

‘Consulting the people’ from Le Monde (20 October 1949)

Caption: On 20 October 1949, the French daily newspaper Le Monde focuses on the organisation of a popular consultation in Belgium planned for 12 March 1950 on King Leopold III’s return to the Belgian throne.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 20.10.1949, n° 1.473; 6e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Consultation populaire", p. 1.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

Consulting the people

The issue of the plebiscite on the return of King Leopold III appears to have been settled by the agreement recently reached between the King and the Prime Minister, Gaston Eyskens. The bill will be passed by the Senate on 25 October. It is also very likely to be passed by the House of Representatives, where the Christian Socialists are only two votes short of an absolute majority: they will get them from the Flemish Liberals. At all events, the Liberals do not appear to wish putting the ministerial coalition at risk over an issue that everyone has long wanted settled, just when a settlement appears to be in sight.

The figure of 55 % agreed between Leopold III and Mr Eyskens is the lowest of those envisaged. The Socialists had demanded a majority of 65 %, while the Liberals would have settled for a slightly lower figure. The King, however, can be said to have made a concession by agreeing to a percentage higher than an absolute majority and, above all, by agreeing to abdicate if that percentage is not reached.

In this instance, the plebiscite is advisory. In other words, it will not necessarily determine the issue one way or the other, unlike the plebiscite on the Italian monarchy, for example. Even if Leopold III receives over 55 % of the vote, he is not certain to return to the throne. It has been stipulated that he will evaluate the outcome of the popular vote solely on the basis of the interests of the country. That apparently means that his decision will depend on the distribution of votes.

The King would be in a difficult situation if he were to be approved by a large majority in Flanders but had an equally large majority against him in Wallonia. In that case, his return to the throne would accentuate the division of the country. Leopold III would then look like the King of half of Belgium. Understandably, he would hesitate to take on such a role.

To avoid this eventuality, it had been proposed that the plebiscite should be held at national level, i.e. that the votes be counted in total without any reference to where they were cast. There would then have been no way of knowing how people in Brussels, Liege or Antwerp had voted. Mr Eyskens preferred a vote by constituency, as in parliamentary elections. That is undoubtedly clearer and more honest.

If the outcome of the popular vote is not categorical — for example, if Leopold III gets more than 55 % in Belgium as a whole but a slight minority of votes in Wallonia, the situation could be tricky. It would have to be weighed carefully. However, the final decision will depend on both the King and Parliament.

Leopold III has begun his electoral campaign, as it were, by publishing a document on the surrender of the Belgian army in May 1940. This issue is less controversial today than it was at the time, and it is not so much surrender with which his opponents reproach him as his refusal to accompany his government to Britain. The Belgian people will have to judge the criticism directed at the King and the importance to be attributed to it. Supporters of the monarchy will be asking themselves whether they are strengthening that institution by submitting a King to the popular vote like any Minister or parliamentary candidate. The plebiscite can, however, be seen as a democratic act that, in itself, may not displease the electorate.