

VINCENT DUJARDIN

(Introduction de Michel Dumoulin)

«Jean Duvieusart (1900-1977). Europe, Wallonie-
Bruxelles, Léopold III»

Gerpinnes, Quorum, 2000, 272 p.

Jean Duvieusart is a minor but interesting figure in the history of twentieth-century Belgium. He is worthy of attention not so much for his limited achievements (two periods of office as Minister for Economic Affairs in post-war governments and above all his controversial brief period as prime minister in the summer of 1950) than for how his career demonstrates the resilience and subsequent decrepitude of the Belgian political elite. His early career was deeply predictable: the son of a Catholic notable of the Charleroi region, he studied Law at Louvain before returning to his home area to practise at the bar in Charleroi. At the same time, he began a steady if unremarkable ascent through the echelons of the Catholic hierarchy of the Hainaut : as *bourgmestre* of his commune, as a member of the *conseil provincial*, and in 1939 as *premier suppléant* on the Catho-

lic list in the parliamentary elections. The war had remarkably little impact on this unremarkable progress. Called up as a reserve officer, he participated in the *exode* of the summer of 1940 but avoided capture as a prisoner of war and was soon re-established at the helm of his commune as *bourgmestre* for the duration of the German occupation.

The Liberation provided the opportunity for him to take his next step up the Catholic political ladder. Because of the death of one of the pre-war Catholic deputies, Duvieusart was sworn in as a parliamentary deputy in September 1944 and soon became part of the new generation of Catholic politicians who participated in the construction of the *PSC-CVP*. Honest Jean, with his phlegmatic solidity, unremarkable pragmatic views and a barrister's ability for making competent speeches, was exactly the sort of figure whom De Schrijver and his colleagues needed for the new party. Consequently, Duvieusart soon became one of the central figures in the PSC in Wallonia and in 1947 made his entry into ministerial office as Minister for Economic Affairs in the Spaak-Eyskens government. His activities as minister reinforced his reputation as a safe and reliable pair of hands, who surrounded himself with a *cabinet* of younger technocratic figures, and dealt with the manifold complexities of the Benelux treaty, the implementation of the Marshall Plan and the restructuring of the Belgian coal industry. Nothing, however, suggested that he was destined for high office or that he was about to become one of the central actors in the most profound political crisis of Belgium's twentieth-century history.

Nevertheless, as is well known, Duvieusart became prime minister of the homogeneous Catholic government in the summer of 1950 which facilitated Leopold III's return to Belgium before, finally, he bowed to popular and political pressures and agreed to abdicate in favour of his son. Duvieusart was the unremarkable generator of these remarkable events. He was at most a *léopoldiste de raison* but certainly not *de cœur* and no bond of intimacy developed between monarch and prime minister during the numerous late-night meetings of the summer of 1950. Indeed, Duvieusart's behaviour during the crisis was entirely in line with his previous political career: legalist, cautious, and rather unimaginative. He never quite seemed to get on top of the magnitude of the events in which he was involved and, though the eventual outcome was very much in accordance with his pragmatic temperament, he somehow failed to appear to be its architect.

It was after the events of 1950 that Duvieusart's hitherto unremarkable career began to become interesting. The bitterness created within Catholic ranks by the *dénouement* of the *question royale* would have been unlikely in itself to have had a durable legacy. Though he harboured some deep grievances, notably towards Albert De Vleeschauwer (who broke ranks with his colleagues in July 1950), but also perhaps towards Eyskens, whose refusal to serve as prime minister in 1950 had lumbered him with the unwelcome job, Duvieusart had returned to ministerial office as Minister for Economic Affairs from 1952 to 1954 and had lost little of his reputation as a solid centrist politician. In fact, however, he soon began to drift away

from the Catholic Party and, subsequently, from Belgian political life. He became an active member of the deeply unimportant European Assembly (subsequently Parliament), began to make numerous foreign visits as a member of parliamentary delegations and turned himself into an authority on colonial matters. Though he remained in the Belgian parliament until 1965, he had long since ceased to be a major figure within Catholic politics and had instead become, by his deeply moderate standards, something of a heretic. By the late-1950s, he was bitter at the increasing Flemish dominance of Belgian political life (symbolised no doubt for him by Gaston Eyskens) and had begun to speak out at what he perceived to be the violation of the linguistic rights of the francophone populations of the Brussels periphery. With the surge in regional politics in the later 1960s, Duvieusart's grumbling suddenly came to acquire a wider relevance and, rather accidentally, he emerged as the distinctly nominal head of the hastily-constructed alliance between the *Rassemblement wallon* and the *Bruxellois FDF*. Duvieusart's last political career in the early 1970s was therefore not as an elder statesman of Belgium but as the legitimator of a movement of francophone defence with its distinctive whiff of Poujadist resentment.

Duvieusart's career, and more especially its peculiar coda, is intriguing for what it suggests about the crises of the Belgian political system after the Second World War. Up until 1950, nothing, apart from a very few sentimental *wallingant* gestures in the 1930s, hinted at his subsequent evolution. He was the archetypal centrist Catholic politician, uncritically committed to the Belgian political system, and the well-

developed forms of compromise politics that it encapsulated. In that respect, he was very similar to other members of a rising generation of Christian Democrat politicians, such as most obviously Auguste De Schrijver. After the *question royale*, however, his abandonment of Belgian national politics for, initially, the supranational pomposities of Euro-politics and, subsequently, the shifting sands of francophone regionalism, symbolised, not merely his personal disenchantment, but a wider disaffection among francophone politicians with Belgian political life. The reasons for this shift are in some respects not difficult to identify. The steady decline of the Catholic pillar in francophone Belgium and, more especially, the perceived capture of the commanding heights of Belgian politics by a new generation of self-confident and talented Flemish politicians were both of great importance. This seems particularly clear in the case of Duvieusart, whose family personified a notable tradition of Catholic politics in the Hainaut that was visibly expiring. In addition, he was well placed to resent the ambitions and the superior talents of Flemish politicians such as Eyskens and De Schrijver, whose mastery of languages and general air of technical and economic competence made them so much better equipped for the post-war political world than the stolid and exclusively francophone Duvieusart. Behind such factors there does, however perhaps lurk a larger story. Duvieusart was not merely manoeuvred out of Belgian politics; he very tangibly defected. And in this respect, he suggests that the cracking of the integrating structures of the Belgian political elite had its origins not so much in the rise of a more assertive Flemish elite than in the defection from Belgium of

the francophone bourgeoisie which had given it life.

Little of this is evident from Vincent Dujardin's superficial and essentially uncritical biography. Its chapters are distinctly uneven: unsurprisingly, given the author's previous research, it is the chapter on the *dénouement* of the *question royale*, which is the most impressive. Other areas of Duvieusart's career, notably his political activities before 1940, are covered no more than superficially. The greatest problem with the book lies, however, in Dujardin's determination, and that of Michel Dumoulin in his Introduction, to present the stolid Duvieusart as one of the founding fathers not merely of the European Parliament but also of the Walloon movement. Both are highly distorting and anachronistic lenses through which to view Duvieusart's career. His Europeanism never rose beyond the level of the platitudinous clichés of the age, and was always mitigated by a rather too uncritical enthusiasm for De Gaulle. As for his *wallingantisme*, it appears even in Dujardin's account to be little more than a negative emotion, driven by rancour at the personal and political success of the Flemish and seasoned with sentimental references to the history and geography of his home area. Far from marking the birth of something new, Duvieusart's career encapsulated the death of the old.

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