Public Libraries in the Brussels Metropolitan Area

GEORGES VAN BELLAIENGH

The Brussels metropolitan area is composed of nineteen communes which are absolutely independent of each other, except for some points on which negotiated agreements have been reached. As with all the great cities of western Europe, the population of the Brussels metropolitan area has increased considerably since the beginning of the twentieth century, as shown in Table 1. For certain communes (notably Brussels, Molenbeek, Saint-Gilles, and Schaerbeek), the population figures have been going down; for the commune of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, the decrease has been continuous since 1900. All these communes are suffering from the exodus of the population towards the periphery.

Local government is exercised in each Belgian commune by a communal body composed of councillors, a burgomaster, and aldermen. The councillors are elected directly by the residents of the commune who have reached the age of twenty-one. The King names the burgomaster, who is chosen from among the councillors; however, the King may in certain cases name a burgomaster from outside the council, e.g., from among the electors of the commune who are more than twenty-five years old. The aldermen are elected by the communal council from among its members. The number of communal councillors and the number of aldermen vary according to the population of the different communes (from seven to forty-five councillors, and from two to nine aldermen).

All Belgian communes enjoy a great degree of autonomy, the inheritance of an historic past, and sometimes a past of high prestige. The communes cling jealously to this autonomy (which is fully recognized in the Belgian Constitution), and they defend it energetically against all the encroachments of superior authority. The central gov-

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Public Libraries in the Brussels Metropolitan Area

TABLE 1
Comparative Population of Communes in the Brussels Metropolitan Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commune</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1947</th>
<th>1962</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anderlecht</td>
<td>47,929</td>
<td>67,038</td>
<td>86,412</td>
<td>96,454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auderghem</td>
<td>4,685</td>
<td>9,108</td>
<td>18,640</td>
<td>28,935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berchem-Ste-Agathe</td>
<td>1,845</td>
<td>3,851</td>
<td>11,180</td>
<td>16,182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brussels</td>
<td>183,886</td>
<td>154,801</td>
<td>184,838</td>
<td>199,211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etterbeek</td>
<td>18,858</td>
<td>39,813</td>
<td>50,040</td>
<td>53,091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evere</td>
<td>3,892</td>
<td>7,192</td>
<td>15,277</td>
<td>22,754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest</td>
<td>9,509</td>
<td>31,152</td>
<td>47,370</td>
<td>51,856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganshoren</td>
<td>2,891</td>
<td>4,451</td>
<td>9,092</td>
<td>15,942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ixelles</td>
<td>58,615</td>
<td>81,245</td>
<td>90,711</td>
<td>94,135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jette</td>
<td>10,053</td>
<td>16,109</td>
<td>29,484</td>
<td>35,381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koekelberg</td>
<td>10,650</td>
<td>12,502</td>
<td>15,103</td>
<td>16,481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laeken (a)</td>
<td>30,438</td>
<td>40,681</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molenbeek-St-Jean</td>
<td>58,445</td>
<td>71,225</td>
<td>63,922</td>
<td>63,488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint-Gilles</td>
<td>51,763</td>
<td>64,814</td>
<td>61,396</td>
<td>55,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint-Josse-t-N.</td>
<td>32,140</td>
<td>31,843</td>
<td>28,155</td>
<td>23,998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaerbeek</td>
<td>63,508</td>
<td>101,526</td>
<td>123,671</td>
<td>116,984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uccle</td>
<td>18,934</td>
<td>22,565</td>
<td>55,655</td>
<td>71,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watermael-Boitsf.</td>
<td>6,520</td>
<td>10,096</td>
<td>19,683</td>
<td>23,581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woluwé-St-Lambert</td>
<td>3,468</td>
<td>11,300</td>
<td>26,344</td>
<td>38,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woluwé-St-Pierre</td>
<td>2,650</td>
<td>8,072</td>
<td>18,455</td>
<td>33,682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>621,559</td>
<td>798,875</td>
<td>955,428</td>
<td>1,028,249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Annexed to Brussels by the law of April 20, 1925.

The central government is enabled to intervene in the management of the communes, by virtue of certain provisions of the Constitution. Everything which is of communal interest rests with the communal councils, without prejudice of the approval of their acts, in those cases and following that method which the law determines. This leads the central government and the provincial power to intervene and approve or disapprove certain decisions of the communes. Since the laws passed by Parliament are ever more numerous, the control of the State and of the provinces is more and more frequently felt, thus repeatedly awakening the discontent of the communes when approval of certain decisions is not granted. Most of the cases in which the State or the provinces veto the wishes of the communes are concerned with finance, or more precisely with expenditures. Certain Belgian communes are in a difficult financial situation, e.g., those at the center of large metropolitan
areas, the population of which has a marked tendency to emigrate
towards the periphery. This tendency, however, does nothing to reduce
the expenses of these communes, but rather increases budget deficits
from year to year. The governing powers do not always permit these
cities and communes to invest the capital required for the proper or-
ganization and functioning of public services, and especially of public
library services. Buildings, equipment, book collections, and staff suffer
evermously from these hindrances.

Because certain communes suffering from a deficit (including some
with particularly heavy indebtedness) do not make use of the material
assistance which the State could give them, the financial handicap is
increased further. Is it that claiming these grants is repugnant to them,
since in the minds of the persons in posts of responsibility this would
be the same as begging and entreating for the money, when these
communes are so proud of their past glories? Is it that they are afraid
of further incursions by the central power into municipal affairs? Is
it confusion on the part of certain communal functionaries who are
lost among the multiple laws, decrees, and other instructions, and
who neglect to make use of all the possibilities of grants? Is it lack of
interest in everything that has to do with reading? It is not easy to
determine. One thing is certain, however; although the communes
lament their hard times, they do nothing to go against the current or
to attract the support and assistance which are needed.

There are projects in existence which aim at a regrouping of differ-
ent communes, and especially of those which make up the large urban
areas. The authors of these projects claim that the merging of several
adjacent communes would reduce expenses which are currently met
on an individual basis. By centralizing certain procedures, sums could
be made available for other purposes. Will these projects come to any-
thing? All the previous attempts in this direction have failed. Each
party is so attached to his own small area that it is difficult to bring
about the abandonment of any single prerogative, however trifling it
may be. Thus in spite of the wishes of certain municipalities to im-
prove their services to readers, the public libraries suffer from this
situation.

But how is public library service actually organized in the Brussels
metropolitan area? In order to grasp all the aspects of the problem, one
must know that Belgian public libraries are governed by a law which
goes back to 1921. This law envisaged the existence of three types of
public libraries: the communal libraries, established and administered
Public Libraries in the Brussels Metropolitan Area

by the communes; the free libraries, established and administered by private persons; and adopted libraries, former free libraries which are "adopted by the communes" and receive an annual grant from them.

In terms of the law of 1921, all public libraries may receive assistance from the State if a certain number of conditions are fulfilled. But only the communal libraries and the adopted libraries are entitled to financial assistance from the communes. Furthermore, it is on this precise point of grants from the communes that the single modification of the law of 1921 was made in 1947; briefly, from the sum of 0.25 franc in the original text, the financial participation of the communes was increased to a minimum of 1.50 francs for each inhabitant. Since the control exercised by the superior governments over the communes is designed to eliminate from the budgets of those with deficits every item not strictly required by law, in many cases only the minimum of 1.50 francs per inhabitant is allowed. And when the communes are grudgingly permitted to go beyond the legal minimum, it is only to a pitifully small extent (with rare exceptions), quite incompatible with the needs of modern public libraries. Except for a limited number of special cases, then, the communal libraries and the adopted libraries do not enjoy a much happier lot, so far as the cost of running them is concerned, than the free libraries which can count only on their own resources.

This, then, is the dramatic problem: the inability, under the present law, of most public libraries to meet even the obligations of today, much less those of tomorrow. And it is no disparagement to state that the very great majority of Belgian public libraries (and the libraries of the Brussels area specifically) cannot bear comparison with the great achievements abroad. Some isolated efforts show the way that must be followed, e.g., in the region of Brussels, the achievements of the communes of Anderlecht and Ixelles, even of Koekelberg (tomorrow of Jette), and of the independent enterprises like the library located in Woluwe-St-Lambert or the improvements undertaken by the library of the parish of Rosaire, in Uccle.

Another point worth mentioning is the confusion which still persists in the minds of many people who have not made the distinction between the old popular libraries and the true and authentic modern public libraries. Some people think and say "public libraries," meaning the libraries of districts, communes, or parishes, which are intended for relaxation and recreation. The same people say and think "public libraries" when they mean libraries with a definite bias and commit-
ment, whether political, philosophical, or religious. Certainly, such latter libraries are "accessible to every one," everybody "may" use them, but will every reader feel at ease there, and will he find there the book or document or information that he wants?

It is quite evident that these two forms or concepts of libraries both have their \textit{raison d'être}, and that it would be absurd to forbid either. What is regrettable is the attempt to include both under the same term "public libraries." That leads inevitably to misunderstandings, as has happened with the libraries of the Brussels metropolitan area. There is of course still another and more modern concept of "public libraries," meaning those institutions where one can find the whole gamut of opinions—political, religious, philosophical, economic, etc.—all made available in a spirit of absolute impartiality to meet the needs of the population which those libraries serve.

Finally, it must be noted that the founding of public libraries has occurred without any rule. The greatest whimsicality—one would be tempted to say "the greatest anarchy"—has presided over the physical location of libraries, whether public, communal, adopted, or free. The result is that some libraries are hampered or interfere with each other, because they are not far enough apart. But elsewhere, whole districts are completely empty of any institution providing reading matter to the public. In spite of all the obstacles, numerous libraries, communal as well as free, have managed to improve their premises and their collections, proof of the wish of librarians to increase the sphere of influence of the institutions which they hold in trust.

Taking into consideration all that has already been said, Table 2 shows the situation as it now exists. All the libraries mentioned in Table 2 are generally bilingual, i.e., in addition to works in French, they possess books in Flemish, because the Belgian population consists chiefly of these two large linguistic groups, and it is normal for libraries established on the territory of the communes surrounding the capital of the kingdom to reflect this duality. Of the total number of libraries appearing in Table 2, 116 are predominantly French and twenty-five are predominantly Flemish.

If one considers future prospects, the entire system of Belgian public libraries will have to be modernized and organized more logically. Those libraries which serve the Brussels metropolitan area must of course follow this movement. The needs of the present are dictated notably by the demands of the increasing democratization of education, which is bringing more and more young people to institutions of
Public Libraries in the Brussels Metropolitan Area

TABLE 2
The Public Libraries of the Brussels Metropolitan Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commune</th>
<th>Permanent com free</th>
<th>Ordinary ad. free</th>
<th>For Youth com. free</th>
<th>Special</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anderlecht</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auderghem</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berchem-Ste-Agathe</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brussels</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etterbeek</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evere</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganshoren</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ixelles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jette</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koekelberg</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molenbeek-St-Jean</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St-Gilles</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St-Josse-t-N.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaerbeek</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uccle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watermael-Boitsf.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woluwé-St-Lambert</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woluwé-St-Pierre</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>141</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning, whether intermediate, technical, professional, or universities. A greater number of permanent libraries must be established, if the young people are to be furnished with the irreplaceable intellectual tools which books provide. A program of establishing these institutions is under study. Several communes have already begun to transform it into reality, wishing to prove that there is nothing fantastic about these projects. They are, moreover, included in the plans for economic expansion in the next few years, for Brussels is aware, as is the whole of Belgium, that the entire democratic life of the nation depends on this. However, the first step will be to revise the laws to adapt them to the needs of the time. That task can no longer wait.