On 11 July the federal inner cabinet decided to supply 5,500 Minimi machine guns from the FN arms factory in Herstal, to Nepal. That inner cabinet meeting was attended by, among others, ministers Magda Aelvoet (Agalev), Isabelle Durant (Ecolo), and Frank Vandebroucke (SP.A). On that day, according to De Morgen, the 1991 Arms Act was flagrantly infringed. This Act stipulates that it is forbidden to export arms to countries at war or countries guilty of human rights violations. Nevertheless, an armed conflict has been raging in Nepal since 1996 between Maoist rebels and a government supported by the West, and the violence has already cost the lives of 4,700 people. The Minister for Foreign Affairs Louis Michel, who only revealed the destination of the arms under pressure from the opposition and from SP.A and Agalev, maintains that the conflict cannot be described as a civil war. De Morgen considers it remarkable that the Flemish Socialists and Greens went along with the decision and are now reining from any criticism (FF).

GEORGES TIMMERMAN/KOEN VIDAL • DE MORGENTHE DUTCH SPEAKING PART OF BELGIUMFLANDERS

What really is striking is that the matter was on the inner cabinet’s table on 11 July. A formal approval of the arms sale by the council of ministers is not necessary, given that the subject has been an area of de facto regional competence since a government crisis surrounding a controversial arms shipment to Saudi Arabia in 1991. Minister Louis Michel, who has competence for the granting of export licences to Wallon companies, gave his blessing on 19 July. Michel says that Nepal is admittedly not a model democracy, but it can be termed a multiparty democracy. According to MEP Bart Staes [Agalev], the delivery contravenes the 1998 European code of conduct, on various counts. This code of conduct (which is not of a binding nature, it is true) prohibits exports to countries of ‘materials that could lead to the provocation or extension of armed conflicts’ or ‘when the shipment is used for the purpose of domestic oppression’.

INTRODUCTION

On 21 August the weekly Knack published an interview with Dyab Abou Jahjah. This Belgian national of Lebanese origin is chairman of the Arab-European League and was the organiser of a highly eventful pro-Palestinian demonstration in Antwerp on 3 April this year. Abou Jahjah is not a Muslim fundamentalist, says Knack, but rather a hard-line activist. He calls Antwerp the capital of the Zionist lobby, can summon up understanding for Osama Bin Laden, and also speaks out against the integration of immigrant Muslims. He claims that ‘his’ community has a very strong cultural individuality and traditions, and feels that the Belgian State ought not to meddle in religion and the position of women in the Muslim family. He regards the Centre for the Fight against Racism as mere eyewash, since legally immigrants hardly have any recourse against racism or discrimination on the job market. According to Abou Jahjah, second- and third-generation Moroccans constitute a domestic minority speaking a different language. He says that if you apply international law to this situation, Arabic should be recognised as the fourth national language, after Dutch, French, and German. Jahjah’s forthright standpoints find no favour in the established Flemish press or among politicians in Flanders. One newspaper - De Morgen - once referred to him as the ‘riot manager’. Patrick Janssen, the chairman of the Flemish Socialists, calls him a disinterested ally of the Vlaams Blok. Nonetheless, Knack is of the view that policy makers do well not to cold-shoulder Abou Jahjah, since he, like no other, knows how to express the frustrations of the immigrant neighbourhoods ravaged by unemployment and dilapidation. Chokri Mahassine, SP-A member of parliament in Limburg and organiser of the celebrated Pukkelpop Festival - and unlike Abou Jahjah, one of the many ‘alibi immigrants’ populating Flanders. Coincidentally or not, it was the Vlaams Blok that once coined the phrase ‘alibi immigrants’ to denote immigrants who have integrated into the community and achieved a degree of public fame.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
Rent prices the main reason for poverty in Flanders

Study says there is scarcely a housing policy worthy of that name

Whilst most Flemish political parties consider the astronomical prices of building land as the main problem confronting the housing policy, the rise in rent prices over the last few decades is much more of a problem, according to the findings of a study by Pascal De Decker of the University of Antwerp, which is presented in De Standaard (20 August). Over the past 25 years the price of rented accommodation has risen by much more than tenants’ incomes. The poorest tenants in particular have become increasingly poorer as a result. Their purchasing power after payment of their rent was 20% lower in 1997 than in 1976. Housing therefore appears to be the primary cause of poverty in Belgium. De Decker points an accusing finger at the authorities (at federal, Flemish, and local level). They scarcely pursue a housing and residential policy worthy of the name. Only 6.5% of the market consists of social housing, whilst this proportion is 20% or more in neighbouring countries. Moreover, the housing policy efforts are unequally divided among the better-off and the poorer families. The 20% made up of the richest families rake in 40% of the expenditure, whilst the 20% made up of the poorest families only receive 10% (FF).

Opinion

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 20 AUGUST

There is indeed a problem with rising land prices. They mainly affect the middle and upper income brackets, and therefore the decision-makers’ circles. However, the problem of the lower incomes and of those who have to rent, is ten times bigger. Academics, intermediaries and organisations concerned with the poor have been saying this for years, but to no avail. The housing and residential policies in Flanders are fallow fields. They do not propose anything. Social housing accounts for barely 6% of the market, whilst in other countries that figure is between 20 and 25%. Nowhere else does such a small section of the poor have access to social housing. Housing costs are the main reason for people falling into poverty in this country. Nowhere in Europe do so few poor people have access to social housing that mitigates their poverty. Poor people do not become better off here as a result of an increase in the minimum wage (subsistence level), since that entire increase immediately goes into paying the rent.

A whole series of other well-intentioned government measures only make the situation worse. The ‘infill development policy’ leads to the better-off buying up and renovating houses that the less well-to-do used to use. When rack-renters are caught and the Public Centres for Social Welfare find accommodation for asylum seekers in less insalubrious houses, the houses they use for his purpose are those that the less well-off used to frequent. And the prices of these houses rise further. The government considers that camp-sites are not acceptable living accommodation, yet there is no replacement social housing. The absence of a social housing policy in Flanders is becoming unacceptable. A large injection is needed. The shortfall in social housing in Flanders is put at 100,000 houses. The Government of Flanders promised a ‘major effort’: 15,000 new social houses in the course of its five-year term of office. At best half of these will actually come about, so that at that rate we’ll need seventy years to make good the current shortfall.

New top duo for public broadcasting corporation VRT

Flemish Minister for the Media, Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD), has kept his word. He had promised that he would find a successor to former Managing Director Bert De Graeve, for the public broadcasting corporation VRT, by 19 July. Tony Mary, who managed the corporate division of Belgacom for a period, subsequently headed the call centre group Sitel and the French IT group Bull, and recently extended KPMG Consultants Belgium, becomes the chief executive officer (CEO) of the VRT. Christina von Wackerbarth, former television manager, becomes the chief operations officer (COO) of the public broadcasting company.

As CEO, Mary will have to deal with the broadcasting company’s strategic, financial, and administrative tasks, whilst von Wackerbarth will be responsible for the programming and implementation of the public broadcasting company’s assignment as regards content. Or to echo the way De Standaard (17 July) put it: Mary will manage the kitchen and von Wackerbarth will select the dishes.

After the press showing, Minister Van Mechelen called on rivals VTM [the major commercial broadcaster] and VRT to ‘normalise’ their relations.
Is the urban exodus a thing of the past?

Flemish cities criticize study commissioned by Minister Picqué

Young double-income couples tend to move out of the cities from their thirties onwards. There’s too much traffic, too much noise, and there are not enough green spaces. This appears to be the main conclusion of a study commissioned by the federal minister for metropolitan policy Charles Picqué (PS) and carried out by demographers from the Leuven, Liège, and Brussels Universities. They compared population figures from 1991 with figures from 2001 for the 17 largest cities in Belgium, and counted some 30,000 fewer city dwellers. A striking finding in the study is that people in their twenties actively seek out the city, but people in their thirties move out of the city in order to build or buy a house. Since the cities lose this richer group of double-income households, they also lose substantial tax revenue, whilst they could well use this income precisely in order to combat this urban exodus. For Picqué, the study was also an opportunity to advocate, in the French-language daily Le Soir, the idea of making commuters or residents from the suburbs, who make use of the urban infrastructure, also liable for the payment of tax in the city where they work. The minister immediately announced that he would be raising the issue for discussion in the government next month. The NV-A reacted indignantly to Picqué’s remarks. According to the Flemish nationalist party, the figures are proof that any kind of metropolitan policy is lacking. But cities such as Ghent and Antwerp were not bolstered by Picqué’s remarks, either. That Picqué should have produced this study now, at all times, irks them. The population has begun to increase again in Ghent and Antwerp in the last few years, and smaller cities such as Hasselt and Leuven are again attracting more residents. In their view, Picqué is using an outdated study (FF).

BART EECKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 20 AUGUST

City-councils in Flanders argue that the exodus out of Flanders’ cities has indeed stopped. This has been demonstrated by recent figures from Antwerp and Ghent. Since last year, the population statistics for Flanders’ two largest cities have been showing a clear change. At the end of last month Antwerp had 451,040 inhabitants, 5,300 more than at the end of 2000. For its part, Ghent has been bucking the trend since 1999. Ghent is currently home to 226,937 people, almost 3,000 more than in 1998. Federal Minister Picqué’s study has in the meantime been superseded, certainly as far as Flanders is concerned. ‘We’re finally managing once more to keep young families in the city, too,’ says Erwin Pairon, alderman for population of the city of Antwerp. The Agalev alderman sees two reasons for this break in the trend. ‘The population is growing chiefly in districts in which the city has invested heavily,’ explains Pairon. ‘What’s more, it has simply become trendy again to go and live in the city.’

It’s something that’s not just happening in Antwerp, but also in Ghent, Bordeaux, Lille, Rotterdam, and Cologne. Traffic jams in the suburbs are one reason for people deciding to go and live in the city itself again. They don’t want to have to sit in a traffic jam for an hour in order to get to work or to go shopping.’ At Picqué’s office, the minister’s staff listen with a degree of bewilderment at the criticism from the Flemish cities. Staff advisor Koen Loquet defends the study: ‘We must remain watchful for migration and aging of the population in the city centres. The break in the trend is still too early for us to stand and look on with folded arms.’

Whatever the Flemish neighbours or with the Flemish inter-municipality companies, for example. That sounds simple, but believe me, there’s nothing more difficult than that.’ In addition, the Parisians who want to go to Bruges 2002 can come here, as can French people dreaming of a holiday in Flanders-reportedly such people really do exist. And companies, of course. Especially the companies.

Opinion

BART EECKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 20 AUGUST

It would not come as a surprise if the tide had also quietly turned on the urban exodus in Brussels as well, since the city of Brussels has also undergone a gradual metamorphosis over the last few years. Little green spaces and patch-up neighbourhoods are popping up all over the place. However, that promising news should not distract our attention from the dark side of things. After all, the trendy city has a price. The fashionable districts and inner-city lots are peopled by a wealthy public. In Brussels, for example, a large number of Eurocrats escaped the horrendous traffic jams in green suburbia in exchange for ownership of a nice little spot in the city centre. However, the catch is that these new, moneyed city-dwellers are making their streets or neighbourhoods expensive - too expensive, in many cases, for the old city folk, who drop out and are forced to look elsewhere for a cheaper roof over their head. The message for today’s city administrators should therefore be that they should not focus single-mindedly on attracting a trendier, richer public. Maintaining and consolidating the social mix should be the task, even in districts that currently adorn the covers of coffee-table magazines.

Source: Institute for Social Geography KU Leuven

Urban Exodus in Flanders - 1998-2000 (Number per 1000 inhabitants)

Brussels
Antwerp
Kortrijk
Mechelen
Ghent
Leuven
Hasselt
Sint-Niklaas
Bruges
Oostend

Source: Institute for Social Geography KU Leuven
The bill of Care Insurance rises alarmingly
HEALTH INSURANCE FUNDS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES ARGUE ABOUT PAYMENT

As of 1 January 2002, 65,000 Flemings are being paid an allowance (between EUR 75 and 125 per month) for the non-medical costs of the home care they are receiving. It is the Flemish Care Insurance scheme that is responsible for this. From 1 October the Care Insurance scheme will be extended to a first group estimated at numbering 29,000 elderly people resident in rest homes and in great need of care. They will draw an allowance of EUR 160. In April a second group of approximately 17,000 rest home residents will also become eligible. The allowance is paid by eight care funds (the public Flemish Care Fund, five of the health insurance funds and two private insurance companies). However, Europe raised objections from the outset. The decree introducing the Flemish care insurance system was tied to the individual’s address, and therefore interfered with the free movement of persons. The competent minister for Welfare Micke Vogels (Agalev) therefore decided in July to make it connected to the workplace. That means that it becomes compulsory not only for Flemings over the age 25, but also for foreign employees. For the time being every insured person pays a contribution of EUR 10, but that is far from being enough to keep the care insurance system out of the red. Furthermore, there is already disagreement between the health insurance funds and the local authorities, the municipalities. They are arguing about whether the allowance should be paid to the rest home or to the resident of the rest home (FF).

PATRICK MARTENS • KNACK • 21 AUGUST

On 16 July the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG - Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten) sent a circular to the rest homes of its own Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMW), advising them to make use of the ‘third-party payer’ arrangement. What this means in concrete terms is that an OCMW rest home sends a monthly memo concerning the accommodation bill to a care fund, and the latter transfers the allowance directly to the institution’s account instead of to the elderly person’s account. The elderly person or his or her family no longer has to worry about the red tape, and the rest home can immediately deduct the EUR 160 from the bill for accommodation costs, according to the VVSG’s reasoning. But the care funds of the health insurance funds do not agree to this. They have agreed now not to apply the third-party payer arrangement. Sarah Willcockx, director of the Socialist Mutual Fund: ‘The Flemish Care Insurance scheme is based on visible solidarity. All Flemings pay a contribution and persons in need of care personally experience what that money is used for. The system of the third-party payer is anonymous and breaches that principle.’ She also feels that ‘the Flemish Care Insurance scheme is not there to solve the cash problems faced by the public centres for social welfare, but to give financial support to those in need of care.’ The health insurance funds are also angry because the VVSG is advising the OCMW centres to impose the arrangement on the residents of rest homes, and in so doing is threatening to propose a switch to another care fund if a particular care fund does not want to co-operate in the third-party payer system.

In the meantime, the moment of truth is approaching for the Flemish Care Insurance scheme. Its success is burning some deep holes in the coffers and this is weighing heavily on the Flemish budget. Minister Vogels [Agalev] recently put the shortfall at almost EUR 28 million this year. Therefore, when a budget audit is carried out in September at least an extra EUR 15 million will have to be found in order to keep the Flemish Care Insurance scheme out of the red in 2002. In 2003 the shortfall will run to a good EUR 72 million. For the moment, Vogels sees three solutions: countering misuse, reducing the Flemish Care Fund’s capitalisation next year from EUR 100 to 25 million, and doubling the compulsory contribution from 10 to 20 euros. The year 2003 will become a transitional year, which will be used to adapt the decree on the care insurance scheme to the European requirements and to decide on whether the contribution should become income-linked.
Flemish Government claims a constitution

PRIME MINISTER VERHOFTSTADT PRESENTS HIS OWN 'EXCELLENT' REPORT

With a year in office still to run, the interim report that federal Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) presented on 13 July, on the federal policy of his Liberal/Socialist/Green coalition was simply impressive. Never before had so many reforms been carried through in a period of office, according to Verhofstadt’s report: a state reform (the Lam伯mont agreement), a reform of the police, a reform in the federal civil service (Copernicus), regularisation for illegal aliens, a new asylum policy, a tax reform, and a modernisation of the social security system. Indeed, the government could not be found wanting in terms of thirst for action, opined De Financieel-Economische Tijd (13 July), although the newspaper felt that a lot of these reforms were still a long way from reaching their final stages on the ground. Nonetheless the paper believes that the Liberal/Socialist/Green coalition had displayed a strong ability to survive and had weathered a good number of internal conflicts. For Verhofstadt it was important that the climate between the Flemish and the French-speaking Community had improved considerably under the Liberal/Socialist/Green government. What counted for most, in his view, was the fact that the conflict model had evolved into a model based on dialogue.

He kept modestly silent on Flanders’ request to draft a constitution of its own. Indeed, two days previously, in his annual address at the celebration of the Flemish Celebration Day (11 July), the president of the Flemish Parliament Robert De Batselier (SP.A) had called on the Federal Government to give the federal states constitutional legislative competence - as is the case in other federal countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Canada, and the USA - in the declaration for a review of the constitution that must be drawn up in 2003. De Batselier announced that he would have a draft text ready by the end of this year. On the same day the Minister-President of the Government of Flanders Patrick Dewael (VLD) called on his ‘Walloon friends’ to negotiate as adult and autonomous federal states on ‘the instruments that should make it possible to pursue a customised social and economic policy designed according to one’s own judgement’.

Both De Batselier and Dewael argued in favour of making the eleventh of July a paid holiday.

VLD: newcomers and senior liberals disagree

SPEED LIMIT ON REGIONAL ROADS AND CIGARETTE ADVERTISING SHOW DIVISION

FF EDITOR

VLD senator Patrick Vankrunkelsven (former chairman of the Volksunie and formerly Spirit senator) has prepared a bill aimed at bringing down the speed limit on regional and municipal roads from 90 km/h to 70 km/h (table p. 2). The idea is not a new one. The Flemish Minister for Transport Steve Stevaert [SP.A] already put forward the idea last year. But seeing as Stevaert does not have competency to adapt the Traffic Code, the plan passed to his federal counterpart Isabelle Durant [Ecolo], who reached a compromise on the issue with the regional ministers in February, and has maintained it since then. However, Vankrunkelsven is the first to couch the plan in a concrete legislative initiative. The essence of his proposal is that 70 km/h will henceforth be the norm, and 90 km/h the exception. With this reversal, he wants to put an end to the jumble of road signs which in practice already largely limit the permitted speed on many regional roads to 70 km/h. As a concession to the opponents on the French-speaking side but also within his own party, the VLD, he is creating an exception possibility whereby it will be possible to drive at 90 km/h on roads that lend themselves to that speed.

Minister Stevaert has reacted enthusiastically to Vankrunkelsven’s proposal and wants to persuade his fellow party members to back the proposal. Although VLD party chairman Karel De Gucht already pronounced himself as being in favour of the proposal, the opposition on the Flemish side appears to come chiefly from within his own party. VLD senators Jean-Marie De Decker and Didier Ramoudt have already rubbished the proposal in the press.

The division within the VLD ranks was even greater when a vote was held in the Senate on 17 July on a bill tabled by the French-speaking side to have the ban on cigarette advertising lifted for three days in 2003 and 2004 in order thereby to serve the motor races of Francorchamps and Zolder. The VLD rallied behind the proposal together with the French-speaking PS and MR, but three VLD senators (Vankrunkelsven, Kestelijn, and Dedecker) voted against and one (Ramoudt) stayed away, with the result that in the end the proposal was voted down.

De Morgen (13 August) concluded that it promises to be a difficult time for VLD Chairman De Gucht when in the autumn he will already have to give the newcomers in the VLD (from CD&V and Spirit) safe seats on the electoral list.
The Dutch telecom group KPN wants to divest itself of its wholly-owned Belgian subsidiary KPN Belgium. According to KPN spokesman Bram Oudshoorn, there are three options: closure, sale, or finding a partner. According to Fernand Hollevoet, general manager of KPN Belgium, there are already talks underway with five to ten telecom companies operational in Belgium. Colt, Cable & Wireless and Telenet confirm that contacts have been made. KPN wrote off an enormous amount in the second quarter on its UMTS licences (third generation mobile telephony) and on the goodwill of its subsidiaries for mobile telephony. KPN Mobile (the Netherlands), Base (Belgium) and E-Plus (Germany). As a result, KPN dipped into the red to the tune of no less than EUR 9.3 billion. The KPN management’s efforts to produce a sounder balance sheet were rewarded by investors. The price of the KPN share posted a 14% gain. However, there is no longer any place within this strategy for the loss-making KPN Belgium. KPN Belgium offers business customers a wide range of services in Belgium. Aside from KPN Belgium, KPN subsidiaries Base (mobile telephony) and the Internet provider PlanetInternet are also active in Belgium (FF).

BERT BROENS • DE FINANCIËL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 21 AUGUST

In a statement KPN wrote that it saw no possibilities for ‘making the company [KPN Belgium] independently profitable’. According to Fernand Hollevoet, the general manager of KPN Belgium, there are only third-rate players on the Belgian market after the dominant Belgacom. ‘None of these parties can carry on independently, as they themselves also affirm. Therefore we are in far-reaching talks with a view to building a number two, which would lead to savings. The legal form that this might assume has not yet been defined. It could even be an operation with three parties. There’ll be more news in a couple of weeks.’ A merger of KPN Belgium with a fellow player in the sector could mark the beginning of consolidation among the second-rank players on the Belgian telecom market. That trend has already occurred over the last few years among the small players.

At KPN Belgium the fact that an economic recovery is failing to appear is thwarting the plans to haul the operating cash flow out of the red around the end of the year. What is more, the bankruptcy of KPNQwest, another KPN subsidiary, will cost KPN Belgium EUR 10 to 15 million in turnover this year.

Opinion

KPN Belgium is one of Belgacom’s main rivals. It is not the first second-string player on Belgium’s telecom market that has almost shut up shop. Versatel is under a judicial settlement. Telenet only just managed to secure its financial security in the future thanks to a huge loan of EUR 1.25 billion. WorldCom Belgium has been restored to profitability, according to its own reports, but the extremely uncertain future of the American parent company hangs over the company’s head like a sword of Damocles. If it’s drizzling among the second-string players, it’s raining among the small players: there, the last few years have seen a good number quietly fall over or merge to form larger entities. It is possible that the second-rank players will now also be beginning a similar consolidation trend.

The reasons for all this distress, which has seen hundreds of jobs and tens of millions of euros lost in Belgium alone, go beyond the country’s national borders. The telecom industry shot itself in the foot by undertaking unbridled investments all over the world on the basis of the mistaken assumption that demand would continue to rocket. But there are also reasons specific to Belgium. Belgacom, one of the most financially sound telecom companies in Europe, remains the absolute number one a good four years after liberalisation of the telecom market.

The stock exchange and the economic prospects

In July the papers were full of calamitous reports for investors. The accounting scandals in the USA led to the European stock exchanges also imploding. The price gains over the previous five years were completely wiped out. The situation was now no longer one concerning the implosion of solely technology shares, but also shares in, for example, insurance companies that had invested their reserves on the stock market. Stock market developments are especially susceptible to psychological phenomena. For the moment there is little to worry about in the real economy. Growth is sputtering slightly, but there is no reason to panic - that is what various heads of government and chairmen of central banks have had us believe.

But nonetheless De Standaard (23 July) warns of the contamination effect from the financial markets to the real economy. What is more, the paper finds it incomprehensible that on the third anniversary of his government’s accession to office (13 July), Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) should have let slip a growth prediction of 3% or more for 2003. The Belgian economy is an open economy and cannot flourish if large companies the world over are engaged in wholesale reorganisation and cost cutting, in the paper’s view. Instead of creating unrealistic expectations, the government would do better to concentrate on protecting the country’s economic fabric against the shocks that are still to come, says the paper.

According to the National Institute for Statistics (NIS), industrial production, which accounts for 25% of the added value in our economy, took a downward turn again in the second quarter, especially in Flanders, after a revival at the beginning of 2002 that had been timely as regards costs. The trend in orders is not really promising either. Orders in the second quarter were barely up 0.5% on the first quarter. Compared with June 2001, production and orders in June 2002 fell respectively by 4.1% and 7.8%, reports De Financieel-Economische Tijd (20 August).
**ECONOMY AND CULTURE**

**COMPANIES**

Telenet can finally think about the costumer again

**NUMBER OF INTERNET CONNECTIONS ROSE BY 26%**

The Flemish telecom company Telenet is coming out of a difficult six-month period. After months of negotiations the company managed to secure a loan, which it was able to use to pay for the acquisition of the cable network from the mixed private/public cable companies. The acquisition came with a price tag of no less than EUR 944 million. Telenet’s purchase of the cable network therefore involves the transfer of 500 employees from Electrabel, the private partner in the mixed private/public cable companies, to Telenet. In addition to that, the existing shareholders have already jointly invested a further EUR 506 million in the telecom company. According to Chief Executive Officer Duco Sickinge, the financial ups and downs and the associated sizeable saving on marketing costs have led to the targeted growth of 80 to 90% not being attained. The number of Internet connections only rose by 26%, and the number of telephone connections by barely 5%. As regards Telenet’s fast Internet connections by cable, the company is experiencing severe competition from Belgium’s ADSL lines. Nonetheless Telenet closed the first half-year with a positive operating cash flow of EUR 7.8 million. Sickinge feels that it is now time to devote a bit more attention to the customers, and is already promising better and faster service (FF).

**Johan van Geyte • Gazet van Antwerpen • 20 August**

The promise to adopt a more customer-oriented approach comes after a difficult period for Telenet. It was only in the middle of July that the telecom company from Mechelen finally secured the EUR 1.25 billion loan that it so desperately needed. ‘The whole business has indeed taken a lot longer than we had expected, since the bankruptcies of WorldCom and KPNQWest led the banks to think twice about giving money to a telecom company again,’ explains Sickinge. Those financial problems have cost the company customers over the past few months. ‘That’s partly through our own doing,’ says Sickinge. ‘After all, we discontinued our marketing campaigns over the last few months.’ Despite this, Telenet still succeeded in attracting 50,000 new Internet customers, so that the total number of Telenet subscribers has risen to 245,000. The number of subscribers with a telephone connection with Telenet has also risen: from 205,000 to 215,000. ‘That’s nice growth, but at the beginning of the year we had expected a stronger increase. Our financial ups and downs meant that sourcing of customers remained behind schedule.’ On the financial front, Telenet has had a decent six months. ‘Our day-to-day activities are profit-making,’ says Sickinge. ‘But since we want to keep investing - EUR 87 million in the first half of the year -, the end result is still in the red.’ Sickinge gives no forecast as to when the first real profit can be expected.

**Festival Laus Polyphoniae with ‘Musica Britannica’**

**28 CONCERTS IN ANTWERP**

The ninth Laus Polyphoniae Festival is to take place in Antwerp from 24 August to 1 September. Laus Polyphoniae is the Antwerp section of the Festival of Flanders. This year the festival’s central theme is Musica Britannica, which produced pioneering composers from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, who composed magnificent vocal and keyboard music long before the celebrated Purcell. The Festival is bringing this music to life again in 28 concerts, with performers and conductors of the very highest calibre, such as Jordi Savall and Paul Van Nevel, and Jos Van Immerseel, the Laus Polyphoniae artist-in-residence (FF).

**Zipp/De Standaard • 21 August**

According to Lieve Schaubroeck, the programme director of Laus Polyphoniae, it was high time that English music was given some attention again. ‘When the revival in early music began in the early nineteen sixties, it received a great deal of attention, but then there was silence again,’ she says. She found a partner in Jos Van Immerseel, who is this festival’s artist in residence. It wasn’t really a problem to find performers. Schaubroeck goes on: ‘It was not difficult to convince musicians. Jordi Savall, for example, has many CDs with English consort music to his name. It’s his favourite repertoire. We have also invited the current specialists, such as the singers from Cardinall’s Musick, who have brought out the complete oeuvre of William Byrd on CD.’ William Byrd (1553-1585) was a high-flier in English music, but also something of an odd man out. He was a fervent Catholic in fiercely Anglican England, so that he was left with little option but to offer his services to both religions. Cardinall’s Musick illustrates this in the concert ‘The Genius of William Byrd’. The chorus sings both a Catholic mass for four voices and a typical Anglican Great Service (Saint Augustine’s Church, 24 August). Music by William Byrd was also on Jos Van Immerseel’s wish list. His eye fell on the 34 motets that Byrd and Thomas Tallis offered to Queen Elisabeth I. This is vocal music, and seems a strange choice for someone known as a specialist in keyboard instruments. Van Immerseel explains: ‘I also studied singing and have even given song recitals. You can-
not think of the vocal and the instrumental as being disconnected just like that’. In the end Van Immerseel has limited himself to 17 motets by Tallis, which are performed by eight solo voices, although they were written for five to seven voices [Saint Augustine’s Church, 25 August]. During a keyboard event featuring Jos Van Immerseel and Friends [closing concert on 1 September], the spotlight is turned on the figure of John Bull, the virtuoso among the virginalists of his time. Van Immerseel: ‘Bull’s manuscripts soon spread from England to the continent. Musicians maintained very close international contacts at the time. This reputation even led to him later becoming organist at the cathedral of Antwerp.’ For the concert Van Immerseel and Friends have used a large number of reconstructions of original instruments, such as clavichords and virginals.

24 August to 1 September: Laus Polyphoniae: 28 concerts with Jordi Savall, Jos Van Immerseel and Paul Van Nevel, Antwerp, Festival of Flanders