Marriage extended to include gay couples

Belgium thus becomes the second country to authorise gay marriages

30 January was a day of rejoicing for Belgium’s gay community. After many years of lobbying, the Gay and Lesbian Movement has succeeded in having marriage extended to include gays and lesbians. The law was voted through in the federal parliament, in the presence of some 100 gays and lesbians. Greens (Agalev and Ecolo), Socialists (PS and SPA) and the Flemish Christian-Democrats (CD&V) and Liberals (VLD) voted in favour. The Vlaams Blok and the French-speaking Christian-Democrats voted against, as did a number of French-speaking Liberals (MR). Belgium thus becomes the second country, after the Netherlands, to authorise gay marriages (FF).

ANJA OTTE • DE STANDAARD • 31 JANUARY

In legal terms, there is no such thing as gay marriage. There is only one kind of marriage, and this is now being extended to include same-sex couples. This means that gay and lesbian couples who get married have the same rights and obligation as other married couples. The fact that this was chosen as opposed to a separate status, that of ‘registered partnership’ - as exists in Sweden and Germany - is of considerable symbolic and social significance.

Extending marriage to include gays is also a practical solution, which in any case is easier than removing each case of discrimination separately. In one fell swoop a number of distressing situations have been consigned to the past. For example, up until now, in the event of death the surviving partner was a stranger who could not lay claim to any rights of inheritance. On the obligations side, it is stipulated that married gay and lesbian have to pay their taxes in the same way as all married couples. The new law does still contain discrimination on two points: the gay marriage is not recognised internationally, and a regulation for offspring (everything related to parenthood) is not included. One consequence of the lack of international recognition is that only nationals of countries where marriage is extended to include gays can get married. In practice, that means Belgians and the Dutch. Offspring will be the next issue to be taken up by the gay and lesbian movement. After all, gay and lesbian are not allowed to adopt children. A more pressing problem is that of co-parenthood, for which there is no regulation as yet. This is important in particular for lesbian couples with children. Only the biological mother can assert rights over her children; legally speaking, her partner has no ties with the children whatsoever.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
The hypocrisy of the Vlaams Blok

THE VLAAMS BLOK IS NOT AT ALL INTERESTED IN FORMING PART OF A GOVERNMENT

In a scientific study, the political analysts Jo Buelens and Kris Deschouwer of the Free University of Brussels (Flemish Section) have shown that the Vlaams Blok is not at all interested in forming part of a government. In the run-up to the 1999 elections, the tensions within the party on participation in office were stashed away behind the cordon sanitaire that the other parties had erected around the Blok. The fact that the other parties are obstructing it from acceding to office is very convenient for the extreme right-wing party. In the meantime the Blok is spending huge amounts of money on propaganda - twice as much, for example, as that spent by that other opposition party, CD&V(FF).

BART BRINCKMAN • DE STANDAARD • 30 JANUARY

In their scientific paper ‘The Forbidden Fleshpots’, the Brussels political analysts Jo Buelens and Kris Deschouwer sounded out the Vlaams Blok’s desire to take part in government. After all these years, this remains scant indeed. In contrast to the early years, the party is no longer completely forswoering government responsibility, but with the guarantees it asks such as an independent Flanders or the splitting-up of the social security system, it is placing the bar impossibly high.

The party feels comfortable with this strategy. The Blok sets itself apart from the others as ‘the only genuine opposition party’ which will never, under any circumstances, violate its programme. It can profile itself as anti-establishment party, and the eternal pain in the neck for traditional politics.

The cordon sanitaire suits the party fine, since it means that it can shift onto others the responsibility for its own refusal to assume policy-making responsibility. Sensitivities are subtler at local level. The Vlaams Blok’s leader Filip Dewinter was keen on breaking through the cordon sanitaire during the last municipal elections, but was unable to do so. After all, his ambition to become the next mayor of Antwerp is well known. Dewinter is aware that logically the Blok cannot remain in opposition forever.

The cordon demarcates the hostile environment in which the Blok functions - an environment that shines forth in the way it is organised. The party is very hermetic and constantly alert to possible attacks from outside. Internally, an iron discipline holds sway. Previous research revealed that in comparison with other parties, the Blok was the least democratic formation. The hierarchy is deadly, and it is forbidden for third parties to be given any information on the working of the party. Every internal party document is by definition confidential.

Since the law on the financing of political parties, the Blok has been rolling in wealth. Given its lack of interest in a stake in government, it does not have to spend that money on a policy unit or extra staff. On the other hand, the Blok does spend prodigious amounts on propaganda, shelling out EUR 2 million on this in 2001 - more than double the amount spent by CD&V.

VLD: a change of direction

VLD PREFERS TO GOVERN WITH FOUR INSTEAD OF SIX PARTIES

Since Ward Beysen set up his ‘Liberal Appeal’, the self-assured, on occasions overconfident tone in the VLD of a few weeks back has given way to nervousness and alarm. Chairman Karel De Gucht acknowledges that Beysen has made him endure the most difficult week in his political career. A change of direction should now see to it that the VLD’s right wing is rubbed up the wrong way as little as possible. At the New Year’s reception De Gucht announced that he would be going into the election without the party committing itself to any particular running partners. In an interview with De Morgen (25 January), he humbly recognises that the party’s top brass had underestimated the resistance to the ‘broadening’ movement that has brought “defectors” from the CD&V and Spirit into the VLD fold, and admits that anti-Green sentiment is growing among the party’s grassroots. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, speaking at the VLD-East Flanders’ New Year’s reception, said it in even less ambiguous terms: if the VLD comes out of the elections even stronger, it will be able to govern with four instead of six parties - i.e., without the Greens (FF).

PETER DE BACKER • HET NIEUWSBLAD/HET VOLK • 27 JANUARY

Party Chairman Karel De Gucht said this weekend that he understood the resentment felt by his grassroots supporters towards Agalev. He suggested that the Greens should be a little more accommodating if they do not want to jeopardise the continuation of this coalition. Verhofstadt’s speech at the New Year’s reception at the Ghent branch of the VLD included a similar message. If the VLD makes progress, four parties might be all that is needed for the next coalition, ‘and then we can deal with even more Liberal issues’, the Prime Minister said. ‘The VLD must remain the largest party - not just for the sake of being the largest party, but in order to continue carrying through the reforms.’ Agalev secretary Jos Geyssels is not getting wound up about the criticism being levelled at his party. ‘I want to view this with a degree of humour. The only explanation I can think of for this change of direction is that the VLD is being confronted with two separate lists,’ Geyssels thinks that the attacks on the Greens are aimed at appeasing the party’s right wing.
Electoral Threshold becomes the electoral issue for N-VA

The New Flemish Alliance of Geert Bourgeois is turning the 5% electoral threshold into an electoral issue. With a poster on which parliament is depicted as beckoning in the background, a photo of himself as the embodiment of political conscientiousness, and the slogan ‘In with the N-VA!’, Bourgeois presented his campaign to the press on 27 January. Bourgeois stressed still more emphatically that the parties in office had forged electoral legislation to suit themselves and that this electoral threshold was chiefly intended to keep the N-VA out of parliament. However, he himself does not doubt for one moment that his party will easily attain this threshold. He is even reckoning on a showing of 7 to 8%, which ought to give the party six seats in parliament. The N-VA argues in favour of rights and obligations, dares to say ‘no’ to the French-speakers, and wants to bring the ‘content’ back into politics, according to Bourgeois. But evidently not everything is going as planned in the N-VA, either. Scarcely a day later, deputy chairman Eric Defoort announced that he was stepping down and withdrawing from politics altogether in order to devote himself to scientific work. Defoort does not want to comment, but according to De Standaard (28 January), the more progressive Defoort had been at odds for some months with the overly conservative line the party was taking. Defoort had also long been involved in a duel with Matthias Storme for the second successor place on the Senate list, which held out the prospect of a seat in the Senate (the Upper House). This feud eventually led to a third candidate, the deaf lawyer Helga Stevens, being included in this place on the list. If she secures the seat, she will become the first deaf senator in Europe.

Even worthless polls make politicians nervous

The fact that his party has not managed to surpass the electoral threshold in a single poll is of no concern to N-VA leader Bourgeois. In the recent Le Soir poll, for example, the N-VA scores just 3.8%. In this poll, the VLD still emerges as the largest party, with 22.8%. SP.A rises to 17.4%, with its alliance partner Spirit moving up to 4.1%. This makes the SP.A alliance the second largest political formation in Flanders, behind the VLD, but ahead of the Christian Democrats of the CD&V, who remain stuck on 19.4%. The Vlaams Blok, on the other hand, rises sharply to 18.1%, whilst the Greens fall back slightly (10.1%). However, this poll was carried out before Goovaerts and Beysen had broken away from the VLD with separate lists. Another survey commissioned by Het Laatste Nieuws in the Antwerp area sounded out the electoral potential of the Liberal Appeal of VLD dissident Beysen and came up with 10%. Het Laatste Nieuws (25 January) added, however, that electoral potential was something quite different to ‘voting intention’. The paper itself thinks that Beysen’s list would be in a position to garner 3 to 5% in the province of Antwerp. Geert Bourgeois relegates the polls to the ‘wastepaper basket’. ‘The danger of opinion polls is that they are taken seriously,’ he says, and quite a number of commentators in the press agree with him there. However, that does not prevent the parties suffering a surge of nervousness whenever one of these polls is published. A number of researchers confirm that the sceptics are more than right. ‘You should stop drawing conclusions from polls that have been carried out among a random sample of 373 people, says Jaak Billiet from the Catholic University of Leuven (FF).’

BEYSEN CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE IN ANTWERP

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<th>WOULD YOU CONSIDER VOTING FOR LIBERaal APPEL (BEYSEN)?</th>
<th>SHOULD THE ‘CORDON SANITAIRE’ AGAINST THE VLAAMS BLOK DISAPPEAR?</th>
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Billiet: ‘I’ll do a simple sum. Six hundred and three people are questioned in Flanders. If 38% do not give an opinion, that means that 373 have said who they will be voting for. What is more, the statistical margin for error is 2.3% in Belgium. For Flanders alone, that error therefore amounts to more than 4%. I have then turned the percentage results into the actual number of voters. For Spirit alone, there is an appreciable difference, since in absolute figures the party gained nine votes in the same poll in September and 16 this time round. For all other parties, VLD, CD&V and so on, the conclusion would have to be: nothing has changed. The elections are still four months away. The fact that 38% of the people did not give an opinion does not mean that they don’t have one, but with such a rapid testing method, by telephone and carried out in a matter of a few days, you can’t find out what that is. The only thing that this kind of poll shows, provided it is carried out by the same firm and according to the same method, is a trend - nothing more. And the trend in this poll is therefore that nothing has changed.’

FOCUS ON FLANDERS • 25 January - 31 January 2003 • Number 4
Sharp criticism of Daems in the Sabena committee

The members of the parliamentary committee of inquiry investigating the responsibilities in the corporate failure of Sabena approved the final report in the night of 28/29 January, with one abstention (Ecolo) and two votes against (Vlaams Blok and N-VA). Remarkably enough, the report also contains criticism of the Minister for Public Enterprises Rik Daems (VLD) and Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD). Daems is blamed for having engaged the services of a firm of lawyers (price EUR 150,000) at the government’s expense to astound him in his own defence in the committee. The Prime Minister is criticised for the fact that documents relating to Sabena that had been requested were only handed over to the committee by his cabinet after lengthy insistence (FF).

GEERT SCIOT • DE MORGEN • 30 JANUARY

It was not the chapter entitled ‘Responsibilities for the corporate failure of Sabena’ that led to tension between the members, for no politicians were mentioned in those pages, but instead a passage on how the committee was obstructed in its work. Sabena’s winding-up was a collective failure on the part of the successive ministers and directors appointed out of party-political considerations. With the elections just around the corner, the emphasis placed on this collective nature of the responsibility precluded individual politicians being named. In the final version, committee chairman Langendries had wanted to include the fact that the Prime Minister had been late in handing over his documents on the matter and had submitted these in a disjointed fashion, and that this was in contravention of the law on parliamentary investigation. However, this passage was considerably toned down under the influence of the VLD committee members. The criticism levelled at Daems, which has been included, is harsh. Daems is reproached for having made declarations about the lawyers’ work that do not square with the truth, and for having used EUR 150,000 of taxpayers’ money for his defence.

Swissair report gives ammunition for claims

Swissair did not even have any money left when it acquired Sabena

The downfall of the Swiss airline Swissair led directly to the bankruptcy of the Belgian airline Sabena in November 2001. After all, Swissair held a 49.5% stake in Sabena, but failed to meet its obligations and keep its promises vis-à-vis the Belgian flag carrier. On the instructions of Karl Wüthricht, the commissioner responsible for the composition at Swissair, the consulting firm Ernst & Young has drawn up a 3,200-page report on the management at Swissair. The result is damning: Swissair embellished its results for the years 1999 and 2000, pursued a reckless acquisition policy and underestimated the costs of its expansion policy. Meanwhile, the board of directors neglected to intervene, even when budgets were exceeded. The report has caused consternation in the Swiss press, but it is also being examined with considerable attention in Belgium. According to De Morgen (25 January), it can also be deduced from the report that Swissair did not even have any money left when it acquired Sabena. The Belgian Minister for Public Companies, Rik Daems (VLD) hopes to find the necessary evidence in the report to underpin claims for damages and lawsuits against the Swiss. The receivers of the bankrupt Sabena are not throwing in the towel either. They are issuing a writ of summons against Swissair to the tune of EUR 2.4 billion, which corresponds to the total liabilities of the Belgian airline (FF).

DE FINANCIËEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 28 JANUARY

The report confirms that Swissair had complete control over the by-then bankrupt airline Sabena, but that Swissair did not consolidate the results of its Belgian subsidiary. At the time Swissair explained that it did so because the participation in the Belgian subsidiary had been written off in full. It now emerges that the Swiss were aiming to disguise the disastrous situation at Swissair and thus hide it from the outside world. In Belgium the report has been viewed as a confirmation of what everyone had long suspected or known. Minister Daems has already ordered the Belgian government’s lawyers to go through the report in detail. He reckons that this reading will undoubtedly offer up additional ammunition in a number of lawsuits brought by the Belgian Government against the Swiss. These concern a claim for EUR 500 million against the Swiss that is being handled in a Belgian court, a claim with the Swissair’s liquidators in Switzerland, and a procedure in which the directors of Swissair are being held liable for the bankruptcy of Sabena.

DE FINANCIËEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 29 JANUARY

Christian van Buggenhout, Sabena’s receiver, will in any case be using the report in a legal action against the Swiss. Since both Swissair and the parent company Swissair Group are likely to declare themselves insolvent, he will extend the action to cover the Swiss airline’s directors, which include the Swiss banks Crédit Suisse Group and Union des Banques Suisses, according to a report in Le Soir on 28 January. In their claim, the receivers are basing themselves on Belgian corporation law, which states that any person or enterprise that exercises effective control over a company can be ordered to pay all or part of the debts if the company is wound up. This ruling can only be handed down if there is talk of a ‘serious error’ having been committed. The report points to mistakes made by the former directors of Swissair.

The action is to be instituted with the Brussels Commercial Court, although it is not known when. It is unclear whether the legal steps will be taken on top of the claims that have already been lodged against Swissair. Both the Belgian Government and Sabena already have a lawsuit under way before the Brussels Commercial Court, whereby they are together demanding almost EUR 2 billion from the defunct Swiss airline.
Sabena Committee points to deceit of the Swiss

The Ernst & Young report also undoubtedly contains a wealth of information for the parliamentary committee of inquiry into Sabena, which is charged with looking into who was responsible for Sabena’s bankruptcy. By a coincidence of timing, this committee is now putting the last touches to a report that will be debated in a full session of the Lower House on 5 and 6 February. An interim report was leaked to the press at the weekend (25 January), and this reveals that the Belgian Government, which at all times remained the majority shareholder, never played this role as it should have done. The report says that on the basis of the shareholder agreement of 1995, the Sabena management and board of directors assumed far too quickly that Sabena would become part of SairGroup. In the purchase of the 34 Airbus A320s on 17 November 1997 (the decision which actually sounded the financial death knell for Sabena), SairGroup quite simply deceived Sabena. The responsibility for this totally wrong decision is laid primarily at the door of two Swiss: Philippe Bruggisser, the then CEO of SairGroup and director at Sabena and Paul Reutlinger, Sabena’s general manager. However, one Belgian, Patrick DuBois, the then secretary-general of Sabena, does not come away scot-free either (FF).

The Brussels examining magistrate Jean-Claude van Espen will be hearing the testimonies of former employees and directors of SairGroup this week in Switzerland as part of his investigation into the bankruptcy of Sabena. The judicial authorities want to find out from them whether SairGroup saddled Sabena with a purchase option for 21 Airbus aircraft. It is possible that that is why Sabena suddenly ordered 34 instead of 13 new aircraft - a transaction that contributed to Sabena going under on 7 November 2001. In September last year, in a house search at the Airbus premises in Toulouse, van Espen found evidence that former Sabena director and chief executive of the SairGroup Philippe Bruggisser was aware of this purchase option. Van Espen is also checking to see whether slush money had been paid in the context of the Airbus order. That, at least, is the opinion of Philippe Doyen, a former Sabena employee, who lodged a complaint with the judicial authorities.

The purchase of 34 Airbus aircraft on 17 November 1997 plays a key role in the report by the committee of inquiry for Sabena. In the report the committee members are especially critical of General Manager Paul Reutlinger. Patrick DuBois, the secretary-general, is criticised for not having provided his board of directors with all the information.

BOUDEWIJN VAN PETEGHEM • DE STANDAARD • 28 JANUARY

The members of the committee feel that in the search for a foreign partner the Belgian Government and Sabena’s board of directors did not do their homework thoroughly enough. Elio Di Rupo, the PS chairman, is spotlighted here. The report criticises the fact that the many plans for Sabena, which followed each other in quick succession, were not implemented. And it was clear what the government thought of the restructuring plans.

At the end of Sabena’s calvary, under the current ‘Purple-Green’ coalition government, the Swiss ‘flagrantly’ and repeatedly failed to meet their obligations. But the Belgian Government did not take enough account of the signals it was receiving concerning Swissair (SairGroup). The replacement in April 2001 of all Belgian directors - at a crisis moment for Sabena - was not a good piece of management action in the committee of inquiry’s view. Rik Daems (VLD), the responsible minister, is put into a corner here. The finger is likewise pointed at Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) and Deputy Premier Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A), when the report reprovingly notes that no bank guarantee was asked for when the infamous ‘hotel agreement’ [with Swissair chairman Corti in Brussels] was concluded. The MPs mention that Swissair used the agreed spread and deferral of payments in order to avoid fulfilling its obligations.

LABOUR POLICY

Job market takes another dive

The number of jobs on offer in Flanders slumped again at the end of last year. With barely 34,000 situations vacant, the job market again finds itself at the level it was at in December 2001 - the crisis period in the wake of 11 September. And yet the job market showed clear signs of improvement in the middle of 2002. The number of job offers in the second and third quarters of 2002 climbed steadily, but in November and December it plummeted again. The index of the job market barometer of De Standaard, which is based on the figures of the VDAB (the Flemish Employment Office), the temporary employment agencies and the employment advertisements in De Standaard, now barely reaches the 1999 level.

INDEX OF JOBS ON OFFER IN FLANDERS (INDEX 100 IN 1997)

SOURCE: FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD

focus on FLANDERS • 25 January - 31 January 2003 • Number 4
New drugs law approved

WHilst the VLD likes to place the emphasis on what is not allowed, coalition partner Agalev is keen to stress what is still permitted

The Parliamentary Committee on Public Health has approved the new drugs law after all, thereby bringing to an end two years of debate, conflicting interpretations by politicians from the majority parties and general confusion among the general public. The new law should clarify the existing regulation, which is based on a circular from the previous government. In a nutshell, the new regulation boils down to this: the use of cannabis by persons who are of age is no longer an offence, as long as the use does not lead to ‘nuisance’ (depending on the interpretation given by the duty police force) and does not occur in the presence of minors. The use of cannabis by minors remains liable to punishment. Driving under the influence is punished, which basically means that people will have to refrain from driving a car for a week after one single joint - the length of time cannabis remains in the bloodstream. As far as possession of drugs is concerned, there is an implicit consensus that five grams is the limit. The Liberal VLD, one of the parties that approved the drugs law, went out of its way to explain that the new legislation is tougher than before. The Greens do not think that that is the case, and neither does the opposition party CD&V (FF).

BART ECKHOOUT • DE MORGEN • 29 JANUARY

A clarification is equivalent to a strengthening, according to the reasoning put forward by coalition partner VLD. The Flemish Liberals, who have been made somewhat nervous by the competition posed by Ward Baysen (on a separate Liberal list under the name Liberal Appeal) and the CD&V, have spent the last few days waging a huge communications offensive aimed at proving that the new law is indeed also a tougher law. ‘The law is tougher because it clearly stipulates the cases in which the use of cannabis is never permitted,’ according to the leader of the VLD in the House, Coveliers. According to him, smoking a joint at a rock concert is not allowed either, although Coveliers does not immediately expect this logically to lead to police raids at all music festivals. Whilst the VLD likes to place the emphasis on what is not allowed, coalition partner Agalev is keen to stress what is still permitted. It is remarkable that the two government parties have approved the same law and have immediately given conflicting interpretations of it. ‘The important thing is that the new law provides clarity. A person of age who smokes cannabis at leisure will no longer be troubled’, says Agalev MP Annemie De Scheemaecker. The opposition party CD&V is seizing precisely on this last point to assert that with the new drugs law, a ‘de facto policy of tolerance is being introduced’.

www.belgium.be

Agreement on noisy night flights

The Federal Government and the governments of Flanders and Brussels reached an agreement on night flights in a meeting of a Consultative Committee on 24 January. The 22 night flights are once again to be spread out more, and from now on there will be three flights over Brussels. It was an awkward balancing act between Brussels and Flemish interests. Federal Transport Minister Isabelle Durant (Ecolo) had to abandon her policy that concentrated the flights over the city’s northern periphery. The courier company DHL also showed an accommodating attitude, promising immediately to take its noisiest B-727 aircraft out of use. It was a satisfied Prime Minister Verhofstadt who announced the news at a press conference (FF).

IVAN BROECKMEIER • DE FINANCIEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 25 JANUARY

At the end of the meeting of the Consultative Committee the official line was that the concentration policy pursued by federal Minister for Transport Isabelle Durant (Ecolo) was not being abandoned. But in practice the flights are being spread out to a quite considerably greater degree. The 22 night flights are to be spread over four routes, two of which are new. At the moment, 16 of the 22 night flights fly over the Brussels northern periphery. This will soon be cut to an average of 6.4 per night. The frequency of flights over a second existing route, the eastern periphery, is being raised slightly (from 6 to 7.7). The centre of Brussels, which had hitherto been spared, is also to take its share of the nuisance, with an average of 3.3 flights per night over the city centre from now on (these will only be noiseless aircraft). Finally, a new route is being introduced around the edge of Brussels. This will be used by 4.7 flights per night, and the aircraft in question here will be noisier types. A ceiling of 25,000 night flights per year is also being introduced. DHL is promising to take its noisiest aircraft out of use immediately. If all goes according to plan, this should happen on 15 March. The company is also examining ways in which it can reduce the number of night flights at the weekend. Meanwhile, DHL is also holding out the prospect of an increase in the number of administrative jobs. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt talked yesterday of 400 jobs, but sources within the group said that it was still too early to put a figure on the numbers. Initial reactions from the pressure groups of residents living in the neighbouring areas were not positive. The Daedalus committee fears that the greatest nuisance will still be experienced by the northern periphery, since the noisiest aircraft will continue to fly over North Brabant and the new route along the Ring Road will in practice also chiefly affect North Brabant.

www.dhl.be
Oil disaster far from over

THE TRICOLOR REPRESENTS AN ENORMOUS RISK, LYING - AS IT IS - SMACK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BUSIEST SHIPPING LAKES IN THE WORLD

As long as the car ship Tricolor, which sank off the Belgian coast, is not salvaged, it represents an enormous risk, lying - as it is - smack in the middle of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. After a collision with the tug Alphonse Letzer last week, the Tricolor discharged some 168 tons of oil into the sea. So far the main victims have been sea birds, mainly guillemots. Some 1,500 dead, weakened and oil-smeared sea birds were washed ashore along the entire Belgian coast at the weekend, although in total something like 10,000 birds will probably end up in the gunge. Bird protectors in various centres had their hands full with the task of cleaning the birds’ feathers. But there is a very real chance of the oil also being washed up on the beaches, for a northerly wind has been forecast. The nature reserves near Nieuwpoort and Knokke-Heist (Het Zwin) were blocked off against oil pollution on Sunday afternoon. A close eye is being kept on the Zwin estuary, in particular (FF).

BEN BLEYS • DE MORGEN • 28 JANUARY

At a meeting bringing together the crisis committee, the mayors of the coastal municipalities, the provincial governor of West Flanders, the bird protection movement and the North Sea Management Unit (Beheerseenheid van de Noordzee - BMM), it was decided that the federal government would step in and contribute to any costs associated with a clean-up operation. Federal Minister for the Environment Tavernier [Agalev] stressed that the owner of the Tricolor would have to bear all the costs. ‘We are applying the principle of ‘the polluter pays’. It is not the intention that the coastal municipalities should become victims,’ said Tavernier. Flemish Environment Minister Vera Dua [Agalev] also released the necessary budgets for the emergency rescue of birds smeared with oil. In order to keep the crisis centre in Ostend operating, an amount of EUR 50,000 has been provided for - a sum that the ship’s owner will have to cough up, according to Dua. In addition to this, Dua is also planning for the city of Ostend to be granted an additional subsidy for the construction of a permanent and well-equipped professional seabird rescue centre. The existing bird rescue centres are also receiving additional support to the tune of EUR 60,000.

Flagsey, a modern factory of sound and image

THE ARTIST AND THE CREATION ARE AT THE FOREFRONT

After extensive restoration, the former public broadcasting corporation building on Place Flagey in Ixelles was opened in October 2002. The majestic building, modelled on a packet boat, is in itself an architectural tour de force by the hand of Belgian architect Joseph Diongre. But from the moment of its inauguration in 1938, the building gained a reputation more than anything for the unparalleled acoustic quality of its studios. In 1998, several years after the public broadcasting corporation had left the building, thirty Belgian companies were found that were prepared, together with the government, to restore the endangered work of art to its former glory. These days one half of the complex is rented out, chiefly to organisations that have something to do with sound or image. The other half [some 11,000 m2] has been earmarked for use as a cultural venue. The Flagey non-profit-making organisation schedules productions of its own and joint productions here, as well as organising small-scale festivals (FF).

MARC HOLTHOF • DE FINANCIIEEL- \nECONOMISCHE TIJD • 25 JANUARY

‘The costs for the running of the Flagey building as a cultural venue run to EUR 3.5 million. Income is estimated at EUR 1 million. Half a million euros comes from the organisation of private events in the building, although here, too, we keep an eye on the content of what is offered’, stresses managing director Bernard Boon-Falleur. The shortfall of EUR 2 million is made up by sponsoring and patronage and - above all - government subsidies. In this respect, the building can count on the Flemish and the French-speaking Community and the Brussels Region, the national lottery and Europe. The government has given positive signals, but the negotiations have not yet been completed. Therefore Flagey is starting up cautiously, and nothing like the full capacity of the beautiful building is being used. In the programming, the Flagey non-profit-making organisation combines productions of its own with joint productions with partners whose profile fits in with the artistic aim. Thus a number of small and medium-sized productions in the framework of the Festival of Flanders, as well as Ars Musica, the Festival of Spanish and Latin American Cinema and the Brussels European Film Festival, have found a venue here. The Brussels Jazz Orchestra has been in residence here for two years, the Prometheus Ensemble puts on four productions a year, and the film programming in Studio 5 is organised in consultation with the Royal Belgian Film Archive. However, Flagey wants to be more than a purely accommodating space. ‘We do not want to become a garage in which other organisations park their productions for a while,’ says France de Kinder. It is not the intention, either, for the spectator just to walk in and out of Flagey, in a noncommittal manner, for one concert. The artist and the creation are at the forefront. For this reason mini festivals are organised at the weekend, the main purpose of which is to enable the artists to meet the public and vice versa.

www.flagey.be
Diary

MUSIC, DANCE THEATRE

• 31 January to 14 February: Werther by Jules Massenet, conductor: Patrick Fourmiliere, Flanders Opera, Antwerp, info: www.vlaasemopera.be
• 6 February: Beethoven Academy conducted by Christopher Hogwood, Violin concerto n° 5 by WA Mozart, Symphony n° 4 by Schubert and Ouverture Oberon by CM von Weber, De Singel, Antwerp, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
• 8 February: Camilla Tilling (soprano) and Roger Vignoles (piano), Myrthen by Schumann, Italienisches Liederbuch by Wolf and Ophelia-Lieder by Richard Strauss, De Singel, Antwerp, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
• 11 to 13 February: Scottish Chamber Orchestra conducted by Charles Mackerras, PSK, Brussels, info: 02/507.82.00
• 12 February: Symphony Orchestra of De Munt conducted by Joseph Swennen with compositions by Haydn, Berg and Schönberg, De Singel, Antwerp, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
• 12 February: Ian Bostridge and Julius Drake (piano), Lieder by Brahms and Wolf, Flanders Opera, Antwerp, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be

EXPO

• Until 16 February: Selection 1/Backstage, Fashion exhibition, Antwerp Modemuseum [MoMu], Antwerp, info: 03/470.27.71 www.momu.be
• Until 30 March: Twins, [the fascination by scientists, artists and the public] exhibition, Museum Dr. Guislain, Ghent, info: www.museumdrguislain.be
• Until 1 March: Play the gardens of the Alhambra, exhibition with Pedro Garcia-Ras, Maria Teresa Martin Vivaldi, Paco Lagares, José Maria Sicilia and Soledad Sevilla, Camilla Tilling (soprano), Provin- cial Gallo-Roman Museum, Tongeren, info: 012/67.03.55
• Until 31 August: The Garden of Eden, photographic exhibition with photography and painting, Technopolis, Mechelen, info: 011/54.60.00
• Until 29 June: Music Planet, one of the most important collections of music, Flanders, Antwerp, info: 09/267.24.24
• Until 2 June: Music: Planet, one of the most important collections of music, Flanders, Antwerp, info: 09/267.24.24
• Until 9 June: Music Planet, one of the most important collections of music, Flanders, Antwerp, info: 09/267.24.24

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.

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• Either transfer the sum to account no.: 473-1010001-19 with the KBC in Roeselare or give us the number and expiry date of your credit card (Visa/Eurocard)
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Translation: Eurologos
Printing: Drukken Lannoix nv, Tielt
Responsibility editor: Luc Demeester, Marke
Subscription rate: 220 euro