

The Provinces in Flanders: between the hammer and the anvil

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Canadian writer Robin Sharma once wrote: “We are all here for some special reason. Stop being a prisoner of your past. Become the architect of your future”.

Doesn't this also apply to the provincial level? Looking far back too much makes no sense to the provinces. Despite the fact that some provinces are rather lost than wealthy, the provinces must focus on the (near) future on their own. In the complex state structure that exists in Belgium but also in Flanders (federal, regional, provincial, local levels, not to mention inter-municipal partnerships), it's not always easy for the provinces to find and assert their place.

In this short contribution, we limit ourselves to Flanders. These last years, successive Flemish governments have mainly focused on local authorities (municipalities and cities). People mostly want bigger (through municipal mergers) and stronger (in terms of administrative power) municipalities and cities. Create larger municipalities and cities may be a problem for the provinces in the future. Some wonder, aloud or not, what will be the role of the provinces in a context of larger and stronger municipalities and inter-municipal partnerships.

In practice, war has been declared in the provinces. From now on, the provinces are competent for territorial powers and no more for person-based powers (sport, well-being, culture, youth). The financial means of the provinces have also been drastically reduced. The number of provincial councilors has considerably decreased in recent years (2006:411; 2012:351; 2018; 175) as the number of deputies (mandatory executives) which increased from 6 to 4. The objective is clear: in the end we want to achieve a maximum of 2 levels of government, namely the municipalities and the Flemish level. It's obviously a difficult position for the provincial level. Nevertheless, the provinces should not be placed in a losing position or play the "calimero". And finally, they have the necessary democratic legitimacy. Representatives are elected every six years, which is certainly an important asset.

What the provinces must devote themselves more, it is to make people understand that they are present for their inhabitants. It can certainly be even better. By the way, the provincial policy will have to be implemented for and in association with the population. Some elements will be therefore important, namely a strong political leadership, a solid provincial administrative organization and good relations with the population.

Do provincial politicians, for example, have enough knowledge about citizens' expectations? Involve the population. After all, the provinces must succeed in convincing the people of their importance.

Ms. Soleil may not be able to say with certainty what the future of the provinces will look like. However, there is only one message for the provincial level: “create your futur”. The start signal has been given. Or as Hagar said to his son: “Do you know the difference between that mountain and that pebble? No, daddy... Lack of ambition”. “Take the lead” is also an important commandment for the provincial level if we still want to play an important role in the (near) future.