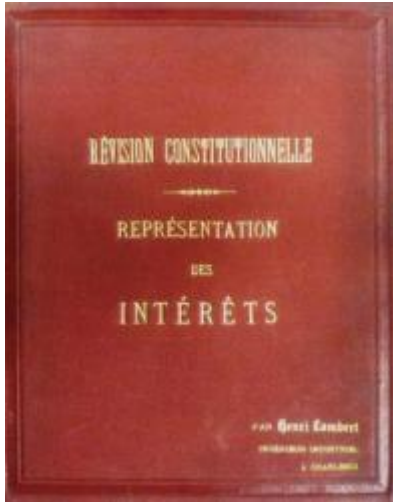


3. Electoral reform in the general interest

Organised universal suffrage – a parliamentary system in the general interest (1892 – 1893)

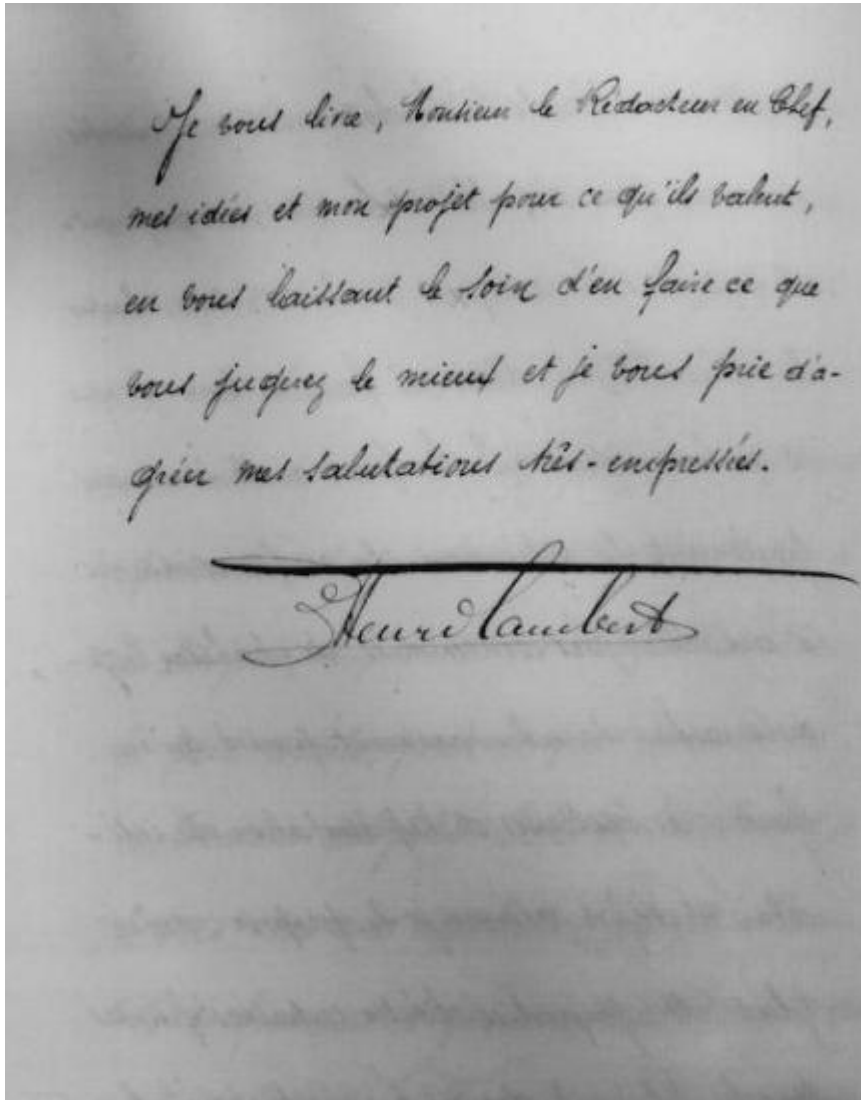


The bloody shock of 1886 would result in different consequences for Belgian society. The idea of universal suffrage resurfaced, but after such excesses the law of numbers, blind and brutal, frightened many. Should it be refused? Could it be prevented? If so, how? It is within this context that one should view the thoughts of Henri Lambert. These were to be his initial thoughts on society, the first reform project he would propose; the first of many.

Now, his mind always alert, would no longer stop to look for solutions to specific problems, but thence culminate in an original system of thought within a very broad and holistic context.

It is within this context of agitation, calculated procrastination, threats of general strikes, inflamed rallies, intimidation of all kinds, and acute social tension that one should place Henri Lambert's reflection in his publication, at the end December 1892, of a pamphlet entitled *Constitutional Revision – Representation of Interests*.

Its foreword is very significant. He writes, in fact, that: *"The internal political situation of our country is unquestionably very grave right now. The issue of constitutional revision concerns, rightly, all citizens who care to ensure social progress. Whoever believes he can shed some light, however feeble, on the debate, has a duty to do so. This is what induced me to communicate my ideas to the public about the solution of this problem: apply to universal suffrage the organisation necessary so that, in our country, it can serve the interests of civilisation. I speak to all men of good will, whatever opinion they hold."*



He first noted the lack of public interest (in 1893) in the system of representation by interests probably because of "*its extreme complexity*". Therefore, his ambition became to present it in a simple way "*as becoming of really beautiful things.*" For this, he says he found a new way of approaching the problem that would allow one to address this question "*in the simplest and most complete way, all towards facilitating the application of universal suffrage on an extremely wide basis.*"

According to him, society is divided into three fundamental categories that take into consideration the following points of

view as to interests, namely:

1. the interests of capital, which group industrialists, businessmen, landowners and owners of real estate,
2. the interests of labour, especially workers and manual labourers,
3. moral and intellectual interests, which concern the whole population and especially the liberal professions.

It would be perverse to say that these are competing interests, because then social problems would be insoluble by peaceful means. Properly understood, all citizens of one category also have interests in each of the other two categories. The class struggle dear to Marxists is thereby rejected. Since "if it is right that each person have a dominant share of involvement in the nomination of candidates responsible for the protection of his direct primordial interests, it is no less fair that every citizen should be asked to contribute to the choice of representatives of all interest categories, and the classification shall be in the body to be elected, not in the electorate." This is the basis of his system.

The Constitution should therefore determine the share of the total representation due to each of the three categories. This share should not be proportional to the number of individuals constituting each group, but to the importance of those interests. This would avoid the law of

numbers and the supremacy of one category over another. It addresses the fear of 'hardcore' universal suffrage, ensuring no monopoly of power by the masses. Those elected no longer therefore represent the voter, but one of the main interests. They cannot however ignore the interests of the whole, that is to say, the general interest. Thus, the candidates in each electoral district are divided into three groups, namely, **Capital, Labour** and **Knowledge**. Each voter votes for one candidate in each of the three groups. In each group the candidate is elected who secures an absolute majority. In the absence of an absolute majority, a second ballot decides between the two candidates with the most votes. These are the principles of Lambert's system for which he outlined its main rules of implementation, nuanced or modified following subsequent comments and criticisms. Hence, it is a parliamentary system of universal suffrage **organised in the general interest**.