Squabble within Flemish government about electoral reform

Everish work is being done in the Rue de la Loi on the reform of the electoral law. It is understandable that there should be such a sense of urgency, since the bills must be voted on by parliament before the summer recess, as after the summer the parties will already be beginning to make up their lists of candidates. There is agreement on the introduction of provincial constituencies and the reform of the Senate (see page 2). At Flemish level, there is agreement on the direct election of mayors and the ban on the simultaneous holding of local and regional mandates (see page 3). For agreement on all aspects, however, we shall have to wait until next week. After all, we are far from having heard the last on the introduction of an electoral threshold and the status of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde electoral district. The introduction of an electoral threshold of 5% per Flemish constituency on top of an initial regional electoral threshold (throughout Flanders) comes up against stiff opposition within the Government of Flanders from Spirit, the party of ministers Van Grembergen and Anciaux (FF).

JOHAN CORTHOUTS • DE MORGEN • 19 APRIL

According to the party, the double electoral threshold places a heavy burden on its continued existence. Spirit, which came into being out of the split of the Volksunie, is willing to accept a regional electoral threshold only. “We need 5% in Flanders in order to be able to operate. Having another electoral threshold per province on top of that is unacceptable for us,” says Annemie Vandecasteele, the party’s chairperson. The party says that it is prepared to torpedo the reform of the electoral system, if necessary, if a double electoral threshold is introduced at federal level. Dewael called Spirit to order yesterday. He feels that it is improper for a party in office, such as Spirit, to make a Flemish agreement dependent on a federal decision. The agreement on the direct election of mayors is contained in the Flemish coalition agreement. Dewael takes for granted that all parties in office will implement that agreement. After this warning, Vandecasteele repeated that her party would use its position in the Government of Flanders to put pressure on federal decision making.

INTRODUCTION

The reform of the electoral law comes as no surprise. The Liberal/Socialist/Green government had already announced in its coalition agreement of 1999 that it would take measures to increase the democratic quality of the decision-making process. The advantages of some parts of the reform are obvious. For example, most Flemish press commentators concur that the election of the Senate from one constituency per Community in 1993 was a monstrosity. The parties had to deploy their big-name vote-catchers in the Senate, although the political decision making takes place in the Lower Chamber. However, an agreement on shifting the entire Senate to the Lower Chamber was anything but self-evident. The French-speakers were against the idea. Verhofstadt therefore had to make a concession, according to Knack (17 April); namely, the establishment of a high Assembly, in which the French-speakers and Dutch-speakers will have equal representation. The Assembly is designed to concern itself with amendments to the constitution and conflicts of competence—in short, more or less to take over the role played by the Court of Arbitration. The introduction of larger provincial electoral districts also has one undeniable advantage: appeasing (the grouping of electoral lists) disappears. Under this technique, after the distribution of seats in the constituencies the excess of votes is distributed at provincial level. In practice, therefore, from 2003 East and West Flanders and Antwerp—in addition to Limburg—will each form a single provincial constituency. For parties able to deploy figureheads in these electoral districts—Vande Lanotte (SPA, West Flanders), Verhofstadt (VLD, East Flanders), and, sure enough, Dewinter (Maams Blok, Antwerp)—this will undoubtedly lead to an electoral gain. A political analyst in Knack even espies a strategy here aimed at countering the CD&V’s strong establishment at local level. According to reports, the Socialists were asking for provincial constituencies, the Liberals wanted the direct election of mayors, and the Greens were asking for the ban on the simultaneous holding of local office and parliamentary mandates and the introduction of the D'Hondt system for the distribution of seats in municipal elections, which works to the advantage of smaller parties. Thus, each party got what it asked for. In short, there is no doubt that behind the rhetoric of the ‘higher democratic quality’ lurks a great deal of arithmetical work, says Knack.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief

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THE DUTCH SPEAKING PART OF BELGIUM

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Towards a reform of the electoral system

The Liberal/Green/Socialist majority is busy working on a political agreement on the reform of the electoral law. According to the current state of affairs in the talks, the constituencies would be enlarged to comprise an entire province, a thorough reform of the Lower and Upper Chambers of Parliament would be prepared, and mayors and aldermen would no longer be able to combine their office with a parliamentary mandate. Finally, mayors would henceforth be elected directly in two rounds of voting. Not all reforms are due to come into effect immedi-
ately. The reform of the Upper Chamber (the Senate) into a ‘Chamber of Communities and Regions’, for example, can only go ahead if during the current period of government a majority were first to agree on an amendment to the constitution, which would then only be carried through in the next period of office. Some time ago the Flemish Minister-President Patrick Dewael (VLD) and Deputy Minister-President Steve Stevaert (Sp.a), among others, toyed with the idea of allowing those heading the lists in the parliamentary elections to run in all electoral districts at the same time. They have now abandoned that idea, among other things because the French-speakers are against it. The broad lines of the governing coalition’s settlement reveal that a candidate in 2003 will be able to run simultaneously for the Lower Chamber (in his province) and for the Senate (in the whole of Flanders). Under this proposal, someone from East Flanders would thus be able to vote for the current Federal Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt for the Lower Chamber and the Senate, and someone from Limburg would be able to vote for Steve Stevaert for both the Lower Chamber and the Senate. Furthermore, an electoral threshold of 5% would be introduced in order to combat the fragmentation of the political landscape. Federal parliamentary elections are due in 2003, with elections in the federal states to follow in 2004. For voters, it will just be a matter of getting used to things (FF).

BOUDEWIJN VAN PETEGHEM • DE STANDAARD • 16 APRIL

This structure is all about senior politicians wanting to have a seat in the Lower Chamber. On previous occasions, they ran as candidates for the Senate because they were then able to present themselves to the voter throughout their federal state (Flanders, Wallonia). The elections to the Senate turned into a popularity test among the political parties’ champions. But the real political debate takes place in the Lower Chamber, so those champions would rather have seats there. That has been settled with the transitional arrangement, which gets under way for 2003. The identity of the person who should succeed Verhofstadt in the Senate in this structure, should the Prime Minister opt for the Lower Chamber, is still a matter of food for thought. The system of successors is rearing its head again.

The question of succession in the Senate ought no longer to arise in the federal elections after 2003, for the intention is to drastically alter the composition of the Lower Chamber and the Senate in the next period of office. The merger of the Lower Chamber and the Senate into a single assembly of between 190 and 200 elected representatives goes hand-in-hand with the establishment of a new and totally different High Assembly. The latter is to be made up of elected representatives from the other parliamentary assemblies from the federal states and from the federal Chamber and does not have a permanent character. The new assembly will be given limited powers, such as everything to do with the major balances in our country. The idea is to have the same number of French-speakers and Flemings in this Senate, so as to turn it into a joint-representation assembly.

But that is for after 2003. For next year’s election, there is also an electoral threshold in the pipeline. A double or a single one? Double: for the federal state and for the provincial constituency. Single: for the federal state. Some feel that the double threshold makes the procedure unnecessarily more cumbersome, since it has little effect in reducing political fragmentation, which is precisely the aim of the electoral threshold.

The decision to opt for provincial constituencies runs foul of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde district in the middle of the country. The idea of letting the candidate MPs from Flemish Brabant and Walloon Brabant run automatically in Brussels as well has been put forward. In this way the senior politicians Frank Vandenbroucke of the SPA and Louis Michel, the French-speaking leader of the Mouvement Réformateur, would in the meantime be able to seek votes in the metropolitan area. Another point that the negotiators have to clarify concerning the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency is that, with an electoral threshold of 5%, there are no longer any MPs there representing the Flemish nationalists, the Flemish Socialists or the Flemish Greens.

WIM WINCKELMANS • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 16 APRIL

The CD&V parliamentary party leader in the Senate, Hugo Vandenberghe: ‘I thought that this government was in favour of more democracy and open debate. Now I see that they are taking decisions behind closed doors as to what the elections should look like in the future. This is the ultimate proof of the existence of a secret electoral agreement. I cannot imagine that the majority would approve a declaration for an amendment to the constitution if it did not have the certainty of also being involved in its implementation. Incidentally, I do not believe that a two-thirds majority will approve this in the Senate.’
Mayors to be chosen by direct election in two rounds

Since the Lambermont Agreement (October 2000) the municipalities fall under the direct supervision of the Region. It was therefore Flemish Minister-President Patrick Dewael (VLD) who announced that mayors in Flanders would henceforth be directly elected, in a two-round electoral process. What is more, he added that the offices of mayor, alderman, and OCMW (Public Centre for Social Welfare) board chairman may no longer be held simultaneously with a parliamentary mandate. The next municipal elections will be held in 2006 (FF).

MARK DEWEERDT • DE FINANCIËLE-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 16 APRIL

On the basis of a memo from the Minister for Home Affairs Van Grembergen (Spirit), the government parties have been holding consultations since November on the forms and methods to be adopted for the mayoral elections. In the weeks before Easter, they reached agreement on the lines of force, but in accordance with an agreement dating from 19 May 2000 among the Liberal/Green/Socialist coalition parties, the Flemish agreement is coupled to a federal agreement on the reform of the electoral system for the Lower and Upper Chambers (the House and the Senate). Since this is with arm’s reach, Dewael felt that the time was ripe to announce the main lines.

The local council and the mayor will be elected on the same day, on separate lists that will be linked to each other. Popular locals who are not backed by any list or party will therefore not be able to have a shot at the mayor’s office. Each candidate should put himself forward with a running mate who will succeed the mayor (for example in the event of death) or replace him (for example when the latter takes up another office at the same time). Does that further democracy? Is there any point in strengthening the position of the leading citizen in a municipality by means of a mandate received directly from the people, and then immediately taking away this person’s leverage at Flemish and federal level? Who will be putting themselves forward for local mandates now? And that is not to mention the technical problems that make the whole plan a difficult product to sell. The mayor is elected over two rounds of voting, but the obligation to vote remains applicable. This means that a large number of people who have no further interest in the remaining candidates nonetheless have to turn out. That is a system that does not exist anywhere in the world.

ERIC DONCKIER • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG • 16 APRIL

One strong argument is that people will now get the mayor they want. At the moment, that is not necessarily the case, since what happens quite frequently in a municipality is that an anti-coalition is formed against the most popular figure. A second argument is that this method brings the population closer to the political world and vice versa. Unfortunately there is also another side to the coin, namely that this undoubtedly leads to a further individualisation of politics. There is a great temptation to come up with well-known figures, easygoing men, and beautiful women. It also involves the risk of more populist ideas making their entry. Another risk is that we will soon be getting mayors who score well individually, but are not supported by a majority in the local council. This kind of situation would be quite conceivable in Antwerp, in the shape of Filip Dewinter (of the Vlaams Blok) as mayor, with the Vlaams Blok in opposition. That would have dramatic consequences for Antwerp and Flanders.

Opinion

BART STURTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 16 APRIL

The direct election of the mayor, including the ban on the holding of another office at the same time, does that further democracy? Is there any point in strengthening the position of the leading citizen in a municipality by means of a mandate received directly from the people, and then immediately taking away this person’s leverage at Flemish and federal level? Who will be putting themselves forward for local mandates now? And that is not to mention the technical problems that make the whole plan a difficult product to sell. The mayor is elected over two rounds of voting, but the obligation to vote remains applicable. This means that a large number of people who have no further interest in the remaining candidates nonetheless have to turn out. That is a system that does not exist anywhere in the world.

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Flemish government can ratify labour agreements

Collective labour agreements, which deal with regional or municipal issues such as transport, training and education, employment and crèche facilities, can only be ratified by the Regions of Flanders, Wallonia, or Brussels, or by the Flemish and the French-speaking Community. Such is the content of an opinion from the Council of State on a draft decree from Renaat Landuyt (Sp.a), the Flemish Minister of Employment. Although there is as yet no talk of Flemish collective labour agreements, Minister Landuyt is of the opinion that a first cautious step has been taken. However, the organisation of the consultations between the two sides of industry continues to take place in the existing federal organs, whilst those collective labour agreements that deal with federal areas of competence, such as labour law and wage movements, are ratified by the federal government. The draft decree has already caused resentment in the socialist trade union ABVV, which accused Landuyt of heading for a regionalisation of the labour market. The federal government stays competent to ratify collective labour agreements that deal with its areas of competence, such as wage movements and labour organisation. The Flemish draft decree only deals with social agreements concluded in a branch of industry. According to Landuyt, there is nevertheless room for parliamentary initiatives to have this extended to inter-professional agreements. Landuyt will be submitting the draft to the Government of Flanders for approval on Friday. The Government will then forward it to the Flemish Parliament (FF).

Opinion

STEFAAN HUYSENTRUYT • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 17 APRIL

A separate Flemish inter-professional agreement can only be brought about, until further notice, via the roundabout route of sectoral collective labour agreements—a route that the Government of Flanders already took in order to carry through the additional Flemish time credit premiums. Whilst Landuyt's draft decree is under consideration in the Flemish Parliament, it is possible that an amendment will be submitted, authorising the Government of Flanders to ratify Flemish inter-sectoral collective labour agreements, in addition to sectoral ones. But, just as the federal structure of joint-representation committees (in which employers' and employees' organisations from the sector are represented) has to be called upon for the conclusion of Flemish sectoral collective labour agreements, so the National Labour Council (Nationale Arbeidsraad [NAR], in which employers and employees' organisations are represented) has to be called upon for the conclusion of these inter-sectoral collective labour agreements (which concern all employees). This is despite the fact that the intention of such an amendment is precisely that it be the Flemish and not the federal social partners that negotiate such an agreement. But there is no Flemish Labour Council, and there is no immediate prospect of one being established either. Wallonia is scared to death of this. It is all too well aware that a Flemish Labour Council will, sooner rather than later, conclude collective labour agreements containing general collective elements alongside social-law aspects. Nonetheless, breaking through the unitary wage and labour market policy, which is currently pricing Wallonia out of the market, would also be a blessing for the southern part of the country. For civil servants in this country, there is now only a minimal joint base for wage and employment conditions. In addition to this, each regional authority has a completely free hand in its negotiations with the civil servants’ unions. Why doesn’t the government grant the private sector the same freedom?

Genocide law suffers setback

The so-called genocide law dating from 1993, which gives Belgian courts universal powers to pass judgement on crimes of international law, is under discussion. Since 1999, some 40 actions have already been brought against ruling heads of state on the basis of this law, including those brought against Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, the Rwandan president Kagame and the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. The diplomatic community is racking its brains over the law, and there is also dissatisfaction in judicial circles as to the law’s already too wide-ranging powers. But in the action against former Congolese Minister for Foreign Affairs Yerodia, the law has suffered two body blows. A Brussels examining magistrate had issued an international warrant of arrest against Yerodia. Yerodia went to the International Court of Justice in The Hague to challenge this, and was pronounced in the right by the Court. As a minister he was immune, and Belgium had to withdraw the arrest warrant. At the Brussels Court’s indictment division he then contested the admissibility of the suit, and here, too, he was successful in his action. According to the Court’s indictment division, proceedings can only be instituted for crimes committed outside Belgium when the accused is in Belgium. After this judgement, press judge Guy Devoire (De Standaard/De Financieel-Economische Tijd, 17 April) confirmed that if this ruling were upheld, most of the outstanding cases (Sharon, Saddam Hussein, Kagame, etc.) would be doomed to failure. The civil indicting party announced that it would be lodging an appeal against the ruling of the Court’s indictment division with the Court of Cassation.
Van Noppen and the struggle against the Hormone Mafia

Monday 15 April saw the beginning of the trial in the Assize Court of four suspects charged with the murder of veterinary inspector Karel Van Noppen. The perpetrator Albert Barrez, a bankrupt funfair peddler, confessed to the hit, which dates from 1995. Barrez carried out the murder for Carl De Schutter, an arms dealer who also supplied him with the weapon. De Schutter maintains that he had the murder carried out on the orders of Alex Vercauteren, a notorious baron of the then ‘hormone mafia’ in the Flanders region. The comeback of the national hormone magistrate was the cattle dealer Germain Daenen, who met De Schutter in prison and knew Vercauteren well. Both Daenen and Vercauteren deny all charges. According to the charge, there is no doubt about the reason for the murder. Van Noppen, who was an inspector with the Institute for Veterinary Inspection (IVK), had to be got rid of because he was too painstaking and single-minded in his search for illegal hormones in the cattle for slaughter in the slaughterhouses.

What the Public Prosecutor’s Department had feared might happen occurred on the first day of the trial. The president had to suspend the session until 18 April because Vercauteren’s lawyers invoked procedural mistakes in the investigation that had been carried out. This concerns statements allegedly made by De Schutter, but which were made in legally improper circumstances. Vercauteren’s counsel for the defence asked for these to be added to the case file again, so that the jury could also consult them. However, after two days’ consultations, the president of the court decided not to agree to this. Whatever the verdict in the trial turns out to be, the murder of Van Noppen led to the fight against the hormone mafia suddenly becoming a top priority for politicians and the judiciary in 1995. The tough approach that was subsequently adopted has been successful, in the view of national hormone magistrate Johan Sabbe (FF).
The SP.A wants to accept the request made by NMBS/SNCB chief executive Etienne Schouppe for the government to take responsibility for the railway network’s historic debt (standing at EUR 4.48 billion at the end of 2001). Federal Minister for the Budget Johan Vande Lanotte suggests doing this in 2005, when the public debt will have fallen well below 100% of the Gross Domestic Product. This takeover of liabilities would save the NMBS/SNCB EUR 372 million a year in debt settlement. The transfer operation should provide the NMBS/SNCB with the necessary capacity for investment, but whether this will happen under the continuing leadership of Etienne Schouppe is still not certain. Federal Minister for Transport Isabel Durant (Ecolo) has a short list of three alternative candidates for the position of managing director. Her personal preference goes to Alain Denef (formerly of Belgacom and now with Deutsche Post), but the inner cabinet does not regard any of the alternative candidates as being sufficiently feasible. Therefore Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) is proposing that new candidates be sought. But time is of the essence, and that also goes for the appointment of the ten new directors, since the mandate of the current board of directors expires on 25 April (FF).

In order to finance the investments in the railways, the socialist Deputy Prime Minister Vande Lanotte is proposing having the NMBS/SNCB’s debt transferred to the government in 2005. ‘If the party follows me at its platform conference in the autumn, that will be a breaking point for the SP.A. during the subsequent government negotiations,’ according to Vande Lanotte. The transfer operation is necessary in order to give the NMBS/SNCB sufficient clout once the liberalisation of passenger transport is a fait accompli. If the debt burden is not drastically reduced, the railway company will be a sitting duck in the competitive struggle with foreign companies such as the SNCF and Deutsche Bahn, which are no longer saddled with a debt mountain. With EUR 372 million extra in investment resources, the picture would be very different. But Vande Lanotte does feel that the NMBS/SNCB must guarantee that it will never again allow its debt to exceed EUR 495 million. He feels that the NMBS/SNCB should use the budgetary leeway thus acquired to halve ticket prices. ‘Seeing as employees now already pay 54% of the social season ticket, employees would therefore travel by train for free in the future. That would result in a drastic increase in the number of passengers.’ And that means that travelling comfort should also be catered for. Vande Lanotte reckons that EUR 250 million should be set aside for the purchase of double-decker trains. ‘If people can travel for fee, but have to stand for the entire journey, you won’t persuade them to leave their cars at home. Therefore we have to provide for extra space.’

The NMBS/SNCB posted a net loss last year of 104.4 million euros on a turnover of 4,953.1 million euros. Particularly striking in the figures is the net loss recorded by the logistics subsidiary ABX (EUR 98.4 million). Furthermore, Schouppe is looking for private investors for ABX. To make buying into ABX more attractive, ABX’s book value was cut by EUR 150 million, a move that naturally had severe repercussions in the group result (De Financieel-Economische Tijd, 18 April).

Within five years the 800 black spots (places where road accidents often result in injuries and fatalities) on Flanders’ regional roads should have been erased from the map. The Flemish Minister for Transport Steve Stevaert (SP.A) is earmarking an additional EUR 500 million for the initiative, a sum that comes on top of the existing budget for cycle paths and safer town centres. He is also investing a further EUR 15.5 million in inland shipping, in an endeavour to get more lorries off the roads (FF).

‘It’s difficult to calculate how many lives will be saved thanks to these measures. Whichever way you look at it, if people continue to drive recklessly, it won’t be of much use. So we have to keep working at changing the mentality of drivers and ensuring strict controls,’ Stevaert said. Originally the aim was only to ensure the elimination of all the black spots within 20 years, but now the target date is 2008. All these black spots will be examined one by one during the course of this year, and then decisions will be taken as to what needs to be changed. Five million euros is being set aside for this screening process. ‘In consultation with the governors and the non-profit-making association Ouders van Verongelukte Kinderen (Parents of children who have been killed in road accidents), we can then get going from 2003 onwards on the job of turning junctions into roundabouts, for example, or straightening out sharp bends,’ said the minister. Tackling 800 black spots in five years means dealing with 160 a year, or three a week. Aren’t people going to get irritated with all these road works? Stevaert thinks that ‘Flemings are intelligent enough to have an understanding for this’. His earlier measures are also now having some effect, since, as his gut feeling tells him, ‘people are beginning to drive more slowly and carefully.’
Diamond sector warns of measures against Israel

The mayor of Antwerp Leona Detiège (Sp.a) has banned a planned demonstration by the Arab-European League (AEL). Two weeks ago a demonstration by that same AEL ended in pitched battles with the police and shops being wrecked and looted. All the majority parties have supported this decision. In addition to a ban on the demonstration, Detiège has also issued a ban on street gatherings on 21 April, so that any demonstration on that day will be rendered impossible. Within the Moroccan community, too, many feared that a fresh demonstration would cast a cloud on relations between the communities in the city. They even made a call for peace, together with members of the Jewish and Catholic communities and other communities of faith in Antwerp. In the meantime the High Council for the Diamond Trade (Hoge Raad voor Diamant), the organisation that represents the Belgian diamond sector, warned the government that any sanctions imposed on Israel would hit the sector hard.

The European Parliament has asked the EU to suspend an association agreement with Israel, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs Louis Michel (PRL) himself has proposed suspending that treaty. Diamonds account for EUR 2.38 billion in exports to Israel, i.e., 80% of total exports (EUR 3.07 billion) to that country. There is only one country in the European Union with greater exports to Israel, namely Germany. And Belgium is in fact the leading EU Member State as regards imports from Israel (FF).

DIRK DELMARTINO • DE STANDAARD • 13 APRIL

Israel is the recipient of 1.46% of our exports (EUR 3.07 billion, out of EUR 209.9 billion in 2001). This makes Israel the ninth largest importer of Belgian products. Aside from our neighbouring countries and the large EU Member States, it is only preceded by the United States. ‘We want to state that from a Belgian point of view, it is not intelligent to shoot ourselves in the foot by asking for sanctions that will have a negative effect on our own country,’ Peter Meeus, Director-General of the High Council for the Diamond Trade, said yesterday.

Antwerp is the largest diamond-trading centre in the world and distributes something in the region of 80% of all uncut diamonds in the world. Israel is the second largest client (after the US) and purchases, directly and indirectly, 20% of the turnover. ‘Moreover, if you take away one of the arms of our Antwerp hub, that will have a multiplier effect in the rest of the world,’ Meeus added.

He therefore fears severe economic consequences if the Israeli market were to disappear for an indefinite period, and in a Thursday evening sent a letter on this subject to the Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD). On top of a ban on arms imports and exports, some politicians have also already called for a diamond blockade. But despite all the strong rhetoric from individuals and the parliamentary ‘requests’, it is only the fifteen EU Member States acting together that can take the decision to impose sanctions or suspend treaties.

‘Early music’ at the Beurschouwburg

The Beursschouwburg, a multicultural Brussels temple chiefly known for its hip-hop workshops, brass band concerts, street parties, and a sultry night pub, is now playing host to early music, in the form of ‘Transreligiosa’—a festival that runs until 10 May. The starting point is the Spanish Golden Age, the 13th century, when a rich mélange of Arab, Jewish, and Christian culture flourished at the court of King Alfonso X. The musical cross-pollination of Arab, Hebrew, and Latin liturgical music is used to paint a picture of an essential part of our cultural history. Programme director Dirk Seghers provides the text and explanation (FF).

HERMAN ASSELBERGS • TIJD CULTUUR • 17 APRIL

Seghers: ‘Transreligiosa’ does not present musicians whose aim it is to make a reconstruction of the original. On the contrary, the bridging of ostensibly separate worlds is what the programme is all about. The Ensemble Organum brings together eight singers including Moroccans, Corsicans, a Maltese and an Algerian. The Ensemble Cantilena Antiqua draws inspiration from the Song of Songs for their ‘Canticum Cantorum’. The work sounds like a single score, but in fact the live ensemble seamlessly strings together Hebrew and Gregorian a-cappella songs, which then merge into Arab instrumental parts with elements from the Maronite rites from Lebanon or Syria and from the Byzantine and Sephardic rites. The rhythms, the tonality, the melodies—it all sounds like a single piece of music, but in fact it is a sublime collage of 12th and 13th century music. It could be a DJ’s mix. It is the role of an arts centre to stress that nothing is from here, that music and culture are always the result of the temporary fusion of elements from various other cultures, that world music has always existed. Multiculturalism is not something particular to our era. Making music together and passing on elements from one’s own tradition in order to create something new—that is something that has been done down the ages. Zefiro Torna will play together with Ialma for a special performance of the Cantigas. Zefiro Torna is a young five-strong ensemble of trained musicians who have earned their spurs with Collegium Vocale and Huelgas Ensemble. Ialma are five young Galician girls from Brussels, with strong, passionate voices. It is a surprising combination that is fitting from an historical standpoint, since Galician was the literary language of the Iberian Peninsula in
the thirteenth century, and the members of Ialma can thus read and speak the Cantigas very well. The ‘Sufistic ritual of Al Shustari’, performed by the Ensemble De Chant Soufi Saad Tensmansani de la Zawiya Kettaniya, is the most unique experience since their ‘performance’ is the furthest removed from a stage act. The Sufi company from Tangiers will only be performing their payer ritual in Brussels, for religious rather than artistic reasons. ‘Transreligiosa’ was an entire year in the making, and nobody could have imagined that right now the Jewish occupier would be dealing with an Arab people with uncommon brutality, and that a productive dialogue between the two cultures would appear to be far from reach than ever. This is the 21st century, not the 9th, or the 13th.

‘TRANRELIGIOSA’: CHURCH OF SAINT ANTHONY, THE MUSEUM OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND BSBBIS; INFORMATION: 02/513.82.90 and www.beurschouwburg.be.

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