

## **Less Fear, More Participation**

**An interview with Stéphane Roberti**

June 19, 2019

**In October 2018, Green parties made huge gains in Belgian municipal elections. Ecolo, the French-speaking Green party, is now in office across 14 areas of Brussels, holding the mayoralty in three. Stéphane Roberti, Ecolo member from the grassroots formerly in charge of social services for his area, is Forest's new mayor and is using his mandate to open up city government and drive forward the green transition. A not so well-off area in the south-west of Brussels, Forest is an open and diverse community increasingly feeling the effects of climate warming. From citizen's participation to housing and green space, we asked Roberti where Forest is headed at a time of political uncertainty when cities across the world are gaining importance as sites of struggle and places of change.**

**Green European Journal: You became mayor of Forest, one of the 19 municipalities in Belgium's Brussels-Capital Region, in December 2018, after 12 years in charge of the area's social services. Are cities gaining importance as sites for the ecological transition in Belgium?**

Becoming mayor is my third stint at the municipal level. When I arrived in 2006, ecological transition was on the backburner and rarely taken seriously. Today, and especially since the student climate marches [Fridays for Future demonstrations are held on Thursdays in Belgium and have helped pioneer the now global movement], things have changed drastically. Getting rid of parking spaces, pedestrianising streets, or turning them into cycle lanes were politically dangerous and required large, difficult majorities until recently. Local politicians are realising – and this increasingly transcends party lines – that it is an emergency, that they can act, and that it is their responsibility.

**Beyond the steps they can take on climate change, can cities also help transform lifestyles and act as political spaces of resistance, if not disobedience, to the national level?**

Forest, and particularly the Ecolo party in Forest, has long been engaged in social issues, which for us include environmental issues. The decisions of the federal government are worrying because we see the direct effects of austerity and attacks on social security and against refugees in rising poverty and insecurity. In this respect, we have resisted, as other municipalities have done elsewhere in Belgium.

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After the local elections of October 2018, our manifesto included our desire to be part of the Fearless Cities movement [read more on [Fearless Cities](#)]. We're convinced that citizens and municipal institutions can work together, fearlessly, for greater solidarity, social justice, and ecological transition. Joining the movement is also a

way to signal our openness towards other initiatives and realities and to take part in a network of cities in Europe and the world. Belgium has not yet woken up to the possibilities available to local authorities. Talking about the idea of a ‘fearless city’ still provokes bafflement and surprise.

For now, I don’t think that in Belgium and the Brussels region there is a clear will to make the city a more politically important and relevant place. In Brussels – partly due to the Brussels-Capital Region’s history – there still isn’t a municipalist mindset, especially not in its libertarian sense, unlike in certain cities in France, Italy, Spain, and elsewhere in Europe. Bear in mind that the city level of government has limited powers and resources in Belgium. But there are positive signs. In Forest, we are taking steps towards participatory democracy, the right to public questioning, a right of citizens’ initiative, and mixed municipal councils where elected representatives and citizens sit together. In Flanders, certain councils are going even further. I think that the Ecolo party in Brussels should reconsider municipalism. In the 1980s, the party favoured dividing up Brussels into neighbourhoods. Today territorial management is back on the political agenda, which should encourage us to think about our local political action for the transition and to gain a better foothold at all levels of power.

### **Is the relationship between citizens and elected representatives changing on the local level?**

Party politics might receive more attention. But, in the Brussels region and certainly Forest, the big change is the increase in citizens’ initiatives. Citizens are taking control and they aren’t asking politicians for permission. In the Brussels region, much of this taking control of neighbourhoods’ destinies is the long-term fruit of policies for ‘sustainable neighbourhoods’ put in place by Evelyne Huytebroeck as a minister in regional government from 2004-2014 [read and listen to more on [urban development in Brussels](#)]. In practical terms, it means people involved in heritage conservation and territorial management, people creating food cooperatives or cultural offerings, and people running outreach programmes. These initiatives are neither partisan nor political in the traditional sense, but they get people involved and drive their elected representatives to support and engage with them.

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These initiatives represent tests of maturity and political management for elected representatives and, therefore, Ecolo. Supporting citizens’ initiatives from the outset is often frustrating for local elected representatives because, for citizens, it’s hard to accept that political power should share the credit for something that comes from the grassroots. In the same way, and this is important for local officials from green movements, striving towards ecological transition looks very different depending on whether you are in power or involved in activism and voluntary work on the ground. Take the example of trees today in Forest. Trees in parks are managed by a regional body, but the municipality has a say and one of my fights is to save the trees. Despite everything, I cannot ignore the advice of experts who tell me that some trees are victims of climate warming and must be cut down because they are diseased. Switching to policy mode, I consider solutions to make up for this loss, make sure that other trees don’t also become diseased, and, above all, undertake a process of citizen consultation. More than a campaign to save the trees, participation starts a dialogue around the broader and deeper question of the environment and biodiversity in Forest.

### **What are the benefits of citizen participation?**

Citizen participation anchors change for the long term and improves the decisions taken by the authorities. But it isn’t simple. Citizens do not necessarily want to get together, become involved, and take control through

neighbourhood committees. Differences in free time and cultural, social or financial capital can all bias participation and run counter to its initial goal, so you need to make sure everyone is included. Participation cannot be decreed; it needs encouragement, support, and nurture. The projects have to be tangible and ambitious enough for citizens to be able to feel like giving their time and input is worth it.

Take the example of trees in Duden Park in Forest. Participatory management prevents simply cutting down trees, replanting them elsewhere with the advice of experts, and moving on to something else. The citizens are included from the start, we tell them that what we have here – not thousands of miles away – is happening because of climate change. Our green lung, at the heart of our municipality, is affected. What should be done? What do they think? Involving people in our deliberations and letting them bring all their baggage without a framework that is predefined before participation. It's important not to pre-empt the forms that participation will take. The water public forums in Forest are a good example. In the past, citizens demanded a say in solving the very real problem of constant flooding in part of the municipality. Together with experts, they created a genuine institution that endures and has pushed the municipality to take further steps in water management. Today the water public forums are thinking about new urban rivers.

**How can participation be as inclusive as possible so it is not limited to those who can and want to take part?**

Everything possible must be done to prevent it being only the privileged who participate and have most impact. There are ways to get working-class people involved in the participation process. It takes time and resources. And there are other forms of participation, residents working together to tackle nuisance noise or drug dealing in a neighbourhood is also a form of participation. More generally, the challenge is to make people feel at ease when they participate. Among working-class people, there is a fear of being confronted with a cultural setting that is hard to understand and being stigmatised. In this case, the participation of citizens through school and projects around children is crucial.

**What other forms of participation do you encourage?**

In addition to dialogue and regular meetings, we want to develop participatory budgeting, the right of citizens' initiatives, and mixed municipal councils where citizens sit with elected representatives and in which you need to represent the municipality's social and cultural diversity to the full. It can take other forms too. I'm not rigidly dogmatic on formats because the main point is to anchor the practice of co-construction with citizens. In Brussels' municipalities these practices are few and far between.

**Why are welfare and health so prominent in Ecolo's manifesto for Forest when municipalities have limited powers in these areas?**

Our manifesto focused on health and social well-being because many important contributing factors can be addressed at the municipal level. Health is also about having a good job, environment, and housing. While the municipality certainly has few levers to pull on its own when it comes to employment, just taking a different approach – such as not stigmatising or being harsh to unemployed people seeking social assistance – can have a direct impact on health. Not just for the people concerned; the health of all citizens living in a more forgiving environment will benefit. Many small levers that can be pulled around access to health and social security that make the quality of life and the social environment much better and life in the municipality more pleasant.

*Social and sustainable housing must improve social diversity and provide green spaces and places for gathering*

**Forest has grown from 48 000 to 55 000 residents over the past few years, what can the municipality do to improve the housing offer in Forest?**

Housing is a crucial issue for the municipal level. There are three main levers that we can pull. First, the municipality can offer social housing to economically insecure citizens. The “how” is just as important as the “what” in this case. Social and sustainable housing must improve social diversity and provide green spaces and places for gathering or interacting. Second, housing management at municipal level must be a means for effecting broader change when it comes to living together and living differently. Co-housing schemes such as the one I live in have long been disparaged as being cramped, uncomfortable, and lacking green space. These prejudices are hangovers from years of people being convinced that everyone should and could live in a large single-family home with a garden and a garage. They must be challenged with other ways of living.

Smart co-housing and social housing envisage spaces that are shared in a sustainable and passive manner while maximising green space, friendliness, and improving community life. Finally, I’m one of those who thinks that the climate migration crisis will not stop. Forest has chosen to be a welcoming municipality which means denser urban life. Housing needs to be designed intelligently so there is not less space to live together and even fewer green spaces.

**How is Forest doing on climate action compared to other parts of Brussels?**

Our municipality now has a climate plan. We wanted to stress how many levers for the transition are at the local level. Procurement of school materials, building renovations, supplies, municipal equipment and materials, transport for municipal agencies, management of green spaces, these are some examples of what a city can do. Forest is a municipality free of single-use plastic and we now have ‘school streets’ that are traffic free. Housing, democracy, transport, schools, and streets are all key levers but they are not enough unless they are coordinated. Today, the role of a deputy mayor for climate is to scrutinise every municipal decision from the perspective of climate change.

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Stéphane Roberti was president of the Public Welfare Centre (Centres Public d’Action Sociale) of Forest, a commune in the Brussels region, between March 2007 and 2018. In December 2018, he became the mayor of Forest for the Ecolo party.

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