The contamination of grain and wheat with the banned weed killer nitrophen with which German free-range chickens and turkeys had been fed, has also reached Flanders. At the beginning of April, a good fifty kilograms of contaminated organic turkey meat was supplied to a company in Sint-Niklaas, according to an agricultural attaché in Bonn who informed the office of the federal Minister for Public Health Magda Aelvoet (Agalev). However, barely a minute earlier the German authorities had informed her by mobile phone that Belgium, unlike the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark, had escaped the ‘organic scandal’. The scandal affecting German organic farming leaked out at the end of May, whilst the organic farming sector had already had to deal with contaminated stables in November 2001 (FF).

ANTOON WOUTERS • DE STANDAARD • 7 JUNE

Our borders with Germany are not immediately closing. However, Aelvoet has decided that all German grains, animal feed, and animal products will have to be checked for contamination with the weed killer nitrophen. In the meantime efforts are being made to find out what happened to that contaminated German turkey. According to initial reports, it was sent back to Germany ‘after processing’. Belgium will also henceforth only buy German products bearing a ‘non-contaminated’ certificate. Our country is complaining about ‘the accumulation of information coming out of Germany that leads to confusion and jeopardises the credibility of the official German channels’. The scandal in the German organic farming sector is also spreading, like an oil spill. ‘Organically’ grown grain crops contain very high concentrations of nitrophen, a banned weed killer that is carcinogenic, among other things. The German organic farming sector kept quiet about the affair for more than five months. However, the European Commission is not taking severe measures. Yesterday afternoon, the Minister for Public Health Magda Aelvoet handed her complaint to the EU Commissioner for Consumer Affairs, David Byrne. Aelvoet regards the attitude of the German organic farming sector and the German inspection services, which did not sound the alarm, as ‘disconcerting and unacceptable’. ‘That is no longer possible in our country today,’ said the minister.

INTRODUCTION

On 5 June Flemish Minister for the Environment and Agriculture, Jos Dewael (VLD) lashed out at the Minister-President of the Government of Flanders Patrick Dewael and her other Liberal colleagues, in no fewer than four Flemish newspapers. Dua furnished that she felt she was being stalked by the Minister-President in environmental issues, that other Liberal colleagues were deliberately delaying her environmental dossiers, and that Dewael, instead of coaching his government team, was himself organising the opposition within the government. This was no longer open debate culture, but a blazing row. There was therefore eager anticipation surrounding the conclusion of this row in the Flemish Parliament the next day. The opposition smelt blood. Eric Van Rompuy, parliamentary party leader of the CD&V, held forth that Dewael had lost his authority as leader of the government and – stronger still – that there was a total lack of confidence within the Government of Flanders. Dewael replied that Dua’s statements were ‘exaggerated’, and assured his Green coalition partner that he would make every effort to sort the Is and cross the Ts on the crucial environmental issues before the summer. With that it looked as though the incident had been closed, but the opposition demanded a vote of confidence. When this was not forthcoming, the CD&V, Vlaams Blok, and N-VA boycotted the Flemish Parliament in protest. De Standaard and De Financieel-Economische Tijd do not deny that the Liberal meddlesomeness has hit home in environmental matters. According to De Financieel-Economische Tijd (6 June), the Liberals are trying to score points with electoral target groups in all these environmental issues: for example with farmers in the vulnerable areas issue, and with company managers and the self-employed in the matter of companies established in non-industrial areas (these companies are unable to expand further or obtain environmental permits because they are not located in industrial zones). And on behalf of these target groups, they are also linking implementation of the Flanders Structural Plan for Town and Country Planning, which they regard as being far too rigid (referring to it as ‘the dictatorship of the town and country planners’), to the demand for extra industrial zones and the allotment of new residential expansion areas. De Standaard (6 June) scornfully comments that the VLD is hereby positioning itself as the out-and-out champion of ‘Healthy Middle-class Thinking’: fewer taxes, thieves behind bars, and people being allowed to plop down little cabins wherever they like. For the time being the Greens and Liberals appear to have concluded something akin to an armed peace. To sum up, in the words of Agalev leader Jos Gheyser, the shower has passed over, but the clouded sky remains.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
The Minister-President of the Government of Flanders Patrick Dewael (VLD) wants to get some key decisions taken on a number of environmental issues before the summer, and is not deterred by the fact that he will risk clashing once again with his Green coalition partner in the process. After the argument with his colleague Vera Dua (Agalev) on the demarcation of vulnerable areas, he is now throwing another spanner in the Greens’ wheels by arguing in De Standaard in favour of having more building land freed up and thus giving the economy an extra boost via the construction sector. He is even sticking the social label on his proposals, because building lots have become extremely expensive since they are in such short supply. The Association of Flemish Town and Country Planners (VVRP) reacted negatively. In the 1997 Flanders Structural Plan for Town and Country Planning, the Authorities of Flanders opted to counter the urban exodus and to safeguard open areas. The town and county planning policy in open areas is therefore aimed at filling the undeveloped lots in residential areas, and putting off having the residential expansion areas divided up into lots for as long as possible, according to the VVRP. Whilst the Greens are demarcating additional scenic areas for the Flanders Structural Plan for Town and Country Planning, Dewael is advocating the creation of 7,000 ha in industrial zones by the year 2007, and the premature broaching of the residential expansion areas. By the summer Dewael also wants a solution for companies that are established in areas intended for other purposes, whilst his Liberal colleague Jaak Gabriëls, the Flemish Minister for Economic Affairs, has ventured to question the Kyoto norm for the emission of CO2 gases. This has produced a good deal of bad blood in the ranks of the Green coalition partner. Ludo Sannen, Agalev parliamentary party leader in the Flemish Parliament, is sick and tired of the VLD spiking the Flemish Greens’ guns in a number of environmental issues, and points out that Dewael, who should be the key player in the coalition, is rendering the government incoherent with his solo actions (FF).

**BART EECKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 3 JUNE**

The tension between Agalev and the VLD is chiefly to do with the fact that a number of crucial environmental issues still have to be dealt with before the summer recess: vulnerable areas, residential expansion areas, and the Flanders Structural Plan for Town and Country Planning. Agalev wants to cash in on the environmental issues at all costs, but is being thwarted by the VLD, which, says Sannen, ‘is letting itself be led by economic rather than environmental interests.’ When the Flemish Minister for the Environment Vera Dua clashed with the farmers on the issue of vulnerable areas, Dewael produced his own environmental memorandum, which toned down Dua’s proposals. The crisis of confidence that then arose within the Government of Flanders is still simmering, and is perpetuated by the fact that Dewael wants to relax the criteria for residential expansion areas.

Ludo Sannen: ‘The structural plan for town and country planning provides for enough space for building. It is just that those plots are not being brought onto the market. Nothing is stopping the municipalities from doing just that. The only condition is that a residential needs study must be carried out. After all, it is only normal that you examine what the housing requirement is in a municipality before you grab new areas. If such a study shows that there is a need for new land, you can cut into new areas with a special building plan [BPA]. Patrick Dewael is pursing the policy of least resistance. If there are complaints about land prices, we broach a few new open areas. That is much easier than pursuing a land policy and imposing sanctions on land speculators. The same can be said for Gabriëls’ industrial zones. Agalev has already tabled a proposal for a decree to introduce a kind of lack-of-occupancy tax for unused industrial land, with the very aim of stimulating industry to bring that land back onto the market. We are not opposed, either, to industrial areas being made suitable for building, for example by having contaminated ground cleaned up.’

**Dua gives as good as she gets**

On 5 June the Minister for the Environment Vera Dua (Agalev) aired her displeasure concerning the meddlesomeness of her Liberal Minister-President (De wael, VLD) in the Flemish press. Dua feels she is being ‘stalked’ by the Minister-President (FF).

**BART DOBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 5 JUNE**

‘This is no open debate culture, this is empty talk that gives people the impression that there are absolutely no projects any more. One of those projects is the implementation of the Flanders Structural Plan for Town and Country Planning.’ ‘I’ve done my homework,’ says Dua, ‘but VLD colleague Van Mechelen does nothing.’ The Liberals are also resorting to delaying tactics in the case of other environmental issues. Minister Dua is pressing for a professional code of ethics in the Flemish Government team on how difficult matters should be tackled. ‘If there is a clear ‘no’ on something that is in the coalition agreement, then let’s get it out in the open and talk it through.’ With her tough talk, Dua wants to give a clear signal that she feels strongly about the recent Liberal meddling. However, she is not threatening to stand down. ‘I’m not going to present them with that gift.’ What gets her back up more than anything is precisely the fact that the Liberals are coming up with new issues that have little to do with the coalition agreement. ‘They are linking those issues with the implementation of the coalition agreement—and that won’t do.’
Sp.a: residential expansion with social conditions

The Socialist SP.A is gradually getting tired of the bickering between the Greens and Liberals in the coalition. Bruno Tobbback, member of the Flemish Parliament for the SP.A, compares the squabbling to a wrestling match. It looks dangerous, but doesn’t amount to anything much, according to Tobbback, who dismisses it as nothing more than each party’s urge to create a distinct profile for itself. His party has worked out a third option for the problem of the shortage of building land. Division of land into building lots in residential expansion areas should be possible if social conditions are met, namely that the lots are brought onto the market at a ‘modal price’ of EUR 25,000 and no further obligations are imposed on the buyer (FF).

A European ‘no’ on vulnerable areas

In the letter from the European Commissioner for the Environment Margot Wallström to the MEP Bart Staes, the Commissioner states quite clearly that she is of the view that 80% of Flanders should be demarcated as vulnerable areas (Focus on Flanders, no. 20). The 46% that Flanders is proposing finds no favour in her eyes. Nevertheless, this is not yet a definitive judgement, all the more so since, according to the Flemish Minister for the Environment Vera Dua (Agalev), Europe is basing itself on old measurement data. However, according to De Morgen, everyone in the Government of Flanders expects Europe to shoot down the demarcation plan, not so much because only 46% has been earmarked as vulnerable areas, but because no account has been taken of the nitrate contamination of the groundwater - since there are still no reliable measurements - or of eutrophication (the deterioration of the water due to the formation of algae) (FF).

BART ECKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 4 JUNE

‘The building land in the residential expansion areas is largely owned by large construction firms who are in the process of acquiring a virtual monopoly on building land. People who want to buy a lot from them are increasingly finding themselves obliged to buy a house, too,’ says Bruno Tobbback. In his view, the VLD argument in favour of additional building land has been prompted chiefly by lobbying from the construction firms concerned. ‘Cutting into extra residential areas just like that will not keep the price of building land down, either.’ The SP.A is therefore by definition not against the idea of open areas being taken over. The conditional use of the residential expansion areas is justified from a town and country planning standpoint, since it is provided for, after all, in the structural plan for town and country planning, reasons Tobbback. ‘And it is socially justified because it reduces the pressure on the price for family houses.’ According to the Flemish Socialists, 20,000 to 30,000 ‘social lots’ are needed. The SP.A wants to enforce its conditions by imposing special regulations when a lot is sold.

Tobbback: ‘If you establish a maximum size per plot, let’s say five ares, then you automatically keep the price down, too.’

SYBILLE DECOO • DE MORGEN • 1 JUNE

During the informal talks with the European Commission, the Flemish representatives attempted to find out two things: if they would be able to review the demarcation more frequently than every four years, and if all the criteria really had to be applied. The answer to both questions is yes. The first was good news, since it means that farmers can be relieved of the yoke of extremely strict manuring in the event of good measurements. The second was bad news, since it means that the multi-step plan is not acceptable for Europe. Wallström has been able to infer that people were pressing ahead all the same, and therefore talks of an unacceptable approach.

Minister Dua is doing little to refute the idea that the European answer will be negative. The hot potato is therefore being shoved into Europe’s hands, on the basis of the reasoning that if Europe says that more areas have to be demarcated, the farmers will have to yield. And in the backs of the minds of some Liberals lurks the thought that a European censure will only come after the next elections anyway. Dua, and Dewael with her, is asserting that she has a solid case for convincing Europe not to strike too hard immediately. ‘We’ve increased the vulnerable areas from 10% to 46%, measurements have been improved, the livestock population is being reduced, and the new groundwater measuring network will enable us to demarcate more next year. Europe will say that we have to go further, but I hope that we can build up sufficient credit so that the sanction will be deferred.’ The sanction in question is the scrapping of the European subsidy for rural development and would chiefly affect farmers who operate in a more environmentally friendly manner.
De Gucht wants to remain on the centre-left course

At the beginning of May Dimarso conducted a telephone survey, commissioned by the Liberal VLD, among 1,500 Flemings. Parties organise surveys quite often, but mostly the results remain secret. VLD Chairman Karel De Gucht’s lengthy presentation of the results at a press conference had its reasons. With some pride, De Gucht stated that the survey confirmed the policy being pursued by the VLD. He finds conformation for his centre-left enlargement operation embracing the NCD of Johan Van Hecke (former CD&V members) and the former Spirit members Herman, van Krankel, Van Quickenborne, and Borgignon, in the fact that not only 70% of the respondents (and 78% of VLD voters) were in favour of euthanasia, but that also 53% of CD&V voters supported it, too. Moreover, not only are 62% of Flemings (and 70% of VLD voters) in favour of moral philosophy in private education, but it also appears that 46% of CD&V voters are thus inclined. In other words, says De Gucht, the survey reveals that the ideological differences of opinion have been smoothed out to such an extent that they can no longer constitute the basis for the formation of a people’s party. The more stringent security policy and immigration policy that his party advocates also meets with substantial approval. Two thirds of those questioned (77.7% of VLD voters) were against the right of immigrants to vote, and 88% were in favour of harsher punishments for criminals, according to the survey (FF).

In the survey De Gucht has above all found confirmation of his centre-left enlargement course. According to the survey, the VLD’s potential voters are not to be found on the right, as VLD Euro MP Ward Beysen, among others, has asserted. It is striking that De Gucht in-fers this, among other things, from the fact that supporters of immigrants’ voting rights are more numerous among the voters who could imagine voting at some point for the VLD, than among VLD voters. The same applies to respondents who do not agree with the proposition that most criminals are immigrants. In any case, the VLD chairman is of the view that he can no longer secure any Vlaams Blok voters for his party. In his analysis, a voter who has taken the decision to support the Blok once has made a choice from which there is no coming back. De Gucht sees the Vlaams Blok as being around in the political field of influence for quite some time to come. Dimarso also asked the 1,500 selected Flemings about their voting intentions. According to the corrected figures, and with a margin of error of 2%, the VLD would secure 27% of the votes. The party thus gains voters from CD&V [3.6%], the Vlaams Blok [2.8%] and Agalev [2.2%], but loses voters to the SP.A [2.4%]. The VLD has a potential [i.e., voters who could imagine themselves voting for the VLD at some point] of 47%, 6% more than before the 1999 elections. These are to be found chiefly among CD&V voters, but also among those with allegiances to the SP.A, the Vlaams Blok, and Agalev.

Medical Practitioners may carry out advertising

Two German doctors who carried out hair transplants in a hospital in Hasselt were suspended three years ago for carrying out advertising. They worked together with the company Laeser Aesthetics, which distributed a brochure mentioning the names of the doctors. The Order of Physicians (Orde van Geneesheren), whose job it is to protect the honour and dignity of the profession, was of the opinion that the two doctors had recruited patients, and suspended them. But one of the doctors took the matter to the Court of Cassation, and was acquitted. Evidently doctors, like pharmacists and lawyers, may now advertise their services (FF).

‘Medical practitioners are involved in medicine and not commerce, which means that there can be no question of the law on economic competition being applicable to them,’ wrote the Limburg provincial board of the Order of Physicians, in its reprimand. One of the two doctors took the matter to the Court of Cassation, and that Court has now quashed the punishment. The blanket ban on advertising serves to ‘benefit certain material interests of medical practitioners,’ said the Court of Cassation. According to the Court, the Order should abide by the rules of free competition provided that ‘the fundamental rules of the profession’ are not at risk. The Court’s decision thus means that doctors can also engage in advertising, just like pharmacists and lawyers, for whom the ban had already been lifted earlier. Comparative advertising and advertising liable to encroach on the dignity of the profession are still prohibited. But what exactly is allowed remains unclear for the time being. ‘The Order of Physicians will be given the task of drawing up new rules,’ says lawyer Filip Dewallens.
The curtain has come down on the most talked-about Assize Court trial in Flanders so far in 2002. A popular jury had to pronounce on the guilt or innocence of four individuals charged with murdering the veterinary surgeon and inspector Karel Van Noppen on 20 February 1995. Van Noppen was a conscientious meat inspector who had joined battle in the fight against the fatteners who were treating their animals with hormones. When he was transferred to the Rekken slaughterhouse in West Flanders, he found himself venturing into the lion’s den, since this was the hormone mafia’s preferred territory at the time. On many occasions he had confided to those in his immediate circle that he feared something terrible would happen to him. The fact that the jury found Albert Barrez and arms supplier Carl De Schutter guilty came as no surprise to anyone, as they had already admitted their guilt anyway.

Less self-evident was the fact that the jury found cattle dealer Germain Daenen and fattener Alex Vercauteren guilty, as intermediaries in the murder, and as the party that ordered the murder, respectively. Both maintained their innocence right up to the last minute of the trial. The jury needed barely three hours’ deliberation in order to come to its verdict. In the concluding pleadings, Van Noppen’s widow, in particular made a strong impression on the jury, in the opinion of the legal reporters present. Vercauteren’s counsel for the defence concurs that the party that ordered the murder should be sought in the fatteners’ circle, but was of the view that the investigation had followed an erroneous lead. On 5 June the Assize Court passed sentence. The individual who ordered the killing, Alex Vercauteren, gets life imprisonment. Barrez, De Schutter and Daenen have all been given 25-year prison sentences. With this punishment, the Court indicates that it places the guilt for the killing with the party who devised the murder scene.

Opinion

BART STURTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 5 JUNE

The role played by Karel Van Noppen’s widow, who herself appeared as a party in civil matters, also carries with it an important lesson, the consequences of which extend far beyond this trial. The decision to opt for the most difficult path--serenity outside the courtroom, impassioned involvement within it—undoubtedly influenced the jury. No procedural battle or army of lawyers was equal to the authenticity of her message.

The jury has pointed to guilty parties, but not all the guilty parties. Not only is there a good chance that there were more conspirators behind the cowardly contract killing of Karel Van Noppen. The death of this man, who turned out to be too conscientious and principled for his own good, also lies with the administration for which he worked, which has been found wanting, and the political tutelage thereof. The recklessness and obstinacy with which Van Noppen devoted himself to his idea of public health far exceeded his job description. Many of his colleagues and superiors knew just as much, but tolerated it. They were not on trial, although their attitude was unforgivable. That is the most important lesson to be drawn from this whole sad affair. If more people had simply done their work and had taken their damned civic duty seriously, Karel Van Noppen would not have had to fatally stick his neck out so far.

In this trial, image, perception, and inner conviction have played a greater role than hard evidence, reasonable doubt, and the presumption of innocence. It could scarcely have been otherwise either, with a dual between a widow who was wholly in the right, morally and ethically, and a man who belonged to the so-called ‘meat mafia’ and who, moreover, was defended by a detested kind of lawyer: the procedural nitpicker. All that remained was the path of catharsis, whereby the people have sent out a clear signal to the mafioso-like meat sector (‘we’re not putting up with this any longer’), and where there was no longer any place for the legal technicality as to whether there was hard evidence that the order had come from Vercauteren.
Tony Gram controls Think-Media

The Antwerp businessman Tony Gram has a reputation. As soon as a company gets into problems in Flanders, his name pops up as a potential new investor. And when he puts his weight behind such a company, the chances are that the operation will be a success. Proof of that is to be found in the success story of the bag manufacturer Kipling. Recently Freddy Van Gaver came to him for help. Van Gaver was busy setting up his Flemish airline VG Airlines, with which he wanted to offer flights to the USA. Gram stumped up EUR 2.5 million and immediately became the largest shareholder. Now Gram is taking a 25.79% stake in the media group Think-Media. Further to talks with some of the other shareholders, he is also acquiring effective control of the group. As quickly as is possible, Gram is to become director and chairman of the group, which incurred a net loss of EUR 4.27 million last year. Think-Media owns De Vrije Pers (which publishes the men’s magazines P-magazine and Ché) and the bill-posting company Business Panel, and holds half the shares in the private radio station 4FM (FF).

DIRK VANDENBERGHE • DE FINANCIËL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 4 JUNE

Tony Gram acquires his stake in Think-Media by means of a capital increase of EUR 1.74 million and by taking over 8.37 percent from the former chief executive Maurice De Velder. The latter has been in detention on remand since 22 April, on suspicion of forgery, price manipulation, money laundering practices and infringement of the transparency law. De Velder resigned from all his functions at Think-Media on 18 April. Since De Velder’s departure, the group has been endeavouring, in co-operation with the auditor, to work hard at greater transparency. That has led to some adjustments being made in the 2001 accounts, as a result of which Think-Media is posting a net loss of EUR 4.27 million (at the end of March the group had announced an annual loss of EUR 2.56 million). Three interventions are responsible for the loss: the write-down of the stake in the Dutch Think-Media partners, the price cut in the sale of the real estate offshoot DB Invest, and the consolidation of the bankrupt subsidiary Djungo Productions. But these were also necessary in order to make the group’s accounting transparent again. After all, the company auditor’s report had been damning. Is this a renovated start for the company, which has been severely criticised since the adjudication of the licence to 4FM? Gram’s arrival thus yields, guaranteeing the continuity of the group.

Gabriëls reforms export promotion agency

Last week the Minister of the Government of Flanders for Economic Affairs and Foreign Trade Jaak Gabriëls (VLD) was on a trade mission to Croatia and Slovenia. In his wake was a small delegation of SMEs. After all, the Flemish Export Promotion Agency (‘Export Vlaanderen’), the department responsible for export promotion, is chiefly for small and medium-sized enterprises, in Gabriëls’ opinion. Large companies can look after themselves (FF).

LUC STANDAERT • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG • 3 JUNE

‘The missions should not be large-scale affairs. It’s better to keep them simple and well organised. With a small group, you can make timely adjustments. SMEs, in particular, tend to get overrun in a large delegation. That also has to do with good preparation. For this visit to Croatia and Slovenia, there were 23 candidates, but we advised four of those to stay at home because we had not been able to arrange any useful contacts for them.’ Gabriëls stresses that the Flemish Export Promotion Agency is there for SMEs. ‘It’s always been my conviction that large companies can take care of themselves when it comes to export matters. I also think it is important that the service provided by the Flemish Export Promotion Agency is free of charge, and that we have the possibility of granting export subsidies. In total, we have a budget of EUR 50 million with which to promote Flemish foreign trade.’ Although Gabriëls is very pleased with the Flemish Export Promotion Agency, he still wants to restructure the department. That will be the third time in ten years. ‘We’re going to FIT, Flanders Investment and Trade. There we’ll be housing both the Flemish Export Promotion Agency and the Flemish Foreign Investment Office (‘Dienst Investeren in Vlaanderen’), the foreign activities of the Flanders Agricultural Products Promotion Board (VLAM) and the people who will be coming over from the Belgian Foreign Trade Office.’
Dockworkers go on strike against European proposals

The four ports in Flanders-Antwerp, Ghent, Zeebrugge, and Ostend-will be brought to a standstill on 7 June by a 24-hour strike by dockworkers. The Flemish dockworkers are thereby taking the lead in the protest against Europe’s proposals to give shipowners permission to load and unload their ships themselves from now on, if they so wish. Although they are equally ill-disposed toward the European proposals, the employers in the ports are nonetheless reacting to the strike with mixed feelings (FF).

PASCAL SERTYN • DE STANDAARD • 6 JUNE

Robert Restiau of the Antwerp port employers’ organisation Agha, declares that he is not in favour of the European proposals either, but he wonders why Flanders’ dockworkers should have to play ringleader in the European trade union protest. He points to the fact that no action is being organised in Dutch or French ports. However, actions will also be set in train in Scandinavia and Germany at the end of next week. The chairman of the Ghent port authority, Daniel Termont (SP.A) is on the same wavelength. He points out that ships that cannot enter Flemish ports this Friday will be able to enter Dutch and French ports. The federal secretary of the Socialist dockworkers’ trade union, Bob Baete, regards the strike primarily as a shot across the bows. He stresses that the common trade union front is only targeting Europe. With the strike, the Flemish dock-workers’ unions are basically protesting against the European Commission’s proposal to allow shipowners to deploy personnel themselves for the loading and unloading of ships. In dock jargon, this is referred to as ‘self handling’. The Member States of the European Union are currently working on the liberalisation of port and harbour services. Apart from self handling, the liberalisation of pilotage services is also a major point of discussion. The Minister for Transport Isabelle Durant let it be known earlier this week that it would be unacceptable for Belgium if such ‘delicate issues’ were dealt with over-hastily. Europe’s transport ministers will be meeting on 17 June to discuss the liberalisation of port and harbour services. In Belgium dockworkers have a status that is protected by the law. The Major-Act stipulates that the loading and unloading of ships may only be carried out by recognised dockworkers. The employers are also in favour of this law remaining intact.

Emigration via Antwerp

In the last century Antwerp was a European hub for emigration to America. East and Central Europeans arrived there by train, and were the return cargo for ships that brought in petroleum and other goods. It made Antwerp and a few shipowners rich. A whole host of lucrative little businesses sprang up around the emigration phenomenon: money-changers, ticket sellers, little guesthouses, and hotels. But exploitation and profiteering also inevitably reared their heads, until an emigration law put a check on that in 1876. When the American immigration department began sending back sickly emigrants, at the expense of the shipping companies, the latter set up their own medical checks in Antwerp. An exhibition at the maritime museum in Antwerp, which runs until the end of the year, throws some light on this nineteenth-century emigration (FF).

MISJOE VERLEYEN • KNACK • 5 JUNE

Flanders, and especially East and West Flanders, saw large-scale emigration in the nineteenth century. Extreme poverty and high unemployment drove a large part of the rural population to the cities, in search of a better life. Some of these people ended up in Wallonia, where they could get work in the factories and mines. Others left for Northern France, where they worked in the agricultural sector. Poverty also resulted in a mass of beggars and vagabonds. The Belgian government, which was Liberal and thus disinclined to take social measures, had no better solution than to set up camps for tramps and vagabonds, and to lock up beggars and orphans. The other option was to export them, since fortunately there was a country on the other side of the ocean that needed people: America. Various factors played a part: a twenty-year-long industrial boom, and the need for workers in agriculture after the abolition of slavery in 1865. In that same period laws were promulgated in the US, which made the purchase of cheap land possible. The Belgian government quickly realised that it was cheaper to promote the emigration of excess workers than to introduce social laws at home. At that time, another economic consideration had appeared. The port of Antwerp had begun to face difficulties after the transport to and from the Dutch colonies had fallen away after Belgium’s independence. Ships were still coming to the port, for both the improving industrial sector and the large factory proletariat wanted and needed cheap (and therefore imported) products, but Antwerp was not able to provide the ships with any return cargo-except people. And that was something in which Antwerp quickly specialised, shipping off almost 2 million emigrants from all over Europe between 1843 and 1913. At least, that is the number of those who were unable to pay for a cabin and had to spend the crossing on the overcrowded deck. According to the Association of Flemings in America, some 60,000 Flemings left the country. Other sources speak of 150,000. For the emigrants, bargain prices were agreed on for those who came to Antwerp by train. The ‘Iron Rhine’ (a rail connection between the Ruhr region and Antwerp) had been completed in 1843, and in Cologne this linked up with the cheap trans-
port routes [the rivers] for emi-
grants coming from Central and Eastern Europe. There were also cheap tickets for Belgian migrants, and in the case of undesirable per-
sons the cities even stepped in. Antwerp was not all that happy
with this and the mayor protested against the fact that the other cities
were offloading their people onto Antwerp. In 1872 the Sanha (So-
ciété Anonyme de Navigation Belge Américaine), a subsidiary of the American Navigation Compa-
nany, was founded. This was to be-
known as the Red Star Line. The Red Star was originally only in-
terested in the transport of petro-
leum to Antwerp, but passengers
could be carried on the return leg, and this traffic made Antwerp and the Red Star rich. In 1864 Antwerp
was the sixth most important port
in Europe, and just ten years later it
had risen to third.
Until 31 December: Emigrants, exhibi-
tion in the Maritime Museum, Antwerp

Focus on Flanders provides a weekly overview of articles from the Flemish press and appears in English, French and German. This newsletter is published by Uitgeverij Lannoo nv, Kasteelstraat 97, 8700 Tielt and can also be obtained by e-mail.