Alcatel Bell scraps 1,073 jobs in Flanders

AS A PART OF WORLDWIDE REORGANISATION

A lcatel Bell, the Belgian subsidiary of French telecoms equipment manufacturer Alcatel, is scrapping almost one third of its 3,500 jobs. Trade unions were informed of the news at a Works Council on 26 September. The news did not come as a complete surprise. Alcatel boss Serge Tchuruk recently announced in Paris that 23,000 jobs would be lost worldwide and that he wanted to turn Alcatel into a company without factories. The closure of the factory in Ghent (185 jobs), which makes PC boards, and the 248 scrapped jobs in the Geel factory are therefore in line with expectations. But that a further 600 highly skilled jobs are also to disappear in Antwerp, mainly involving engineers, is a heavy blow for the unions. These unions also suspect that the factory Hoboken (Antwerp) will shortly be closed (FF).

LUC VAN AELST • DE FINANCIËLE-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 27 SEPTEMBER

The factory in Hoboken, which employs some 500 people, remains out of the firing line. Nevertheless, Hoboken, together with Ghent, is on the ‘black list’ of Alcatel boss Serge Tchuruk. Hoboken and Ghent are among the 50 factories to be closed or sold off. According to trade unions, Alcatel wants to sell the Hoboken plant and is artificially embellishing the order book in anticipation of this. Alcatel Bell is initiating a procedure of mass dismissal. Negotiations with the trade unions will begin in November. The unions suspect that Alcatel Bell will apply for the status of company in difficulties, opening the door to solutions such as early retirement. The management is saying it has not yet reached a decision on the matter. On 1 April this year Alcatel Bell obtained the status of company under restructuring for the plants in Antwerp, Geel, and Ghent. The unions fear that further reorganisation will follow over the coming months.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
Frère holding NPM and Antwerp holding AvH share GIB

AFTER NPM TOOK OVER A PACKAGE OF 11.85% A BID WAR OR A DEADLOCK THREATENED

First step: NPM takes over 11.85% GIB stake at 43 euros per share

NPM, one of the holdings of Walloon financier Albert Frère, has played the Antwerp holding company Ackermans & Van Haaren a nasty trick. NPM took over a package of 11.85% GIB shares from the American Guy Wyser-Pratte and Franklin Templeton at 43 euros per share. Last week Ackermans & van Haaren (AvH) made a bid for 90% of GIB, initially at 41 euros per GIB share. On 20 September AvH increased the bid to 42 euros. But AvH will now not get very far with that bid price. Following news of the NPM bid, the GIB share closed at 42.85 euros. The shareholders will now undoubtedly want at least 43 euros for their share. What NPM’s plans are now remains a mystery. ‘No comment’ was all that was forthcoming from Frère headquarters in Charleroi. At AvH, Managing Director Luc Bertrand announced that he first wanted to make a few calculations. According to De Financieel-Economische Tijd, the key lies with the holding Cobepa, which with 30.5% of the shares is the largest shareholder in GIB. Cobepa is also a 14% shareholder in the Frère holding Pargesa, whereas the parent holding of Cobepa, the BNP Paribas group, also holds 47% in Erbe, the controlling holding of NPM. If Cobepa decides to transfer its interest in GIB, the key lies with the BFC will summon NPM to make a compulsory bid for GIB if the Frère holding acquires around 41% of GIB. There have been several precedents. But what form that compulsory bid for GIB will take remains unclear. The BFC could force NPM to make a compulsory counter-bid for GIB. That will immediately have to be 5% higher, at 44.1 euros per share. The financial supervisor could also summon NPM to make a simple compulsory bid at 43 euros, despite the fact that an earlier bid for AvH is already on the table. The question remains as to whether NPM is prepared to make a compulsory bid. The Charleroi holding could also wait quietly in the wings until the Ackermans bid is over and done with. Because one thing is clear: AvH can no longer go back on its bid. The bid has been submitted to the BFC and must be brought in. The question nevertheless remains as to whether control of GIB will pass to a new owner to whom the take-over legislation will apply. Various take-over specialists are convinced that the BFC will summon NPM to make a compulsory bid for GIB if the Frère holding acquires around 41% of GIB. There have been several precedents. But what form that compulsory bid for GIB will take remains unclear. The BFC could force NPM to make a compulsory counter-bid for GIB. That will immediately have to be 5% higher, at 44.1 euros per share. The financial supervisor could also summon NPM to make a simple compulsory bid at 43 euros, despite the fact that an earlier bid for AvH is already on the table. The question remains as to whether NPM is prepared to make a compulsory bid. The Charleroi holding could also wait quietly in the wings until the Ackermans bid is over and done with. Because one thing is clear: AvH can no longer go back on its bid. The bid has been submitted to the BFC and must take place. AvH can only amend the terms of the bid. At the same time, the investment company could drop the success threshold altogether instead of lowering it slightly. AvH can also amend the price of the bid, although there seems little chance of that. If NPM waits until the end of the Ackermans bid, the Frère holding could then come up with its own bid. A voluntary bid of 43 euros or a little more should then suffice. The question nevertheless remains as to whether the market and the BFC will accept this. It is therefore uncertain whether AvH, which has probably accumulated a significant amount of GIB shares, will sell its recently acquired interest in GIB to NPM for a premium of 1 euro or a little more. If Cobepa sells its interest to NPM, GIB looks like being in for a few restless weeks. If Cobepa’s Board of Directors decides to support the AvH bid, a deadlock with GIB cannot be precluded.

Unexpected turn: NPM and AVH to split GIB

A deadlock or a bidding war between NPM and AvH did not materialise. Both holdings reached a compromise that is interesting to both parties. AvH is increasing its bid price to 43 euros per share and NPM will support AvH’s bid. If the bid is successful, both parties will each acquire half the GIB shares. The chance of a third party making a higher bid is small, feels De Financieel-Economische Tijd [27 September]. According to the paper, that bid must be at least 45.15 euros. Analysts are reacting positively.

TOM PEETERS • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 24 SEPTEMBER

Last week Cobepa declared that the AvH bid was acceptable to all shareholders. But now there is a higher price, this may well prove tempting. If Cobepa sells its 30.5% share to NPM, the Frère holding will acquire around 42%. And then the question arises as to whether control of GIB will pass to a new owner to whom the take-over legislation will apply. Various take-over specialists are convinced that the BFC will summon NPM to make a compulsory bid for GIB if the Frère holding acquires around 41% of GIB. There have been several precedents. But what form that compulsory bid for GIB will take remains unclear. The BFC could force NPM to make a compulsory counter-bid for GIB. That will immediately have to be 5% higher, at 44.1 euros per share. The financial supervisor could also summon NPM to make a simple compulsory bid at 43 euros, despite the fact that an earlier bid for AvH is already on the table. The question remains as to whether NPM is prepared to make a compulsory bid. The Charleroi holding could also wait quietly in the wings until the Ackermans bid is over and done with. Because one thing is clear: AvH can no longer go back on its bid. The bid has been submitted to the BFC and must take place. AvH can only amend the terms of the bid. At the same time, the investment company could drop the success threshold altogether instead of lowering it slightly. AvH can also amend the price of the bid, although there seems little chance of that. If NPM waits until the end of the Ackermans bid, the Frère holding could then come up with its own bid. A voluntary bid of 43 euros or a little more should then suffice. The question nevertheless remains as to whether the market and the BFC will accept this. It is therefore uncertain whether AvH, which has probably accumulated a significant amount of GIB shares, will sell its recently acquired interest in GIB to NPM for a premium of 1 euro or a little more. If Cobepa sells its interest to NPM, GIB looks like being in for a few restless weeks. If Cobepa’s Board of Directors decides to support the AvH bid, a deadlock with GIB cannot be precluded.

ALCATEL BELL: EVOLUTION OF STAFF 1971-2002

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SOURCE: INFOGRAFIEK RUG

focus on FLANDERS • 21 September - 27 September 2002 • Number 32
Christian democratic commentators see no future for CD&V

ON the day of the socio-economic conference of the CD&V, in a round-table talk with three prominent ‘Christian Democratic’ commentators, De Morgen took stock of the Christian Democratic party, its relationship with the classes and the current generation of CD&V politicians. Around the table sat the two old hands Manu Ruys (former political commentator of De Standaard) and Leo Marijnissen (former political commentator of Het Volk) and current editor-in-chief of Knack, Rik Van Cauwelaert. The discussion was summarised as follows in De Morgen’s lead comment (FF).

Opinion

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 21 SEPTEMBER

Their analysis is fatal: from a party with a clear body of ideas, propagated by loads of strong leading politicians, firmly anchored in a sociological Catholic Flanders, the CD&V has evolved into an indecisive and ideology-free group of bickering politicians who are nothing to do with their predecessors and are no longer tolerated by the classic supporters of Christian democracy, the Christian socio-political organisations. And that sorry sight is taking place in a region that over the past thirty years has become secularised and urbanised at an alarming rate. The conclusion of the three is clear and damning: there is no future for the CD&V. According to one, the Christian workers’ wing will eventually break free and form a sort of New Labour with the SP.A and the Greens, whereas another sees the collapse continuing implacably.

Opinion

ERIC DONCKIER • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG • 23 SEPTEMBER

We are afraid that the euphoria, which immediately followed the conference will quickly be over. The main problem with the CD&V is that it is so difficult for the party to choose. Thus, at its conference it didn’t succeed highlighting one single point about which people would say: aha, is that what the CD&V wants, that is clear. And it will not improve on this. When ACW Chairman Jan Renders criticised the CD&V in the middle of last week, it was said that the party itself would decide what was good or bad, and not the ACW. But by the beginning of the conference the ACW was back in the fold and at the end Stefaan De Clerck even announced that he would propose to the CD&V executive re-admitting representatives of class organisations onto the board. It is a choice, but not one that is likely to make an impression on voters, who like clarity.

CD&V holds conference in Antwerp

DE CLERCK ANNOUNCED THAT HE WOULD INVITE BRIDGE-BUILDERS BETWEEN THE PARTY AND THE CLASSES

THE atmosphere was spoilt in the days leading up to the socio-economic conference of the Christian Democratic CD&V in Antwerp. The killjoy was the enfant terrible of the new generation of CD&V members, Pieter De Crem, who a day earlier in Het Laatste Nieuws called on CD&V Chairman Stefaan De Clerck to give up his mayorship in Kortrijk in order to concentrate more on his position as Chairman. De Clerck stuck up for himself, and said that it was not for De Crem to determine his agenda. Parliamentary Party Leader in the Chamber Yves Leterme hauled De Crem over the coals. At the conference itself almost all the heavyweights unanimously gave their backing to Chairman De Clerck. Even the undisputed strongman of olden times, Jean-Luc Dehaene, gave De Clerck heart. After the undisguised criticism of the workers’ movement’s new top man Jan Renders in the middle of last week at the CD&V address, the bonds had to be tightened again as well, felt Chairman De Clerck. In contrast to the trend of recent years to shrug off the party and the classes and their ‘friends from the media’ at the party itself would decide what was good or bad, and not the ACW. But by the beginning of the conference the ACW was back in the fold and at the end Stefaan De Clerck even announced that he would propose to the CD&V executive re-admitting representatives of class organisations onto the board. It is a choice, but not one that is likely to make an impression on voters, who like clarity.

MATTHIAS DANNEELS • HET VOLK • 23 SEPTEMBER

MP and Antwerp host Marc Van Peel on De Crem’s interview in Het Laatste Nieuws: ‘These are manoeuvres in the dark to wreak havoc in the CD&V. Het Laatste Nieuws and De Morgen are only too pleased to seize on a rash statement like this by De Crem to pull out all the stops. Those two papers are intent on increasing the strength of the liberals. That suits their boss Van Thillo [Managing Director of the Persgroep, to which De Morgen and Het Laatste Nieuws belong and which is also the majority shareholder in the commercial broadcaster VTM], the Flemish Berlusconi. Yes, De Crem was extremely foolish. He has served the hidden agenda of the VLD and whatever the media are saying about it. I had expected a bit more strategic insight from him.’ (...) The 1,500 delegates were short-handed in supporting Stefaan De Clerck with bursts of applause. When the message of Dutch Christian Democratic Premier Balkenende is unveiled on the video screens, the mood could not be better. ‘New politics is active politics,’ says Balkenende quietly but firmly. De Clerck takes up the zeal of the CDA leader. He wants the CD&V to become an ‘open, modern party of values that combines support for free initiative with an increased concern for society’s underprivileged.’

focus on flanders • 21 September - 27 September 2002 • Number 32
An Open Technology Day as a sign of the Hi-Tech region Flanders

Patrick Dewael did not have many surprising policy announcements up his sleeve in his September Speech this year. After all, he had unveiled the budget a week before at a press conference. But he still had one surprise kept back. Next year, for the first time, there will be an Open Technology Day, at which 100 technology firms will open their doors to the public in March 2003. The Open Technology Day is to become a successor to the technology trade fair Flanders Technology (FTI), which was set up at the time by his CVP predecessor Gaston Geens but petered out a few years ago (FF).

ISABEL ALBERS/BART DOBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 24 SEPTEMBER

According to the Flemish Government, a technology trade fair such as FTI in one place has had its day. Hence the choice of an Open Technology Day, by analogy with the Open Companies Day. In 2001, for example, the Open Companies Day attracted 720,000 visitors, more than the Open Monument Day and the Heritage Day together. The Technology Day could show textile companies that use modern computers to dye materials, or assembly lines at car manufacturers, touchscreens at Barco, applications in biotechnology – but also national observatories and the KMI (National Meteorological Institute). By linking certain company visits together, visitors routes would be mapped out around the theme of ‘environmentally friendly energy’, for example.

For the first edition at the end of March next year the Flemish Government is hoping to attract 200,000 visitors. De Lijn would have to provide free buses and the NMBS cheap train tickets. The theme of the first edition is to be ‘public-private co-operation in research and development’. Astronaut Dirk Frimout will be the godfather of the initiative.

The September Statement, in which the Flemish Minister-President announces the main themes of new government policy, traditionally ushers in the new working year of the Flemish Parliament. As usual, Patrick Dewael highlighted the achievements of the Flemish Government. He was proud that Flemish Government policy was socially oriented. He referred here to Flemish care insurance, the extra money for rest homes, day nurseries and centres for the disabled. He called the Flemish care insurance the first cornerstone of a new Flemish social security and promised that he would defend it tooth and claw in Europe. The fact that according to the European Commission Flemish care insurance had to be work-related did not yet mean that it would return to being federally based, was his message.

But this year the Minister-President also gave room in his speech for the problems afflicting Flemings: increasing sourness, the lack of solidarity and the dwindling sense of entrepreneurship among Flemings. He did also mention the fact that people were still complaining despite the many planned tax cuts and abolitions of taxes. For example, the increase in the compulsory premium for care insurance from 25 to 10 euros (FF).

STEVEN SOMERS • HET LAATSTE NIEUWS • 24 SEPTEMBER

‘The abolition of the radio and television licence fee alone will mean an extra 225 euros a year for every Flemish family,’ said Dewael. ‘When I hear the criticism of the increase in the premium for care insurance with just this tax cut in the back of my mind, I simply cannot understand. Have we in Flanders become so sour that we have problems with an increase of 15 euros? A social measure which after all only applies to those who can afford it? A measure intended to keep a unique system of solidarity between the generations affordable!’ The Minister-President does, however, want to meet the demand of its partner in government, the SP.A, to make the premium means-tested at some point in the future (in 2004).

‘In contrast to what many people claim, the Flemings are no longer as entrepreneurial as they were twenty years ago,’ postulated Dewael. ‘In terms of the number of starters we are even in the European rearguard. Flanders must again become an entrepreneurial region. With people who are prepared to take the risks involved. With the decree on SME loans currently being prepared, we want to grant a new tax rebate next year to anyone who invests in sustainable risk capital.’

The Flemish number one sneered in passing at the ‘self-satisfaction’ and ‘egotism’ in Flanders. ‘I was unpleasantly surprised when I read in a recent poll by the VEV (Flemish employers) that Flemish employees are less prepared than their Wallon, French, German, or Irish counterparts to moderate their wages if this means they can retain jobs in their own sector. In the same way that it goes against the grain with me that nowhere in Europe are so many over-55s being pushed out of the job market as in Belgium. We must not forget that you have to earn your welfare.’

BUDGETS OF THE VARIOUS DEPARTMENTS IN 2003

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<th>Department</th>
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<td>Others</td>
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Source: DS-infografiek
De Batselier calls for political education packages in schools

As is his annual custom, Parliament Chairman Robert De Batselier (SP.A) gave an opening address to the Flemish Parliament. In it he stood up for the introduction of political teaching packages in education. De Batselier quoted a report from the Department of Political Science of the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL), which shows that the government’s communications policy scarcely reaches the man in the street (FF).

LUC STANDAERT • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG • 24 SEPTEMBER

Recent research shows that the government and politics are reaching the man in the street less and less. Most government communications are picked up by a minority of well-educated people. A major effort is required to make Flemings more familiar with the operation of democracy and political institutions. And Parliament must assume some of the responsibility, maintains De Batselier. He finds it amazing in this connection that within the education system hardly any attention is paid to political training and knowledge of institutions. He attributes that partly to the extremely heavy teaching package, but feels that some-}

Antwerp finally has a master plan

On 25 September the Bench of Aldermen of the City of Antwerp finally approved its ambitious master plan. On top of the budget for 2003 a long-range plan will be launched that will run until the next local elections in 2006 with investments of 225 million euros. That package of investments includes a number of noteworthy initiatives, such as the building of the Museum aan de Stroom (‘Museum near the River’), a top sports hall, and a velodrome. Alongside these prestigious projects, infrastructure work is planned that will significantly change the appearance of two deprived areas (the Railway Yard North and the Petroleum South). And obviously due consideration was given to the social dimension.

A great deal of money is in fact going to the brightening up of squares, streets, schools, and the promotion of amateur sport. This plan has put an end to the internal bickering in the monster VLD-SP.A-Agalev-CD&V coalition, which was occasionally continued on the street and in the press. In June this led to a deadlock in government. This summer, however, discreet top-level talks between the parties’ local heavyweights Leon De Tiège (SP.A), Marc Van Peel (CD&V), Erwin Paieron (Agalev) and Luc Bungeneers (VLD), with the addition of Robert Voorhamme (SP.A) and united in the ‘budget unit’ got discussions back on track. In the end the tangible result of all this was a united vision and a master plan. Together with the implementation of the footpath, cycle path and public transport plan of Flemish Transport Minister Steve Stevaert (SP.A), the master plan is intended to alter the appearance of the city. The people of Antwerp currently seem prepared to put up with the temporary inconvenience of the public construction works (reconstruction of De Leien new court house, Central Station). Although a certain amount of financial breathing space was created for the master plan when the loan ceiling for investments was increased by 25 million euros a year, the city remains saddled with significant debts. Saving was and is therefore unavoidable, in such areas as staff, subsidies for associations and lease cars (FF).

Opinion

They have made a wretched start, the four parties who two years ago were condemned by the voter to again jointly run the city of Antwerp. The Vlaams Blok, as the sole opposition party, was given one chance after another to score an open goal. The party effortlessly set the agenda and both inside and outside the city limits the horror and despondency grew over the appalling incompetence of Antwerp’s politicians. Which explains the creation today of a long-range plan to give Antwerp a facelift in strict tempo. Flemish and European money provided the necessary oxygen and evidently sufficient common sense has now been scraped together in Antwerp to put forward a balanced and ambitious plan.

Crime figures have stabilised. Confidence in the meticulous approach of the police and judiciary is growing. The start of work on De Leien has shown that the proverbial sourness of the people of Antwerp is not irreversible. The feared traffic overload has not materialised. The metamorphosis of the introverted metropolis into a trendy place to be is unstoppable, partly due to the recently opened ModeMuseum and shortly the MAS. That does not mean that everything has suddenly changed. There are plenty of people in Antwerp on whom all this is lost. Who do not feel included in this hopeful dynamic because their own social situation seems miles away from it all. The problems of a multicultural society will not disappear as if by magic, because nightlife is thriving and dilapidated sheds are being converted into expensive lofts. And yet Antwerp is not beyond rescue. If council and citizens, immigrants and natives accept their responsibilities, the city can again become the pride of Flanders instead of its shame.
According to the Bologna Declaration, the whole of higher education in Europe must follow the same pattern. In principle, this must make it possible for Flemish students to spend their first two years studying in France and complete their studies in the Netherlands. In Flanders, Education Minister Marleen Vanderpoorten (VLD) has already enshrined the Declaration in a Structural Decree for Higher Education. According to this Decree, Bachelors or Masters will be able to complete their studies in the six Flemish universities and 24 Polytechnical Schools of Higher Education for the first time in 2005. The Bachelorship is a three-year course that follows on from secondary education. They can be academic or professional (i.e., more vocational). The second case gives easy access to the job market. At the universities, the academic Bachelor course will replace the candidature course. However, a student can continue to study for a Master’s diploma, which will replace the current licentiateship diploma. Many universities are asking for this Master’s course to be spread over two years, whereas the Minister is sticking to one year for most areas. The intention is that in the longer term these year-long courses will be replaced by a study points system, in which the students determine the speed at which they complete a course. After the reform those current Colleges of Higher Education that have entered into an association with a university will also be able to offer Master’s degrees. To do this they must first be recognised by an independent committee. The Decree is currently being considered by the Council of State (FF).

Kim Herbots • De Morgen • 24 September

‘To stand firm against the globalised education market, Flemish Higher Education has to become more competitive. The government clearly does not intend keeping step with financial needs, so the institutions are obliged to look for alternative sources,’ says Rector Van Camp in his speech. What can bring in extra money, for example, is the name and renown of a university.

Rector Oosterlinck of the Catholic University of Leuven has no problem with the introduction of the new structure in higher education, indeed, he supports it. Even the American ranking system, in which universities are ranked according to prestige, finds favour in the eyes of the Leuven Rector. ‘In Flanders it will only be possible to have two top universities,’ claims Oosterlinck. He categorically denies that a ranking system is an elitist affair. ‘Only the best, not the richest, are admitted,’ says the KUL Rector. ‘Here anyone can, in principle, begin the best course at the best university. This possibility is the result of a political option and at first sight leads to the democratisation of higher education. Nevertheless, this should not be confused with mass participation. True democratisation consists of giving access on the basis of intellectual capacity.’

Van Camp does, however, object strongly to such a ranking system. ‘How is a reputation tested? Are there quantitative quality criteria and do they universalsatisfaction?’ Van Camp clearly believes that this is not the case. Nevertheless, a ranking of European universities will be an automatic consequence of Bologna. Furthermore, private bodies will also be tapped for funds. Again a trend that is feared at the Free University of Brussels and welcomed at the Catholic University of Leuven. ‘Healthy competition between institutions built on offering high-quality education and innovative research threatens to become market-driven competition,’ claims Van Camp in his speech. For Oosterlinck, conversely, ‘the mutual intertwining of the worlds of business and research in the US leads to greater awareness of what universities do, better financing, contact and change-over possibilities and a more positive gearing of the business world to the universities.’ ‘We cannot miss the boat. European universities must creatively copy the best of the American universities,’ says Oosterlinck.
Van Greembergen scraps funds, but revokes decision after consultation with Dewael

The budget of the Flemish Radio Orchestra, the Flemish Opera, the Philharmonic, and the Concertgebouw will remain as they are.

Following the resignation of his party colleague Bert Anciaux, the Minister for Culture, Minister Van Greembergen (Spirit), has put back the promised credits for a number of infrastructure projects for museums such as the Museum aan de Stroom in Antwerp (‘The Museum near the River’, MAS) the Bijkloke Museum in Ghent and the Gallo-Roman Museum in Tongeren to a later date. In so doing, he is saving around 6 million euros. In addition, the permanent Flemish orchestras, the Philharmonic and the Flemish Radio Orchestra, will each lose 375,000 euros next year. A similar amount was scrapped for the Flemish Opera. The Royal Ballet of Flanders earlier had to surrender 640,000 euros. Even the brand-new Concertgebouw in Bruges will have to make do with 250,000 euros less. Nevertheless, the culture budget is increasing by 28 million euros, or 4%. But Van Greembergen initially wants to spend that on implementing a number of recently approved decrees, such as the one relating to socio-cultural organisations. Why is it that these established companies in particular that have to tighten their belts? ‘Because the bigger companies can cope with it better,’ is the laconic response from Van Greembergen’s office. The decision is not yet absolutely definitive, but the music companies involved are still reacting with shock. They are criticising the lack of motivation behind the decision and its extremely poor timing, since the contracts for 2003 had already been concluded and the costs incurred (FF).

DE STANDAARD • 25 SEPTEMBER

Can the bigger companies cope with it better? Dries Sel [Flemish Radio Orchestra, VRO]: ‘I’m staggered. The VRO had just acquired a new profile: it is concentrating on twentieth-century music and multimedia. The matter was discussed two years ago and the government took a decision last June. We were counting on 500,000 euros to pay our deficit, this failed to appear, and now we have to save a further 375,000 euros. This brings us back to zero.’ Jan Briers [Concertgebouw, Bruges] is also stunned. ‘This concert hall, in which the Flemish Government also invested, cost a great deal of money. It has massive potential, but if we have to make such massive savings straight away, we will have to scale down our ambitions. In recent months we’ve already scrimped and saved for the programme. Now we can do no more. (...) For me it’s clear: if the government doesn’t keep its promise, I cannot complete my assignment. Then I’ll resign.’ Van Greembergen justifies his decision: ‘My culture budget has increased, but not by enough to follow the new decrees and rises in expenditure. If savings have to be made, I first want to honour the Parliament’s decrees.’ Is this final? ‘I am still hoping to discuss the matter with colleagues. I have not yet submitted my budget to Parliament. I am still hopeful of finding a solution. I will wait until after the discussion to see if my colleagues are more willing to make an extra effort.’ But the questions will undoubtedly come. The Culture Department is ignoring an agreement of 28 June in the Council of Ministers. ‘So what is the point of a government decision?’ thunder Dries Sel [VRO]. ‘Why have we spent two years talking if a decision can be overturned so abruptly?’ ‘That is also the Philharmonic’s drift. Manager Jan Raes: ‘There is a government decision, there in black and white for all to see. The credibility of the Flemish Community is being seriously tested here.’

DE STANDAARD • 25 SEPTEMBER

Opinion

KARL VANDEN BROECK • DE MORGEN • 25 SEPTEMBER

What inspired the Culture Minister to institute a round of savings at this precise point in time? Next week he is addressing the culture sector for the first time in Ghent’s temple of culture ‘de Vooruit’ at the end of a major States-General session. He then wants to draw conclusions from the occasionally brusque cultural debate that raged throughout the summer in Flanders. In the eyes of the arts and culture sector, politics did not make a particularly good impression in that debate. The call from Anciaux, Van Greembergen, and Patrick Janssens (Chairman of the SPA) for more cultural participation and for an active contribution in the fight against sourness was countered by, among other things, the question of who would pay for all these fine dreams. Anciaux promised two years ago that he would not touch the sector’s funds. There is now very little left of that promise. All the more distressing is that Van Greembergen is saving in one and the same place: that of elitist high art (opera, classical music). That lends even more weight to the notion that there is a populist hidden agenda at work behind the cultural debate. This painful episode also shows that Spirit’s political weight in the Flemish Government has dwindled to almost nothing. As long as Bert Anciaux did not confess to the SPA and both Stevaert and Dewael paid their attentions to him, he was able to unashamedly keep going back to the till year after year. Now it’s payback time.

Protest gets results

The protest by the cultural organisations has had the desired effect. Remarkably quickly, talks between Minister-President Dewael (VLD) and Culture Minister Van Greembergen (Spirit) resulted in fresh funds being made available, so that the orchestras and the Opera can operate with the same budget as last year.

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The budgets of the Flemish Radio Orchestra, the Flemish Opera, the Philharmonic, and the Concertgebouw will remain as they are. At any rate, that was what was agreed by the Council of Ministers on 28 June, but was quickly sidelined in the past week. Murmurs of ‘improper administration’ were heard in political circles. Meanwhile, the government has managed to avoid being disgraced. The only organisation that cannot count on clemency is the Ballet of Flanders. This year it has provided
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