Governors in Flemish provinces. Between bureaucratic and political leadership?

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Introduction

The Flemish institutional framework at the provincial level offers an interesting angle to study leadership in a changing context. First of all there is the particular institutional position of the governor. In the second place there are some interesting internal and external reforms with an impact on the context in which the governors function.

As on any other government level, we can distinguish a legislative branch (the provincial council) and an executive branch (the provincial college) of the provincial government. Unlike the mayor, who chairs the college at the municipal level, the provincial college is not chaired by a politician. It is the governor, a civil servant who is appointed by the (regional) government, who chairs the college. This situation is very particular, but not unique for Flanders. In The Netherlands the governor, appointed by the Crown (hence called the ‘commissioner of the Queen’), not only chairs the provincial college but also the provincial council. For some time now the function of governor in Flanders is surrounded by controversy. Especially the other members of the college (elected by the council) seem to be gradually less inclined to accept this situation. At this stage it is important to remark that all governors had a political career before being appointed by the government. This means that they were formerly politicians. Some college members therefore consider the governor as a leadership competitor and want to abolish the existing ambiguity. They support the idea of an elected president of the provincial college. To understand this ‘competition’ between the elected councillors and the appointed governor, we have to acknowledge the unclear profile of the provincial government level. The citizens do not or hardly have a clear view on what provincial policy consists of and who the provincial politicians are. The governor, on the contrary, is considered as a symbolic character. Although not elected by the people, in their view he represents the provincial government. In the case of the politicians with little or no ‘visibility’, the legitimacy can be questioned. In the case of the governor, with greater visibility but not subject to (direct) democratic control, the accountability can pose a threat.

In this contribution we focus on the question if governors can be considered as political leaders (and if so, to what extent) or purely government officials. Do they meet the conditions for leadership as mentioned in the literature? How do these formerly politicians function in their new supposedly neutral role? In other words, is the function of the governor, being not elected, compatible with (strong) leadership.

We will try to examine this against the background of a gradually changing internal and external context. As with most institutions, provincial government has permanently been in a process of transformation during the last decades. Internal transformations, on the one hand, refer to a set of institutional reforms and the growing division between the roles of the college and the governor. External transformations, on the other hand, refer to the growing importance of the network society and multi-level governance. The latter being pre-eminently the policy area for intermediate government. Our aim is to analyse if these reforms have affected the profile, the functioning and the leadership characteristics of governors. As all leaders, governors function within a specific societal and political context. We will therefore focus both on the individual as on the relationships the governors have with their (public) context.
This contribution partly is based on the available literature, partly on our own research. To gather the information we organised interviews with governors and cabinet employees\(^1\). The interviews took place by means of semi-structured questionnaires. Questionnaires with merely closed answer categories did not fit, since this research has an exploring character. Moreover, they would have produced much less information.

It is important to state here that up until now, only little systematic research was conducted concerning governors and political leadership at the provincial level (Janssens, 1992). Some rather historical and biographical studies have, however, been published (Heylen, De Nil, D’Hondt, 2005; Valcke, 2003). These can help us get an insight in the function. But up until now, a broader leadership analysis is not available. Inevitably this paper thus has an exploring character. We nevertheless hope to be able to lay the foundation for more thoroughly and systematic research in the future. In any case, it is our intention to proceed by means of more in depth interviews with governors and people related to the context of their functioning: politicians (college and council members, also at the municipal and the regional level), civil servants (from different government institutions) and private actors (enterprises and the media). It will then be our aim to analyse how all policy actors react to the reforms mentioned above and if (how) leadership has been transformed. The aim of this contribution is more modest.

In the first chapter we describe some central concepts, that will help us examine leadership at the provincial level: the different functions and roles of political leadership, the formal an informal aspects of power, the difference between power and authority.

The second chapter starts with an outline of the institutional framework within which the governors function. We then describe some important internal and external reforms that are supposed to have affected political leadership.

In the third chapter we finally have a look at how governors function in practice. What characteristics can be identified? How do they respond tot the new institutional settings? And what factors have proven to be decisive and successful in their leadership attitude?

1. Functions, roles and types of leadership

In order to be able to analyse the information retrieved form the interviews, it is important to clear the meaning of some central concepts and terms. First we have a look at the difference between power and authority and the importance of formal as well as informal aspects of leadership. Then we describe the different functions and roles leaders can fulfil, leading to different theories and styles of leadership.

When assessing leadership, one must distinguish power from authority. Power usually is based upon formal grounds such as a legal framework. The competence to take decisions gives politicians a certain degree of power. However, in modern democracies, power is not unlimited. Elections provide the politicians the legitimacy to make policy decisions, but a system of checks and balances between the different actors in government and society provides control.

\(^1\) Interviews were done with the governor and the cabinet officials of the following Flemish provinces: West-Flanders, East-Flanders, Brabant and Antwerp. The findings of one province, Limburg, are lacking. We hope to be able to complete this in the future.
In contrast to power, authority relies rather on informal grounds. These can refer to different aspects, such as knowledge, experience and communication skills. The classic distinction between three forms of authority, traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority, as based upon Weber, can still be relevant today.

It is the combination of power and authority, as based on formal and informal aspects, that results in strong leadership. ‘Personality’ can be as important as ‘holding a formal function’ in explaining the political power distribution (Dewachter and Das, 1991). A part from these factors, the support of a group and the power to convince are very crucial and will be important to take into account when analysing leadership.

1.1. Functions and roles

When describing the role of the executive branch, traditionally a distinction is made between the purely ‘political’ executive and the ‘bureaucratic’ executive (Brooker, 2005). This essentially highlights the differences between politicians and civil servants, and more broadly between politics and administration. Normally, in parliamentary systems, the political executive comprises elected politicians: their job is to make policy, in accordance with the political and ideological priorities of their party and the expectations of the citizens (the electorate). The official executive comprises appointed and professional civil servants whose job is to offer advice and administer policy, subject to the requirements of political neutrality. Nevertheless the distinction between the political and the bureaucratic is blurred. Not only do senior civil servants often make a substantial contribution to policy-making, commonly use is made of temporary, politically committed advisors. However, in our case, the governor is a somewhat ambiguous actor. In one way, being appointed by the government, he can be considered to be a government official. Yet, in another way, being the chairman of the provincial college and having voting right (see below) he can act as a politician.

The members of political executives have to carry out several functions, sometimes simultaneously. The most important are: ceremonial duties, control of policy-making, popular political leadership, bureaucratic leadership and crisis response. We briefly give an overview of some essential characteristics of each of these functions.

Leaders in a certain way ‘stand for the state’. They give the state authority form and hereby represent the larger society. In the third chapter we will give some examples of this largely formal and ceremonial role of governors. This role covers, for example, state occasions, foreign visits, international conferences and so on. For two reasons, this role is nevertheless of broader significance. First, it provides a focus for unity and political loyalty, and so helps to build legitimacy (even when governors are not elected). Second, it allows those at the top of the executive to portray themselves as ‘leaders’, which is vital to the maintenance of public support. The latter is especially important when controversy is at hand with respect to the function.

The key function of the political executive is to direct and control the policy process. This role was substantially expanded during the twentieth century in response to the broadening responsibilities of government. Political executives usually initiate legislative programmes and help the legislative process work. However, it is misleading to imply that the political executive always dominates the policy process. Much policy is initiated by political parties or interest groups. Moreover, by virtue of their expertise bureaucrats or civil servants play a crucial role in policy formulation. We will see that in the case of the governors, there was an
important power shift. Due to the reform in 1997 they no longer possessed voting right. Formally speaking, they lost the power of policy-making. From that time on, in order to achieve what they want, they had to use other, informal means of persuasion. Popular support is crucial to the character and stability of the government as a whole. Without support from the public or from key groups in society, policy implementation becomes difficult. Some examples in the third chapter will show just how crucial this function can be. While political executives are staffed with politicians who often lack the competence, managerial experience and administrative knowledge, there still is a need for policy coordination. This can give rise to bureaucratic power and consequently bureaucratic leadership is very important. Crisis response is another function, stating the ability to take swift and decisive action. Domestic crisis such as natural disasters, terrorist threats, industrial unrest and civil disorder all are part of the governors competences.

A part from the different functions, we can also identify three dimensions of power. First, there is the formal dimension of power: the constitutional roles and responsabilities, the competences and the constitutional frameworks in which governors operate. Second, there is the informal dimension of power: the role of personality, political skills and experience, and even the impact of parties and mass media. Third, there is the external dimension of power: the political, economic and diplomatic context within which they have to operate.

Leadership can be understood as a pattern of behaviour or as a personal attribute. Therefore it is important to distinguish different theories and styles of leadership.

1.2. Theories of leadership

Leadership essentially is surrounded by controversy. Two main questions are: to what extent is leadership compatible with freedom and democracy, and what does leadership consist of? Four contrasting theories of leadership can be identified: leadership as a personal gift, leadership as a sociological phenomenon, leadership as an organisational necessity and leadership as a political skill. Some identify leadership as a personal or natural gift. Macchiavelli described ‘la virtù’ as ‘the combination of intelligence and energy which enables someone to see through a situation immediately and consequently take swift action for the benefit of himself or of the state’ (Macchiavelli, [1990]). An extreme version of this theory is found in the fascist leader principle, in a more modest form this theory is embodied in the idea of charisma, with the classic examples of charismatic and forceful leaders (Caesar, Hitler, Castro, Gandhi). It is clear that leaders which exhibit genuine moral authority are rare. Others identify leadership as a sociological phenomenon. Leaders are ‘created’ by particular socio-historical forces, an approach adopted by Marxists. In their vision, leaders are impelled by the collective behaviour of the masses, not the other way round. Another theory suggests leadership as an organisational necessity. It arises from the need for coherence, unity and direction within any complex institution. This conforms to what Weber called legal-rational authority (see above), in that it is essentially impersonal and based on formal, usually written, rules. Finally, leadership can be identified as a political skill, meaning it can be learned and practised. This can lead to the cults of personality that have been constructed, but in modern times its emphasis has shifted towards televisual skills and the reliance upon media advisors or ‘spin doctors’.
1.3. Styles of leadership

A style of leadership refers to the strategies and behavioural patterns by which a leader seeks to achieve his or her goals. It is obvious that leadership can be exercised in a number of different ways. The factors that shape the adoption of a particular strategy or style of leadership are numerous. Among the most important are the personality and goals of the leader, the institutional framework within which he or she operates, the political mechanisms by which power is won, the means of mass communication and the nature of the broader political culture (Brooker, 2005).

Some authors identified three distinctive styles of leadership: laissez-faire leadership, transactional leadership and transformational leadership (Northouse, 2000).

The laissez-faire leadership can be described as a ‘hands off’ approach to cabinet and departmental management. This style is not irreconcilable with ideological leadership but requires that ideological goals only constitute a broadly stated vision. On the one hand it can foster harmony and teamwork because subordinates are given greater responsibility, on the other hand it can lead to weak coordination of policy.

Transactional leaders adopt a positive role in relation to policy-making and government management. They are motivated by essentially pragmatic goals and considerations. This is above all a managerial, even technocratic style of leadership. On the one hand it allows scope for tactical flexibility, on the other leaders may be seen as opportunistic.

Transformational leaders are not so much coordinator or manager, as inspirer or visionary. Instead of seeking compromise and consensus, they attempt to mobilize support from within government, the parties and the general public. It provides a basis for pushing through programmes of social, economic and political reform, but it may drift towards authoritarianism and lead to political rigidity.

Is there a type of leadership typical for the kind of leaders who operate at the background, such as governors? Or do leaders adopt different styles according to the necessities of a given policy-process?

Regardless of the leadership style, modern political leaders face greater challenges than their predecessors. This is important because the attitudes towards leaders influence people’s general view of the political process.

2. Patterns of a changing context

The last few decades provincial government has faced some important transformations. The first, internal transformation was characterised by a shift in legislation, strengthening the democratic control and the executive power of the politicians. This evolution was accompanied by what is commonly called New Public Management reforms. Second, we can observe that intergovernmental networks have become increasingly important. The shift from government to governance is especially important for the provinces, being an intermediate government level that has to deal with multi-level governance.

Several explanations have been given to make sense of these reforms. Government is confronted with the joint pressures of globalisation, Europeanization, and privatisation (Pilet, Steyvers, Delwit, Reynaert, 2005). Moreover, in Belgium, the institutional evolution, with an ongoing federalisation has had an influence on the different government levels.
2.1. The institutional shift: towards a dualistic model?

Designed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the governor in the first place was seen as an agent of the central government. Gradually though he became the symbol of the provincial government. At the same time their was a slow institutional evolution. Only in the last decades has the provincial government ‘grown up’, as the democratic actors (council and college) have been strengthened. This evolution not only has had consequences for the internal, administrative relations and the (external) relations between the provinces and the other authorities, but certainly also for the functioning of the governor.

To understand this institutional evolution and the position of the governor, we have to go back in time. The legal framework that regulates the position of the governor was founded in 1836, when the Provincial Government Act was passed. Only recently (November 30, 2005), the Flemish parliament passed a Decree on Provincial Government (see below). The Provincial Government Act provided the direct election of the provincial council, the legislative branch of the province. The members of the council then elect, among them, the provincial college (six members), the executive branch of the province. The governor, however, up until recently played a crucial role in this framework. In fact, being the heir of the French prefects, he was designed mainly as an agent of the central state. He was appointed by the government and chairman of the provincial college. As he had voting right (until 1997) he could influence the provincial policy-making. Moreover he had to see to it that the provincial council and the college did not break any laws nor decided upon matters that did not belong to their competences. As a matter of fact, the meetings of the council were ‘opened and closed’ by the governor in the name of the king (up until 1984) and he could address the council at any time when he wanted to. Up until 1987 only the governor had the executive power to carry out the decisions of the council and the college.

The broadly defined power of the governor can be seen in the context of the consolidation of the new state of Belgium. The risk that some provinces could take measures against the state (as had happened before 1830) could clearly not be taken. This also explains the severe constraints that were laid upon the provincial government: restricted competences and very little policy autonomy, restricted financial resources, restricted meeting schedule (only once a year during two weeks), and so on (Coninckx and Valcke, 2005).

The Provincial Government Act was, of course, repeatedly adapted to the needs of the time. Important to state is that these changes all took place very recently. Only since 1984 can the council decide how often council meetings will take place (in practice, once in a month). The governor no longer has the power to open and close the meetings of the council, it is the president of the council who takes the initiative to convene. Moreover, several ‘acts’ of the council (establishing institutions, acquiring buildings, contracting loans, …) were no longer subject to royal approval. In practice, this meant that the governor no longer had the approval supervision. In 1987 then, the college acquired the executive power to carry out its own decisions and those of the council. Moreover, the college acquired the possibility of dividing the competences among its members. It is clear that all these measures implicated a strengthening of the control power of the council and the executive power of the college. In other words a more clear cut distinction was made between the governor, as commissioner of the government, and the college, as the key democratically elected provincial actor. This evolution was concluded in 1997, the year in which the governor lost his voting right as member of the provincial college. In purely legal terms, he lost the real policy power. We will see later on if this has indeed affected the practice of provincial policy making.
It has to be stressed though that some of the competences of the governor are regulated by other laws, for example the competences concerning public order, security and police forces, weapon legislation, environment legislation, disaster management, ... In these fields, where he purely acts as a commissioner of the federal or regional government, he holds full power.

Remarks can be made though about the effectiveness of the reforms as mentioned above. Some of the key features of the evolution we described, at first sight, resemble some elements of the dualistic model in The Netherlands. The objective of this model, introduced in 2002, was to introduce a clear distinction between the legislative and administrative functions of the key actors at the local and provincial level. Some authors however doubt if these formal and institutional reforms will suffice to engage e new way of governing (Steen and Wille, 2005).

In 2002 the power to regulate the organisation of provincial government was transferred from the federal tot the regional level. On November 30, 2005 the Flemish Parliament passed the Decree on Provincial Government. However, the institutional setting, the balance between governor, college and council, as achieved by the previous reforms, was not modified. The reforms implied by the decree of 2005 concern the functioning of the administration and the relation between the politicians and the administration. The decree provides for instance the possibility of a more flexible internal organisation, the responsabilisation of civil servants and delegation of power to the administration. Furthermore the decree imposes the installation of a so-called ‘management team’, a group of leading public officials presided by the provincial clerk. The management team has to perform different managerial tasks such as improving the coordination and the quality of management in provincial government and arranging the interaction between politics and administration. We will return on this later.

In contrast to the Flemish government, the Walloon government did go one step further in reshaping the balance between the provincial actors. According to the Walloon Decree on Provincial Government (February 12, 2004) the governor no longer chairs the provincial college. Nevertheless he remains a member of the college without voting right2.

Assessing the evolution of the provincial institutional setting, we can recognize the same two principles guiding the reform aims at the local level in Europe: to improve efficiency and to strengthen local democracy (Kersting and Vetter, 2003). It remains to be seen if these reforms hold up in every day practice.

Focussing on the shift in the horizontal power relations at the provincial level, we also recognize, mutatis mutandis, some elements of the fourfold typology of intergovernmental forms by Mouritzen and Svara (2002). In the collective form, a collegiate body is responsible for all executive functions. This body is composed of elected politicians often presided over by the mayor (in our case: the governor). Political and administrative roles usually overlap. In the council-manager form a clear distinction is made between political and executive roles. The council has general authority over policy and is headed by a mayor (governor) who only has presiding and ceremonial functions. The evidence at the provincial level suggests a shift from the collective form to the council-manager form.

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2 This new institutional setting will become effective after the provincial elections of 2006.
2.2. Towards governance in a multi-level context?

In the course of the 20th century Flemish provinces, as a government level, were squeezed between the communes (which had, after the amalgamations, undergone a significant process of enlargement) and the emerged Flemish government, assuming different policy tasks. For a long time the usefulness of the provincial level was questioned. In this respect, the new Decree on Provincial Government constitutes a turning point. Then three main competences of the provincial level are described as follows: tasks at the intermediate level, supporting the municipal level and territorial co-governance.

This can be seen as a recognition of some recent developments in provincial policy. Developments with an impact on the functioning of the governor.

Each government can be situated within the context of a surrounding society. The citizens, private actors such as enterprises and interest groups all have their own values and conceptions. The government, responsible for policy making, stands under the influence of all these actors and vice versa. Changes in society can lead to new expectations, such as efficiency and democratic quality. These in turn can lead to changes in the administrative organisation. We overlook some of the main social developments with possible implications on political and administrative functioning.

The technological evolution (information and communication technology) creates a world as a ‘global village’. In this world, networks become more and more important and boundaries (between countries, between what is public and what is private) are blurred. Policy making moves away from the traditional nation state. In this new, so called multi-level context, we find cities, regions and the European Union on one side and private actors on the other side. Government therefore faces new challenges, brought about by an increased complexity and interdependency. Relations between different government levels are shaped in a non-hierarchical way and as opposed to the globalisation and the decreasing importance of the national government, local and regional governments become more important (the so called ‘glocalisation’). The complex society induces complex problems that cannot be solved by one government, but need cooperation of several government levels and other non-government actors. The concept governance also refers to the fact that policy processes are becoming more important than the institutions. Hence, cooperation and partnership are the new key words and the Decree on Provincial Government refers to them constantly.

Several authors have made quite a few remarks about the concept of multi-level governance. In practice, the existence of non-hierarchical relations must not be exaggerated. Depending of the situation, there is always some kind of dominance and hierarchy. The Flemish government still holds the supervision over the ‘lower’ government levels and the latter still remain (for a great deal) financially dependent. The dilemma between cooperation and autonomy thus remains an important aspect of the policy networks. The governor in this respect stands in a more comfortable position then the politicians.

Frank Hendriks concludes that representative democracy, and the ‘primacy of politics’ stand under the pressure of the network society (Hendriks, 2002). Two visions can be distinguished. Those who plead for ‘modest politics’ and those who plead for ‘strong politics’ with strong leadership. Deschouwer points out that the new institutional arrangements could put democracy at danger, when the sovereignty of the people (the basic democratic principle) is not observed (Deschouwer, 2001).
Inspite of these remarks, the increase of government activities on the meso-level has lead to the fact that provinces more often get involved in co-government (e.g. traffic and mobility). The adequate government size nevertheless depends on the policy topic and is not to be seen as everlasting (De Rynck, 2001). Sometimes, the municipal level is the most appropriate, sometimes an intermediate government level.

Evidence has shown that the interdependency in government networks has increased the need for coordination between the different government levels. At this point the governor seems to assume a coordinating and conciliating role (De Rynck and Voets, 2004; Janssens, 1992).

The complexity of network policy making certainly sheds a new light on the boundaries of ‘the primacy of politics’ and the relation between the different actors on the provincial level.

3. Theory and practice: mind the gap?

In the preceding chapters we concentrated on some functions and concepts of leadership and described some elements of the changing context. In this chapter we look at who the governors are and how they function in reality.

3.1. Once a politician, always a politician? The selection process of the governor.

Because the profile and the selection process may have an influence on the functioning of the governor we now take a closer look at these aspects.

We already mentioned that governors are appointed by the (Flemish) government. From 1946 until 2005 only 18 governors were appointed in the Flemish provinces (there were four provinces up until 1995). The elite circulation thus was very low. One of the reasons is that the pension age of 65 years was established only in 2004 (before it was 67 years). Another reason is that nobody resigned from the function! For nearly all governors it was the last step in their career. Most of them (13 out of 18), were appointed at the age of 45 (or older). As a consequence most of them already had a broad experience (Coninckx and Valcke, 2005).

Research revealed that all governors were candidate of one of the three ‘traditional’ parties (Christian-democrats, socialists and liberals). The nomination sometimes gave rise to competition between the government parties. Apparently the electoral results in each specific province were taken into account when deals were made after negotiations between the political parties. In 2002 the power to nominate the governor was transferred from the federal to the regional level. Two governors have been appointed since and it is clear that the selection process has changed. Not only did these recent nominations give rise to a ‘political shift’, for the first time the ‘political’ character of the nominated governors was more pronounced than before. In East-Flanders the socialist governor was replaced by a liberal, formerly MP, and in the province of Limburg, where the governor traditionally was Christian democratic, a socialist governor, formerly president of a political party, was appointed. According to their electoral results the different political parties ‘claim’ the governor. In this way new balances can develop.

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3 In 1995 the unitary province of Brabant was divided into a Flemish and a Walloon part.
The selection process already revealed that all governors had political support. Moreover, all of them had formerly been active in politics on different government levels (8 Christian democrats, 5 socialists and 5 liberals). Seven had been member of parliament (at the federal or regional level). However, with only one exception (the recent nomination in Limburg of the former president of the socialist party), we can say that top politicians never chose for the function.

It is interesting to look at the education level of the governors. Nearly all had a university degree (with only the two recently appointed governors as an exception). This doesn’t surprise, since the complexity of government requires intellectual skills and a certain level of education. It is obvious though that a university degree does not guarantee a successful career as a governor. With the growing importance of the (mass) media, in addition certainly attention needs to be paid to communication skills.

Looking at the professional career, most of them had experience as civil servants at a high level (11 out of 18), others had a legal background or as entrepreneurs. This professional experience certainly is an advantage in the complex political and bureaucratic context of their function (relations with the municipal, provincial, regional and federal level).

The selection process reveals that intellectual capacities and political experience play a major role in the appointment. Moreover we observed a shift in the most recent appointments, as the political character is more pronounced. It remains to be seen if this evolution to politicise the function will continue.

Janssens made the same conclusions for the Dutch governors. The political qualities of the candidates have become more important (more commissioners of the Queen have a background as an MP or even as a secretary of the state then was the case before). But once they have assumed the function they are supposed to play a neutral and reserved role. It is clear that this is a paradoxical situation. The person is politicised, while the function is depoliticised.

3.2. Between political and bureaucratic leadership: the consensual and connective role of the governor

The leadership of the governor is, for a considerable amount, determined by the political and institutional context in which he (or she) must operate. Tasks and competences are derived from the legal framework. Nevertheless, the personal characteristics and backgrounds play an equally important role, especially where the institutional framework allows individual interpretation (Voets and De Rynck, 2004, Janssens, 1992). In addition the leadership undirectly is influenced by the selection process.

Governors and cabinet employees stress the importance of neutrality. Given the fact that all of them previously had a political career, this leads some of them to recognise that at the beginning of their new function, they had to get used to this. Perhaps this can shed a new light on the troubles the two recent nominated governors experienced, when they were asked to lay down their old habits of giving comment publicly on political issues. Without exception, all of

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4 This chapter is mainly based on the findings of the interviews, completed with the (scarce) literature.
them seem convinced that a neutral attitude is necessary to obtain authority. This is confirmed by the different partners in the context of a large and longitudinal project in East-Flanders (Voets and De Rynck, 2004). One governor puts it like this: as a politician you have to create perception and take into account the results of the following elections, as a governor you can act independent from these constraints.

All governors confirm that within the provincial college decisions are made without voting as such. Discussion takes place and then a decision is made. Hence, the loss of their voting right doesn’t seem to have affected their role as chairman of the college. Of course, these kind of statements need to be confirmed in the future through more extensive interviews with all college members.

Neutrality and being able to keep at a distance are crucial when governors want to play an intermediate role. They can play this role between different government levels, between government and non-government actors (citizens, private enterprises, social organisations).

The governors are unanimous when stressing the importance of their bridge function. This points at consensual and connective leadership. All of them frequently have contact with the municipal government level. Most of them confirm that they have personal contacts with the mayors and (somewhat less) with the aldermen. While legal rules impose administrative supervision over the communes, all participants stress that conciliation is more at hand.

One of the key features of leadership concerns initializing policy and formulating policy options. All governors seem to assume this role. The important feature here is that they (can) develop specific strategies based on the uniform legal competences. Based on the competence in the field of security, the governor of Antwerp developed a specific campaign (called WODCA) to reduce the casualties due to road accidents in the weekend. The campaign, initiated in 1994, was a great success and was later adopted by others. Based on the competence regarding the weapon legislation, the governor of East-Flanders recently developed a broad campaign to collect unregistered weapons. Although very recent, this campaign inspires other provinces to plan a similar action.

Sometimes though, the actions of governors take place ‘on demand’. In 2005 there was much protest against the so called Pact of the Generations, a federal employment plan. Based on his competence concerning public order, the governors were asked (by the minister of internal affairs) to have conversations with the trade unions in order to hold the public protest under control.

The influence of personal characteristics is marked for example in the way the governors handle citizen contact. All governors receive day to day questions of citizens concerning all kinds of policy topics. Most of them try to channelize these questions towards the administration. One governor though each month receives the citizens personally to listen to their questions.

The findings of our interviews (supported by the literature) point out that precisely the ambiguous position allows that personal preferences can play a very great role in defining the major policy topics.

However, all governors state that the main topics of their policy (such as security and police security, the administrative supervision over the municipal government level) are not to be chosen, but imposed by legal rules. Besides these, the specific context of the province can
also impose certain policy topics: the port of Antwerp in the province of Antwerp, the airport of Zaventem in the province of Brabant, the coastal region in the province of West-Flanders.

The governors all recognise the important amount of ceremonial and representative tasks they have to fulfil. These tasks are inherent to the function and include signing treaties, receiving foreign guests, and so on. Governors especially play a role concerning the cross-border relations (with neighbouring provinces of other countries). In all these tasks, the governor represents the province. These tasks are reckoned not to be of the utmost importance, but apparently they help to build up authority.

If one conclusion can be made, it is that besides the formal aspects of power, the informal factors at the least play a significant role in the leadership of the governor. The combination of neutrality and consensual and connective skills can be considered as the main feature of their leadership.

4. Conclusion

The last few decades provincial government was confronted with a double evolution. On the one hand, the internal shift in legislation, strengthening the democratic control and the executive power of the elected politicians. On the other hand, the external shift towards network policy and multi-level governance.

In the introduction we asked ourselves to what extent these evolutions could contribute to changes in the leadership role of the governor. At first sight the gradual evolution seems to indicate an increased power of the elected politicians and a loss of (formal) power of the governor. This is illustrated by the fact that the governor, as chairman of the provincial executive council, lost his voting right in 1997.

However, when we take a closer view, other factors come to our attention. The institutional changes seem to have induced a shift in the selection process, as the political profile of the (newly) nominated governors is more pronounced. The recently appointed governors thus counter the strengthened executive college. Nevertheless the governor is now (formally and legally) less closely linked to the provincial policy. Although at the same time, he remains the key symbolic character of provincial government.

We can conclude that new institutional settings and government arrangements may help enforce leadership reform, but still much will depend on the strength of individual leaders, both governors as politicians and their willingness to engage themselves in a new way of governing. The attested consensual and connective leadership of the governor seems to be embedded within the contextual framework.

It can be doubted that provincial government would gain much when the governor would be elected and no longer be appointed. Pure legally one can see some advantages, but opposed to these are the pitfalls. The typical neutrality and ‘distance’, enabling the governor to play his leadership role, would inevitably disappear.

One final remark. We must bear in mind that our conclusions are based upon research with an exploring character. Purely political factors could trouble our view. The Flemish government only recently received the competence to appoint the governors. The selection process cannot
as yet be considered as fully developed. To assess this thoroughly it will be necessary to conduct further and more elaborate research in the future.

References


