Flemish vulnerable areas: Europe blows the whistle

The way in which the Government of Flanders has demarcated its vulnerable agricultural areas finds no favour with the European Commissioner for the Environment, Margot Wallström. At the insistence of the Minister-President of the Government of Flanders, Patrick Dewael (VLD), the Flemish Minister for the Environment, Vera Dua, reduced these areas, where manuring has to be severely restricted, to 47% of the total farming area. But in a reply to the MEP Bart Staes (Spirit), Wallström says that the Flemish approach appears to her to be ‘neither appropriate nor acceptable’, and that at least 80% of Flanders should be demarcated as vulnerable areas (FF).

Flanders is acting with premeditation. During informal meetings with the Government of Flanders Wallström repeatedly let it be known that she rejected the Flemish approach. Nonetheless the Government of Flanders persisted. The compromise agreement between Minister-President Patrick Dewael and Minister for Agriculture and the Environment Vera Dua, was reached on 29 April. In that agreement, the map of vulnerable areas was brought down to as little as 47% of the total area of farming land in Flanders. That map will function as an ‘accordion’. If the groundwater and surface water in a particular area is no longer subject to nitrate contamination, it will be struck off the list of vulnerable areas. In that case, a somewhat freer manuring activity can again be permitted. That is not what the European Nitrate Directive is all about, says Wallström in a letter to Bart Staes. ‘My office and my administration have clearly stated, during informal meetings with the Government of Flanders, that the Commission was not in agreement with the approach adopted for the demarcation.’ Wallström calls the nitrate contamination in Flanders serious. ‘Flanders is contributing, in increasing measure, to the contamination of the North Sea with nitrates.’ The European Commission is losing its patience, and is threatening to block EUR 200 million in subsidies for rural development. Bart Staes is unhappy about the state of affairs. ‘Dua initially tackled the affair bravely, but then the Farmers’ Union and the General Farmers’ Syndicate blew the whistle on her, with Dewael’s support’.

INTRODUCTION

In an age in which more and more people are watching out for number one and bother less and less about others, the feeling of solidarity is losing ground.

But is that also the case for the manifestation of excellence in that feeling of solidarity, the social security system, which provides for a redistribution of wealth from the workers to the jobless, and from the healthy to the infirm? The question was posed by Knack (29 May). How strong is the basis of this solidarity still among public opinion in Flanders? Specifically, do Flemings feel that the social security system is indeed the best conceivable safety net, or do they consider it rather as a hammock in which people’s sense of responsibility is rocked to sleep? Together with the insurance company P&V and the Sociology Department of the Free University of Brussels (Flemish Section) under the leadership of Professor Mark Elchardus, the weekly news magazine conducted a written survey among 7,500 Flemings. This reveals that more and more people share the negative criticism of the welfare state in Flanders, although those who have a positive view of it are still in the majority. The most common comment made by the “negatives” is that the welfare state makes people on benefit lazy. Those espousing this opinion are found chiefly among the self-employed and people working in the private sector, but equally among semi- and unskilled workers, people on low incomes, and the elderly. And yet the age and socio-economic position of Flemings do not suffice to account for the negative perception. In part, at least, it is also an expression of malaise and grouchiness, according to the conclusions of the study. Elchardus refers here to a new socio-cultural fault line that subdivides Flemings according to their attitude to immigration, authority, and democracy, and their faith in or mistrust of their fellow man. Only 22% of the Flemings who are to the left of this fault line have a negative attitude towards the social security system. On the other side, 52% are negatively inclined. However, he concludes that the structure of the social security system is standing up pretty well, although the uneasiness and mistrust in society risks driving a wedge into solidarity. Paradoxically, it is the socially vulnerable—the ill, unemployed, and retired—who are most dependent on social security, who are also most liable to criticise the welfare state, Elchardus concludes (table p. 5).
Four Spirit politicians defect to the VLD

For four members of Spirit, the party that came into being after the Volksunie disintegrated, the die is cast. They are defecting to the VLD. The four in question are senators Patrick Vankrunkelsven and Vincent Van Quickenborne, Flemish MP Margriet Hermans, and the member of the federal parliament Fons Borgignon. Together they announced their move at a press conference at the VLD’s party headquarters. In Spirit’s own ranks, there is great consternation at the loss of four nationally recognised politicians. Nonetheless the party still insists that it will continue on its own and for the moment is not considering an alliance with the SP.A, as figurehead and Flemish Minister for Culture Bert Anciaux had advocated (FF).

PETER DE BACKER • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 29 MAY

‘This is the best way to safeguard progressive regionalism,’ Vankrunkelsven went as far as saying. He thinks that too many politicians still think in terms of the old ideological differences. ‘But the only fault line that I still see is that between the conservatively inclined and the innovators. We are convinced that the VLD is an innovative, progressive party that wants to reform society with new ideas.’ The four defecting Spirit members have drawn up a ‘declaration of intent’ with the VLD, in which they emphasise an abhorrence of all forms of ‘conservatism’. They also insisted on the guarantee that the VLD wanted to work on greater social protection, a tolerant society, and further steps in the state reform. Conspicuously the VLD is now also of the view that the railways (the national company NMBS/SNCB) should be split up. The four new-comers want to become members of the VLD, but they will continue to belong to the VU-ID parliamentary parties because this was what had been agreed when the Volksunie was disbanded. However, the four intend to vote with the majority parties. Spirit chairperson Annemie Vande Casteele said that the decision to carry on alone still held, although she realised that the chances of the Spirit project succeeding were diminishing. A quick glance at Spirit’s remaining elected representatives also reflects this. Apart from the two ministers (Bert Anciaux and Paul Van Grembergen) and Vande Casteele herself, there are few nationally recognised politicians left in the party’s ranks.

Opinion

RIK VAN CAUWELAERT • KNACK • 29 MAY

Residents of the Rue de la Loi knew for some time that a number of Spirit mandataries were preparing for the big leap to the VLD in order merely to save their political skin. But the manoeuvre was revealed prematurely by the remarks made by Flemish Minister for Culture Bert Anciaux regarding his preference for an electoral alliance with the SP.A and the Christian workers’ movement ACW. In the past Spirit had been keen to refer to the Dutch left-Liberal example of D66. When it was founded, the pragmatic Liberal D66 labelled itself as ‘ideology-free but not principle-free’. According to its own claims, the party wanted to make the traditional parties explode and thereby inflict so much loss that they would be forced into modernisation and cooperation. Spirit’s pyrotechnists, who appear to be not only free of ideology but also — given the flexibility with which they change party — free of principles, have mixed up D66’s formulas and blown themselves up.

Euthanasia: De Gucht counterattacks catholic hospitals

The announcement made by Caritas, the umbrella organisation of Christian hospitals, that it would be ruling out euthanasia in non-terminal patients, even though this was made possible under the terms of the new Euthanasia Act, has created bad blood in Flanders. Therefore his party will be tabling a bill obliging Christian hospitals to ensure the pluralistic composition of the hospitals’ ethical committees (FF).

DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 28 MAY

The VLD bill should protect the patients’ and doctors’ rights that are established in the Euthanasia Act. ‘If we don’t do that, doctors who do want to implement euthanasia — and they account for about 50% — will risk having the bread taken out of their mouths,’ said the VLD chairman. De Gucht yesterday received the support of Agalev and SPA. ‘This is a very serious problem,’ said Van Lerberghe, one of the initiators of the Euthanasia Act. ‘But we must arrive at a solution together and not begin submitting separate proposals.’

‘I find it very hard to swallow the fact that Caritas wants to take away the freedom of doctors to agree to a request for euthanasia or not,’ said Agalev senator Jacinta de Roeck. ‘We support De Gucht, but we do wonder whether the tabling of a bill is the right solution. In any case we are receptive to the idea of working together on a solution.’ ‘Caritas simply has its own opinion,’ was the reaction of the CD&V Chairman Stefaan de Clerck. ‘If a doctor nonetheless goes against the recommendations, he will not be dismissed. The ethical committees, which for that matter are legally composed of members from among the staff, do not intervene here. It is merely De Gucht’s umpteenth attempt to impinge on the Christian institutions.’
Every newcomer shortly to be offered a ‘settling-in course’

Recognised asylum seekers or immigrants who have been regularised after a stay of some years or immigrants who arrive in Flanders on account of a so-called family reunification (e.g. wedding) have to go through a slow integration process. The municipalities are lending them a hand in this process. Via special reception agencies, the newcomers are invited to follow so-called ‘settling-in courses’. These courses contain a series of language lessons, a component on social orientation and assistance in job hunting. Unfortunately, at the moment the number and capacity of such courses is nowhere near large enough. According to calculations made by the Flemish Minister for Welfare, Mieke Vogels (Agalev), there are some 13,000 such newcomers every year, and at the moment only about 2,256 of these are following one of these settling-in courses. Vogels promises that she is aiming to do away with this shortfall before the end of the current period of office (2004). Therefore, all Flemish municipalities will shortly have to offer a reception policy. However, an additional investment of EUR 25 million is needed for that (FF).

BART EECKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 25 MAY

As long as the number of settling-in courses is not sufficient, the Government of Flanders does not want to make the settling in obligatory for newcomers. However, when the decree is debated, the Flemish Parliament will have the chance to introduce the obligation. The newcomers who have undergone a settling-in course receive a certificate. Of the newcomers who have a settling-in certificate, 73% have a basic knowledge of Dutch. Of this group, three-quarters move on to the employment service, the VDAB.

At the same time the Flemish Minister for Education, Marleen Vanderpoorten (VLD) announced that she would be setting aside an additional EUR 5.5 million for Dutch-language education for non-native speakers. Most eye-catching is the intention to set up ‘Centres for Dutch’ (Huizen van het Nederlands). Vanderpoorten is hereby meeting the need for regional reception centres that can offer the candidate students the necessary orientation. The extra budget of EUR 5.5 million for ‘Dutch as a second language’ will also partly be to the benefit of the parents, with one million euros being earmarked for Dutch classes to be given to the parents of non-native-speaker newcomers in the schools attended by their children. The remaining EUR 4.5 million will be used to expand the range of Dutch-as-a-second-language classes offered in centres for basic education and adult education centres.

Agalev holds its party conference

The Green party Agalev held its party conference on 25 May, in Ghent. The main business centred on the approval of conference texts that are due to form the basis for the electoral programme. However, first of all Agalev wants to implement what has already been decided in the governments, party secretary Jos Geyssels stressed. Minister of the Environment Vera Dua wants the Government of Flanders to create an ecological fund. The idea would be for this to help pay for the damage done to the environment in the past. But at the top of the party’s list of priorities is the VEN, the Flemish Ecological Network, which is a demarcation and grouping of all existing scenic areas and nature reserves in Flanders (FF).

BART DOBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 27 MAY

One breaking point also slipped into the conference texts: the right of immigrants to vote should be included in the next government declaration, in Agalev’s view. ‘If the Socialists are going for it, then we should do so as well,’ said Flemish community senator Johan Malcorps. It was striking how Agalev ranged itself behind the Minister for the Environment and Agriculture, Vera Dua. In a resolution on topical matters, the party implored the coalition partners to honour the arrangements that had been agreed to in the coalition agreement. ‘Some members of the Government of Flanders want to turn back the clock and let some issues drag along. Well, we’re not taking that,’ said the member of the Flemish Parliament Isabelle Vertriest. Here Agalev is thinking in particular of the VEN, the Flemish Ecological Network, on which matter the party is still encountering opposition from the farming organisations and from the VLD. The decree on the integral water policy is also only moving with difficulty. And Dua’s waste policy is increasingly coming up against resistance because it hurts the waste industry, so it was said. Dua promised the conference that these issues would have been completely dealt with by the summer. She also wants to raise the idea of a green ‘silver fund’ in the Government of Flanders. This should help alleviate ‘Flanders’ environmental debt’. Jos Geyssels calculated that for the decontamination of the soil, the price would be almost EUR 10 billion. Minister Dua added to this the example of water purification and the old sewer systems (price: more than EUR 8 billion).
The Flemish Liberal Minister for Economic Affairs, Jaak Gabriëls, caused commotion in Green circles, when he let slip in De Standaard (25 May) that if necessary green and agricultural areas would have to be taken over in order to colour in the much-needed 7,000 ha in extra industrial zones. At the Agalev party conference in Ghent, party secretary Jos Gheysels answered Gabriëls. For his party, the grabbing of nature areas is not open to discussion. Gheysels reminded Gabriëls of the coalition agreement, in which it was agreed that 35,000 ha in new scenic areas was to be coloured in. A day later VLD Chairman Karel de Gucht put Gabriëls’ comment into perspective. He said that there was indeed a need for additional industrial zones, but that it was not necessary to sacrifice nature areas for that.

The same day De Financieel-Economische Tijd published a report by the firm Ernst & Young on the airport of Deurne near Antwerp. In this report the consultant argues in favour of the extension of the runway in order to make the airport profitable. However, a motorway would have to be taken through a tunnel for that. The airport of Deurne is of vital importance for the transport of diamonds. The Greens are radically opposed to the plan. Minister for Home Affairs Paul Van Grembergen (Spirit) had already earlier sided with the Greens by instituting a procedure under which the Port, an historic monument near the airport, gains protected status as a monument. There also appears to be a lack of unanimity within the opposition party CDeV as to the fate of the airport. CDeV airport specialist Carl Decaluwe even raised questions about the continued existence of the airport, but was reminded by Marc Van Peel, CDeV alderman in Antwerp, that the official party standpoint is that the airport stays. In the Antwerp coalition the CDeV and VLD are strong proponents of an extension to the airport.

Minister-President Patrick Dewael (VLD) assured that the Flanders Town and Country Planning Structural Plan (Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen - RSV) was being implemented in the way in which it had been agreed in the coalition agreement. He did point out, however, that the RSV was ‘rigid, unwieldy, and theoretical’ and ‘does not tally with reality’, and was therefore ripe for adaptation. The evaluation and adjustment are on the agenda for the second half of the year. The public opening moves have thus been made in the Liberal-Green game of chess that is to be played out over the next few weeks. The extension of the airport of Deurne and the building of new industrial zones are not what is really at stake, however. With the federal election campaign in the offing, the VLD’s and Agalev’s political priorities are rather different.

For the Greens, the demarcation of the Flemish Ecological Network (VEN) is at the top of the list. Minister for the Environment Magda Aelvoet (Agalev) has signed a VEN map and written the requisite draft decrees. The Liberals want to notch up points with a regularisation of the companies established in areas intended for other purposes, particularly SMEs. The proposal for a decree has been submitted to the Flemish Parliament. In addition, in the run-up to the preparation of the 2003 budget a decision has to be taken on the financing of the environmental policy and a reform of the environmental taxes, whereby the ‘polluter pays’ principle is under discussion. In this issue it is not only the Liberals and the Greens that are on the move; SPA figurehead Steve Stevaert is also hoping to be able to strike a blow. Stevaert already launched the proposal of having the household refuse tax linked to income, instead of a fixed-sum household refuse tax being levied. Behind the scenes the political game of give and take can now begin. There is little doubt that it will end with a political compromise between economy and ecology, with which both the Greens and the Liberals can go into the electoral battle. It looks as though the Deurne airport will chiefly be used as a political bartering piece for other issues. The persistent matter is not a breaking point for either the Liberals or the Greens. The third major party in office, the SPA, has kept quiet on the subject thus far. The Socialists are biding their time and are currently the unknown factor. It could be that they will thereby again play a decisive role in forging a political compromise between economy and ecology.

No second windmill park off the coast of De Haan

The chances of the second windmill park being built on the Wendeine bank off the coast of De Haan are receding. It so happens that the North Sea Mathematical Model Control Unit (BMM) has delivered a negative opinion to the Federal Minister for the Environment Magda Aelvoet (Agalev). The company C-Power wanted to place 50 windmills, providing for a capacity of 115 megawatts, between six and 11 kilometres from the coast. However, the windmill park would be too visually intrusive, would cause noise pollution, and would lead to too great a risk of shipping disasters. On top of that, the site lies smack in the middle of a bird migration area. Aelvoet already let it be known that she would be inclined to follow the advice. She has to formulate a draft ministerial order by 25 June. Conversely, the windmill park of Seaneergy (Ericabat and the Jan De Nul dredging company), which lies 12 km off the coast of Knokke-Heist, had previously obtained a positive opinion.
Prisons: discontented warders and overcrowding

Last week Belgium’s 5,400 prison warders went on strike. The police had to take over the guarding and surveillance duties as an emergency measure, but they were not able to prevent discontented inmates in the prisons of Ypres and Tongeren from rising in revolt and wreaking havoc. Minister of Justice Verwilghen came in for some scathing criticism from the opposition. But on the evening of Thursday 23 May a social agreement was nonetheless reached between the trade unions, Verwilghen and the Minister for the Civil Service, Luc Vanden Bossche (SP.A). The agreement provides for more staff, in particular psychologists, social workers, and administrative personnel. In addition, the warders are to keep the 36-hour week, and will be given the possibility of retiring at 55 or after 20 years’ service, as well as an adapted bonus system. Warders who continue working after their 55th birthday will receive an incentive bonus of EUR 2,500. The new rules governing departures will come into effect from the beginning of 2004. But this agreement does not serve to deal with another pressing problem facing the prison system—overcrowding. Around 8,800 inmates are confined in 7,500 cells. Harry Van Oers, consultant-general of the Prisons Board, listed the reasons in Knack (FF).

Van Oers: ‘The number of inmates serving long sentences, who are in jail for more than five years, continues to grow. And yet, as is always proclaimed in circles of criminology, the deprivation of liberty becomes counter-productive after seven years. In a number of people, feelings of hate come boiling to the surface after seven years, and when that happens there is little you can do in terms of reintegration—you’re sending a time bomb onto the streets. Our magistrates are not always inclined to apply alternative sanctions. For alternative sanctions do exist: there are fines, there has been the law on probation and deferment that has been on the books since 1963, and as of April this year there is even forced labour as a punishment. I have been arguing for ten years now that magistrates should modify their inclination to hand down prison sentences. Another problem is the fact that the period of pre-trial detention is becoming longer and longer. Almost 40% of the prison population is on detention for more than six months. France introduced this limitation two years ago. There, an individual may only be detained awaiting trial if he or she is suspected of having committed an offence for which the penalty is at least a three-year prison sentence. In our country that condition is one year’s imprisonment, but here those accused of transgressions for which there is a lesser penalty are also locked up. The most effective solution would be to place a limit on the length of time during which someone can be detained under remand. France has introduced this by law. If the average length of pre-trial detention in Belgium could be reduced to the level of 1980 (one month less than at the moment), this could cut the prison population by 800. However, the judicial authorities would have to work more quickly for this to happen. In defence, examining magistrates refer to techniques such as DNA testing, which are very time-consuming.

Two researchers from the National Institute for Criminalistics and Criminology have examined what the effect would be of a limitation being placed on pre-trial detention. France introduced this limitation two years ago. There, an individual may only be detained awaiting trial if he or she is suspected of having committed an offence for which the penalty is at least a three-year prison sentence. In our country that condition is one year’s imprisonment, but here those accused of transgressions for which there is a lesser penalty are also locked up. The most effective solution would be to place a limit on the length of time during which someone can be detained under remand. France has introduced this by law. If the average length of pre-trial detention in Belgium could be reduced to the level of 1980 (one month less than at the moment), this could cut the prison population by 800. However, the judicial authorities would have to work more quickly for this to happen. In defence, examining magistrates refer to techniques such as DNA testing, which are very time-consuming.
**De Graeve leaves the VRT**

Bert De Graeve, Managing Director of the public broadcasting corporation VRT, has unexpectedly resigned. De Graeve will be taking up the post of financial and administrative manager at the multinational company Bekaert. There is nothing but praise for De Graeve in the Flemish press. Under his leadership, the combined market share of the VRT channels TV1, Canvas and Ketnet (children’s programmes) has risen from 28.2% to 38.8% in the space of six and a half years. The public broadcasting corporation has again taken over the market leader’s position from the commercial broadcasting company VTM, which has suffered a market share fall from 44.6% to 36.3%. De Graeve had charisma, had a clear-cut vision of the role of the public broadcasting corporation, and had a strategic view. In 1996 the then Media Minister Eric Van Rompuy (CD&V) lured him away from Alcatel Paris. According to the current Media Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD), De Graeve is the living proof that a manager from the private sector can do excellent work in a public enterprise, as long as he is not obstructed by political meddling. Van Mechelen has already announced that, as had been the case when De Graeve was recruited in 1996, the services of a head-hunting agency would again be hired to look for a successor (FF).

KRISTOF DEMASURE • DE MORGEN • 29 MAY

When he came to the Reyerslaan for the first time, Bert De Graeve made the acquaintance of a heavily politicised company where the member’s badge of this or that party was our guaranteed buffer against the support of the critical staff. ‘He was our guaranteed buffer against the interference of Flemish politicians,’ says a member of the management staff. He reacted furiously when it was leaked that a number of prominent VLD politicians together with Christian Van Thillo, the chief executive of De Persgroep and shareholder in the Vlaamse Media Maatschappij (VMM), which is the VRT’s umbrella company, had devoted their attention to the VRT’s new management agreement at an evening meeting. As always, De Graeve vented his displeasure for all the world to see, and repeatedly stressed the fact that he had hitherto never been able to attend a single meeting with Minister-President Patrick Dewael (VLD). Over the last few months De Graeve has also become the subject of the so-called reinstatement of ‘the primacy of politics’, the restoration of the omnipotence of the political establishment, which would again determine the course of affairs at the VRT. On the other hand, a very different story is doing the rounds among the competitors. Whilst former Minister Van Rompuy (CD&V) was renamed Minister of Public Broadcasting by VMM Chief Executive Van Thillo, the current Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD) has also received the occasional jibe that he shared De Graeve’s enthusiasm too much and too often. That the idea for the digital home platform eVRT came about after a ‘joint study trip’ to the United States is often cited as proof. However that may be, the fact is that after six and half years, De Graeve, who had originally been averse to politicians, had developed a way of dealing with them, in which his perseverance and determination were key factors. How things will further develop in the relations between the VRT and the political world in the wake of De Graeve’s departure, is for the moment a matter for crystal ball gazing. If the primacy of the political world wins the day, a manager solicited externally will be installed before long. If the wish of the chairman of the board of directors is fulfilled, the current general manager of television Christina von Wackerbarth will take the post.

**Bekaert replaces CEO Decaluwé with the duo De Wilde and De Graeve**

Raf Decaluwé is no longer managing director of the Belgian steel cord and steel wire manufacturer Bekaert, a listed company that employs 17,000 people worldwide. He is replaced by Julien De Wilde, who has been executive vice-president of Alcatel Bell in Paris since 1999. The managing director of the VRT, Bert De Graeve, becomes financial and administrative manager of Bekaert and assumes responsibility for all staff departments. De Graeve and De Wilde know each other well from the days when they both worked at Alcatel. Decaluwé does not remain in his seat on the board of directors and remains advisor to Bekaert Chairman Buysse. The Bekaert share rose by 3.31% on the day the announcement was made (FF).

MARC DE ROO • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHIE TIJD • 29 MAY

It was no secret that Decaluwé and Buysse were not on the same wavelength. The engineer Decaluwé was an old hand in steel cord and steel wire, and was the man of cautious growth, and the long-term approach. As new chairman, Buysse resolutely changed course two years ago. He opted for quicker decisions, and more substantial investments in new technology: solar panels, advanced coatings, chemical film coats, and so on. He said at the time that Bekaert had to be more assertive. He did not want to admit that Bekaert had an image problem, ‘just a weakened image’. The new corporate style did not yield much fruit, and profits fell by half last year. The share value dropped. The shift at the top of Bekaert has also been fearful of the omnipotence of the political establishment, which would again determine the course of affairs at the VRT. On the other hand, a very different story is doing the rounds among the competitors. Whilst former Minister Van Rompuy (CD&V) was renamed Minister of Public Broadcasting by VMM Chief Executive Van Thillo, the current Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD) has also received the occasional jibe that he shared De Graeve’s enthusiasm too much and too often. That the idea for the digital home platform eVRT came about after a ‘joint study trip’ to the United States is often cited as proof. However that may be, the fact is that after six and half years, De Graeve, who had originally been averse to politicians, had developed a way of dealing with them, in which his perseverance and determination were key factors. How things will further develop in the relations between the VRT and the political world in the wake of De Graeve’s departure, is for the moment a matter for crystal ball gazing. If the primacy of the political word wins the day, a manager solicited externally will be installed before long. If the wish of the chairman of the board of directors is fulfilled, the current general manager of television Christina von Wackerbarth will take the post.

focus on flanders • 25 May- 31 May 2002 • Number 20
Telenet counts on a bankloan of 1.35 billion

The young ‘Flemish-American’ telecom company Telenet, like many other telecom companies, is having a tough time of it on the market. The difficulties only really began when it turned out that the American buyer Callahan was unable to pay for its acquisition and the other shareholders, including the Flemish mixed (public/private) cable companies, had to realign the participating interests out of sheer necessity. The Callahan share was cut from 54.32 to 24%, but Telenet continues to contend with an acute shortage of money, in the first instance to be able to pay for the acquisition of half of the Flemish cable network, but also to pay off a number of outstanding loans. The municipalities, which own the cable network, have already granted a postponement of payment once, but now they are getting impatient, since it looks as though Telenet will not be able to meet the next deadline (31 May) either. On top of this, Telenet’s financial results for 2001 are not exactly rosy. Since the company started up, the cumulative loss runs to EUR 549.5 million, even though turnover rose by 93% in 2001 to EUR 172.3 million. According to De Financieel-Economische Tijd (30 May), the liabilities on the annual accounts already total EUR 858 million. Equity capital even dipped EUR 149.8 million into the red in 2001, and in such cases the law obliges the general meeting to give its opinion as to the continuation of business. Telenet is now counting wholly on a bank loan to the tune of EUR 1.35 billion (FF).

BERT BROENS • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 30 MAY

Telenet’s board of directors points to the improvement in the results and the financial situation (the operating result has been in the black since the New Year). The uncertain future meant that sales have dropped, but ironically enough this has had a beneficial effect on results since there have also been fewer expenses. Moreover, Telenet shareholders made agreements earlier this year, which were aimed at making up the company’s equity capital again. This chiefly relates to a fresh cash contribution and the conversion of bonds into share capital. But a suspensive condition for these arrangements is that the EUR 1.35 billion loan must be contracted. This remains an uncertain factor. The situation on the telecom market has deteriorated to the point where the banks now want to limit their exposure in this sector as much as possible. ‘Approximately one billion euros has more or less definitely been promised,’ said Leo Steenbergen, Telenet’s financial manager. ‘There therefore remains a shortfall of some EUR 400 million that has to be made up, but that could soon become EUR 200 million.’ According to Steenbergen, two large banks and a number of smaller ones should still be won over. One large bank is ABN Amro.

Ancient Bruges, European trading centre

The exhibition Hanze@Medici runs in Bruges until 8 September. The way in which Bruges flourished commercially between 1300 and 1600 is displayed at four sites in the city. The title indicates what it is all about. The Hanseatic League (the Hanze of the title) was a German merchant guild that originated in Bremen, Hamburg, and Lübeck and aimed to promote international trade. Its power was feared by the city authorities, since it was in a position to establish trade blockades. The arrival of Southern European (and especially Italian) merchants was equally vital for Bruges’ flourishing development. They grouped together in what were called naties (goods handling associations). In the title of the exhibition, the powerful De Medici family from Florence is symbolic of the contribution from the south. By the end of the thirteenth century, Bruges had become a trading centre par excellence between Northern and Southern Europe (FF).

BERT POPELIER • TIJD CULTUUR • 29 MAY

The title also contains a euro symbol, and the subject of the exhibition is also European: international trade and stock exchange activities in Bruges. Bruges had some 40,000 to 45,000 inhabitants in around 1300, and was thus one of the largest cities in Europe—a metropolis alongside Ghent, Paris, and a handful of cities in Northern Italy. It was a cosmopolitan city where people of many nationalities lived and worked with each other in a jumble of languages and customs. Bruges was by far and away the most important trading centre north of the Alps. The exhibition tells the story of these international traders against a background of towers, gables, and monuments. After all, the old city centre forms part of the exhibition, which is spread over four locations—each and every one a historical building that has some connection with the subject. The itinerary starts in the Provinciaal Hof, where the Waterhalle stood in the Middle Ages. Goods transported by the Zwin (sea creek) were unloaded at the Waterhalle. The visitor then strolls to a building called the Poortersloge (Burghers’ Lodge), which was erected at the beginning of the fifteenth century as a meeting place for Bruges’ foremost citizens, the burgheers. The venue for the next part of the exhibition is the so-called Saaihalle, built in 1399 as a natie house for the merchants from Genoa. The exhibition ends in the Hof Bladelin, which served as the office of the De Medici bank in the second half of the fifteenth century, and is now a convent. The urban setting is emphasised still further by a crane on the Kraanplein (Crane
were hoisted into smaller boats which sailed to Bruges. The two curators of the exhibition, Ronny Gobyn and André Vandewalle, have succeeded in portraying this economic story in a lively and vivid fashion. This is chiefly down to the sophisticated scenography. The design is aimed at telling stories and full use is made of historicising reconstructions and illusions.

**CULTURE**

**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE THEATRE**

- **3 June: [sonic]square # 5: stuttermouthface with Christof Migone, Vincent Barras, Brandon Labelle, Caroline Bergvall, Kaaitheater-studie Brussels; info: 02/201.59.59 www.kaaitheater.be**
- **3 June: [sonic]square # 5: Stuttermouth, contemporary music, kaaitheaterstudios, Brussels; info: 02/201.59.59 www.kaaitheater.be**
- **4 June: Simple minds, Royal Circus, Brussels; info: 09/000/26060**
- **4 June: Electric Ballroom, Ictus ensemble, concerts, exhibitions, Zuiderpershuis, Brussels; info: 02/201.59.59 www.zuiderpershuis.be**
- **7 and 8 June: Akram Khan Company with Kaash, dance, kaaitheater, Brussels; info: 02/201.59.59 www.kaaitheater.be**
- **11 June: Cleveland Orchestra, Christoph Van Dohnanyi, PSK, Brussels; info: 02/507.82.00**
- **Until 9 June: Tosareg in residence, concerts, workshops, exhibitions, Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: 03/248.01.00 www.zuiderpershuis.be**
- **6, 7 and 9 June: Festival of Flanders, Liège: Huelgas Ensemble wet compositions by Ciconia and Perotinus (6 June), Capella Brugensis with Petite Messe by Rossini (7 June) and Blindman Quartet (6 June)**
- **6 June: Johnny Dowd, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be**
- **11 June: Moldy Peaches, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be**
- **9 June: Fado with Mafalda Arnauth (Port), Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: 070/22.33.02 www.cactusmusic.be**
- **13 June: Murray Perahia, PSK, Brussels; info: 02/507.82.00 www.psk_pba.be**
- **19 June: Suzanne Vega, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be**
- **22 June: David Byrne, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be**
- **26 June: Pet Shop Boys, Royal Circus, Brussels; info: 0900/26060**

**EXPO**

- **Until 23 June: Retrospective exhibition Janiss Kounellis, SMAK, Ghent; info: 09/211.17.03 www.smak.be**
- **Until 2 June: About the Head, exhibition, Museum Dr. Chisilain, Ghent; info: 09/216.35.95 www.fracarita.be**
- **Until November: Living Tomorrow, where visions meet, the house of the future, Vilvoorde; info: www.livton.be**
- **25 June: Photo Festival Knokke-Heist with Erwin Olaf, Paradise 2001, Photo Exhibition, CC Scarpaord, Knokke-Heist**
- **18 July: Rubens and the Flemish Baroque painters, exhibition, City Hall, Bruges; info: 02/279.64.34**
- **14 July: Silver work by the De Vecchi Family, Provincial Museum Sterckshof-Zilvercentrum, Antwerp; info: 03/360.52.50**
- **23 June, The Bruges Film Festival, exhibition, Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels; info: 02/508.32.11**
- **16 June: Surrealism with Emile Salkin (Bel), Desmond Morris (GB), Ergin Inan (Turkey) and Clovis Trouille (Fr), exhibition, Museum Dr. Ghuislain, Ghent; info: 0900/26060**
- **23 June: Desire in a cage, Jane Graverol, Rachel Baes and surrealism, KMSK, Antwerp; info: 03/238.78.09**
- **8 July: Kunst-stof!f: exhibition on contemporary art and design, Broelmuseum, Kortrijk**
- **9 June: After-sprawl: study about the contemporary city, exhibition on architecture, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28**
- **28 July: The ritual art of the Lega, ethics and beauty in het heart of Africa, exhibition, KBC gallery, info: 02/429.85.68**
- **18 August: The Illias and the Odyssey, exhibition by Mimmo Paladino, Museum Eismen, info: 02/515.64.23**
- **From 26 May onwards: Interactive Diamond Museum of the Province of Antwerp, info: 03/20.2.48.90 www.diamantmuseum.be**
- **25 August: Atelier Van Lieshout, The Franchise unit, Open Air Museum Middelheim, Antwerp, info: 03/827.15.34 www.antwerpen.be**
- **Until 6 July: SMAK and Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent: Jan De Cock, Randschade Fig. 7, exhibition, info: 09/240.07.00 www.smak.be**
- **29 June: The Rustin Foundation, exhibition (about Jean Rustin), Modern Art Center Belgium, Antwerp; info: 03/281.34.47**
- **16 June: Jorge Pardo, Art and Design, exhibition, Museum Dhondt - Dhaenens, Deurle (near Ghent); info: www.museumdd.be**
- **9 June to 1 September: International Cartoon Festival Knokke-Heist; info: 050/63.04.30**
- **29 September: Een Swaere Enterprise, exhibition on the East-Indian Company in the 18th century, Venetiësche Gaanderijen, Ostend; info: 059/80.55.00**

**Focus on Flanders**

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