The beginning: from a movement to a political party

In the seventies the movement “Anders Gaan Leven” (Living Differently) comes into existence as a result of new social movements with a post-material agenda. These movements fight for peace, third world, the environment, social rights and civil rights, women’s rights. Actions are being undertaken against air pollution, nuclear weapons and nuclear energy. In 1977, the movement presents itself to the electorate for the first time, with a limited success.

At the European elections in 1979, the green movement has its first break-through with 2,3% of all votes. This is a rather good result for a non-official political party with neither means nor famous candidates. At the national elections in 1981 the greens win their first seats. Three MPs go to the national parliament, 5 members are elected to seats in provincial councils. One year later, the movement is being transformed into the political party Agalev. In that same year, the party participates in local elections obtaining more than 10% in some constituencies, mostly at the cost of the Christian-democrats. The new political style from Agalev becomes more and more attractive. From that moment on, the greens are present on the political scene in Belgium. By the way, in 1981 Agalev and Ecolo were the first green political parties to enter a national parliament in Europe.

Growing in the eighties

In the eighties, regionalism and Flemish-nationalist outbidding are absorbing Belgian politics. Agalev refuses to participate in this. The party is broadening its themes with a radical green and left social-economic programme. It opposes economic growth, is in favour of re-distribution of labour and of a basic income, as well as of the socialisation of energy infrastructure and financial institutions. Voters are welcoming this strategy. At the 1985 elections the party wins more seats.

In 1984, Paul Staes goes to the European Parliament for the green party. He doesn’t shut himself away in Strasbourg, but can be seen on the streets in actions against environmental degradation caused by industrial big business. Time spirit is on his side, with the “No Time To Waste” Greenpeace t-shirts. In 1989 he gets no less than 13% of all votes.

Down in the dumps in 1995

In the first half of the nineties, Agalev has to swallow some bitter pills. As an opposition party, it gives its support to the state reform in exchange for a tax on one-way beverage packaging. However, later on, the unfaithful coalition parties completely hollow out this piece of legislation until nothing is left over.

In 1995 follows the first real defeat. Traditional politics are being dominated by corruption scandals. Agalev is campaigning on the theme of clean politics but is losing support. As a result, the party realises that it needs to be better organised and decides to go for internal professionalization.

In 1999 several crises in agro-industry and food safety are favourable to Agalev. The party scores a historical result of more than 11% at the Federal, Flemish, Brussels and European elections. Also Ecolo is doing well. In the Federal government, Agalev becomes responsible for i.a. environment, public health, animal wellbeing, food safety and development cooperation. In the Flemish government the greens get responsibility for i.a. environment, agriculture, wellbeing and equality, as well as development cooperation. Objectively speaking, the green ministers can present a rather nice list of achievements. At the Federal level, a decision is taken to exit from nuclear energy, the law on road safety is being strengthened, the food safety agency is created, same-sex marriage is made possible, a law on patient’s rights is approved as well as an anti-discrimination law, regularisation of undocumented persons is carried through and finally a roadmap to 0.7% for development cooperation is made legally binding.

At the Flemish level a clear choice is made for sustainable and organic agriculture, more natural lands and woodlands are added to already existing areas, a pioneering agreement is reached with the health care sector as a response to the “white rage”, measures are introduced for a better quality of life (such as “leave of absence”), for enhancing environmental policy (i.e. soil decontamination and sustainable water management), for more attention to environment and public health, for new instruments for persons with a disability.

Nevertheless, despite these achievements, a negative imaging is mounting around Agalev. Tensions between agricultural and economic policy makers are being built up to the disadvantage of the greens. Coalition partners do not refrain from participating in this, on the contrary. In 2003, this leads to a black page in the history of Agalev. At the Federal elections on May 18th the party goes under the 5% minimum threshold for the award of a seat and is deemed to be clinically dead. However, after the debacle at the elections, the political party Agalev is dissolved and a new party founded: Groen! (Note the exclamation mark.).

Transformation to Groen! in 2004

For the greens, the regional elections of 2004 are a real thriller. They have developed a creative campaign with hardly any means and only a limited number of people. It works, and Groen! gets 7.6% in the Flemish Parliament and 8.0% in the European Parliament. After the elections Groen! goes to the opposition.

Groen! is working hard. After an internal reorganisation and after investing in several thematic congresses, the party is on its way to recovery. The first litmus test confirms this recovery. The local elections in 2006 put Groen! back on the map and bring it up to the level of 1994. In 2007 a generation switch brings a wave of young politicians into Parliament and Senate.

2009 – Today: once more Groen becomes an important political factor
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The party is growing slowly but steadily. Groen! is present in all parliaments. In 2009, when a serious financial and economic crisis is spreading all over the world, other parties and movements are getting convinced of the analyses that had been made years ago by the greens. It is not necessary anymore to shout it out loudly, the exclamation mark can be dropped. And so it goes! Groen! becomes simply Groen. At the national elections in 2009 Groen is winning a few more seats. The local elections in 2012 are the best-ever local elections for Groen, with the highest number of elected municipal councillors, and the highest number of green city council cabinet members. In 2014 the elections are equally successful: on the Federal level Groen is growing to 8.5%, on the Flemish level it even rises to 8.7%.

Today, Groen is unmistakably the opposition leader in the Flemish Parliament. The same goes for the political group “Ecolo-Groen” in the Brussels and in the Federal parliaments. Polls are showing that the party is on the rise. According to a recent poll Groen might even become the third political party in Flanders, with 13.8% of all votes. Groen is looking self-assuredly towards upcoming elections. October 2018 brings local elections and in 2019 we will have Federal, regional and European elections.

Collaboration between Groen and Ecolo

The traditional parties – socialists, Christian-democrats and liberals – were established in the 19th century as national Belgian political parties. In the sixties, when Belgium sets the first steps towards a federal state, these parties split up in Flemish and French-speaking parties. The Belgian ecologists take an opposite direction. From the start there is collaboration on both sides of the linguistic border. In 1990, Ecolo and Groen form a common political group both in the Brussels government as well as in the Federal government. In this way they confirm their commitment to a strong Belgium. Many problems do not stop at the linguistic border, and should be solved on a Belgian level.

Local elections of October 2018 in Antwerp

On October 14th local elections are being held in all cities and municipalities in Belgium. These are of great significance to Groen, everywhere. The city of Antwerp represents a special challenge. Being the biggest city in Flanders, the local election campaign is likely to become of national importance. Former Groen party leader Wouter Van Besien will be challenging the sitting mayor Bart De Wever. Bart De Wever is a popular Flemish-nationalist politician. His party is the biggest one in the Federal and in the Flemish government. Van Besien and De Wever defend different models for society. De Wever stands for the primacy of politics (and politicians), wants to keep cars in the city and defends megalomaniac city projects. The greens stand for citizen’s active participation, mobility with a lot of space for bicycles and public transport, and real estate projects that must deliver on affordable housing.