> 'Le revenu de base proposé par Vivant. Argumentaire en 6 questions', Centre d'études politiques, économiques et sociales, Bruxelles, 29 avril 1999.

<sup>35</sup> 'Le PSC enterre Vivant et son revenu de base', *Le Soir*, 27 avril 1999.

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous, quoted in 'Le revenu de citoyenneté, cheval de bataille électorale de "Vivant"', *La Libre Belgique*, 17 août 1998

<sup>37</sup> Roland Duchâtelet, personal communication, September 28, 1999.

was reached in Ronse, a small district 55 km west of Brussels.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, VIVANT obtained only one seat, in the Council of the Brussels Region.<sup>39</sup> Its incumbent will be Albert Mahieu, a colourful figure of the anti-corruption kind. Though a recent convert, he is a strong believer in basic income and is determined to attract the media attention on VIVANT's programme.<sup>40</sup> In spite of the negative coverage in the Francophone press, VIVANT reached its best score at the election of the Walloon Council : 2.4%, compared to 2.0% for the Flemish Council.<sup>41</sup> This is only an apparent paradox. VIVANT, as newcomer and single-issue party, had to rely on protest votes. In Flanders, the competition on that ground is very strong : the far right Vlaams Blok managed to get the greater part of the voters who were disappointed by the existing formations.<sup>42</sup>

With regard to the federal level, the results ranged from 2% for the Senate to 2.1% for the Chamber of Deputies. This electoral outcome made VIVANT by far the most successful among the parties not previously represented in the Federal Parliament : none of them could reach the symbolic threshold of 1%.<sup>43</sup> Its results are comparable to those achieved at first trial by parties which are now well-established (e.g. ECOLO). On the other hand, these percentages are far away from VIVANT's own ambitions, at least as publicly expressed during its two years of existence. In August 1998, Roland Duchâtelet announced that 'VIVANT should attract from 5 to 15% of the votes'. He repeated this forecast at the party's first congress, held in Brussels in November 1998. In May 1999, VIVANT was still proclaiming that it would obtain a seat in almost half of the districts.<sup>44</sup>

Soon after the elections, the press asserted that Duchâtelet was very disappointed at how his movement performed.<sup>45</sup> VIVANT's founder announced a dramatic reduction in the level of his financial involvement, closed down most of the party's local offices, and introduced a membership fee.

---

<sup>38</sup> Results for the Chamber of Deputies.

<sup>39</sup> Unsurprisingly since the election for the Brussels Region is organized in a single 75-member district, whereas all other elections operate with districts of a smaller magnitude.

<sup>40</sup> "Andere" Mahieu haalt enige Vivant-zetel', *De Standaard*, 15 juni 1999. In January 2000, Albert Mahieu left VIVANT. His stated motive lies in Duchâtelet's refusal to work out more seriously the party's basic income proposal. Duchâtelet denies this assertion and has requested that Mahieu resign from the parliamentary seat he owes to VIVANT. See 'Fraudejager Mahieu breekt met Vivant', *De Morgen*, 4 januari 2000 ; 'Duchâtelet : Mahieu moet zetel afgeven', *De Morgen*, 5 januari 2000 ; 'Mahieu démissionne', *Le Soir*, 4 janvier 2000.

<sup>41</sup> For the German-speaking Community Council : 3.3%. This last result is not really significant : the German-speaking Community corresponds to a small district (40,650 voters).

<sup>42</sup> Vlaams Blok : 15.5% for the Flemish Council.

<sup>43</sup> For information only, here are a few results for the Chamber of Deputies. PTB-PVDA (Marxist-Jenunist) : 0.5% ; PC (Communist Party) : 0.4% ; PnPB (Party descended from the so-called 'White Movement' against pedophile criminality) : 0.3%.

<sup>44</sup> See respectively "'Vivant", le parti de Roland', *La Libre Belgique*, 16 août 1998 ; "'Vivant" rêve d'entraîner l'Europe dans son utopie', *Le Soir*, 30 novembre 1998 ; 'Wij zijn de eerste sociaal-liberale partij in België', *De Morgen*, 6 mei 1999. For the Chamber of Deputies, there are 20 electoral districts.

<sup>45</sup> See for example 'Vivant moet ingrijpend besparen', *De Morgen*, 17 juni 1999.

## Conclusions

Even though the emergence of VIVANT on the political scene has contributed to the spreading of the idea beyond academic circles, it cannot be said to have boosted Belgium's public debate on basic income. Media attention above all concentrated on Duchâtelet's personality, and the few discussions on his programme remained mostly polemical. Since the elections, VIVANT seems – so far – to have dropped out entirely from the public attention. In addition to that general conclusion, several lessons can be learned from this original experience. I will only mention three of them.

The first one is suggested by Roland Duchâtelet himself, as he admits having made a mistake in trying to attract immediately a large electorate with such an innovative message. According to him, VIVANT's programme should have been researched more thoroughly and made more credible, with the aim of appealing to 'the innovators'<sup>46</sup> i.e. the youth and the intellectuals. These could later have spread the message. In short, one could say that Duchâtelet is thinking of a strategic implementation of Katz & Lazarsfeld's 'two steps flow of communication'<sup>47</sup> rule.

Secondly, one could assert in the light of this experience that it is not very promising to launch a party exclusively focused on basic income – assuming that the purpose is really to promote this proposal. There are two main reasons. First, a 'credibility problem': VIVANT, as an issue-based party focused on full basic income, was driven into claiming that this measure was an ideal solution for all social issues. The movement was thereby exposing itself to being labelled as 'demagogic' or 'simplistic'. As a foreign observer at VIVANT's second congress put it, 'basic income seemed like a panacea against all difficulties'.<sup>48</sup> On the contrary, if the proposal is included in a more global alternative, its credibility may increase. The second reason is closely linked to the first. The visibility of a single-issue party like VIVANT, focused on a very specific proposal, is extremely dependent on the current political context. In June 1999 in Belgium, soon after the 'dioxin crisis', the debates revolved above all around the quality of food and the control on farm-produce industry. VIVANT had little, if anything, to say on these topics. If social security had been the main theme of the electoral campaign, as it was at previous elections in 1995, the party would no doubt have attracted greater attention in the media and could have made more of a mark.

Finally, the specific nature of VIVANT's basic income proposal, related to a suppression of income taxes on low earnings and social security contributions, prevents us from using its electoral performance as a way of assessing basic income's social acceptability and political

---

<sup>46</sup> Roland Duchâtelet, personal communication, September 28, 1999.

<sup>47</sup> See KATZ, E., LAZARSELD, P. F. (1955), *Personal Influence. The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. Glencoe : Free Press. " Ideas, often, seem to flow *from* radio and print *to* opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population' (p.32).

<sup>48</sup> de JONGE, W., 'Vivant. Basisinkomen als politieke partijgrondslag', *Nieuwsbrief basisinkomen*, n°28, september 1999, p.13.

feasibility in Belgium. VIVANT's public seemed actually tempted by its pure anti-fiscalism at least as much as by basic income itself.

In any case, the experiment goes on. Despite the spending cuts, VIVANT will be present at Belgian local elections of October 2000 and is planning to establish itself in other countries. It has already entered candidates at European elections in France, where it reached 0.71%.<sup>49</sup> Its setting up in Switzerland and The Netherlands is in its early stages. In September 1999, in the aftermath of the elections, it published a new manifesto with the following promising start : 'A spectre is haunting Europe : the spectre of Basic Income'.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Source : *Le Monde*, 15 juin 1999.

<sup>50</sup> VERHULST, Jos, VAN BOGAERT, Mark (Ed.) (1999), *Basisinkomen en Vrijheid. Een Vivantisch manifest*, Brussels : Vivant.