focus on flanders • 8 March - 14 March 2003 • Number 10

VLD demands mayorship after Antwerp crisis

Antwerp went through a political crisis on 13 March (see page 2 and 3) the likes of which had never been seen before. After the resignation of the Bench of Aldermen in the morning, all the parties in the coalition realised more than ever that energetic measures have to be taken to prevent the Vlaams Blok from chalking up a stunning result in Antwerp in the federal elections on 18 May. In the afternoon the prevailing opinion in all the parties was that SPA chairman Patrick Janssens should become the city's new mayor - in all the parties, that is, except the VLD. The latter party felt that 'after 70 years of Socialist misgovernment', it itself had the right to fill the position of mayor. In the morning of 14 March, Patrick Janssens announced on Radio 1 that as far as he was concerned the VLD could provide the new mayor, provided that the new city council was constituted swiftly. A few hours later on the VLD put forward Leo Delwaide, the former alderman of the Antwerp Port as its candidate to the mayorship (FF).

WIM VANDE VELDEN • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 14 MARCH

In the course of the day it became clear that the SPA was prepared to place its party chairman Patrick Janssens in the firing line. He would become mayor of Antwerp, whereupon Steve Stevaert would take over as party chairman. But it quickly became clear that there was a fly in the ointment. The VLD made a fuss about the continuation of the Antwerp coalition with Agalev and was of the view that the SPA could no longer lay claim to the mayorship. The SPA, Agalev and CD&V made no secret of their dissatisfaction with the VLD. This was not the time to play political games with a view to the elections on 18 May, it was said. With 18 May in sight, and Ward Beye's Liberal Appeal breathing down its neck, it is difficult for the VLD to go on board with the Greens again in Antwerp, just like that. According to Agalev, the VLD is playing bluff poker, since without the Greens there is no majority in Antwerp. The VLD’s claim to the mayorship is another kettle of fish. Bart Somers, the VLD’s rising star who is being deployed in the Antwerp constituency on 18 May, said that after seventy years the SPA no longer had a legitimate claim to the mayoral sash in Antwerp. As far as Janssens is concerned, everything can be discussed, except political games. 'The most important think is for a sound and strong city council to be formed very quickly. If the VLD insists that it wants to provide the mayor, then we are prepared to accept that. But then the VLD should lose no time in putting forward its candidate’, said the SPA chairman. www.antwerp.be

INTRODUCTION

There is a clear lack of enterprise in Flanders, if we are to believe the findings of a study by the Vlerick Management School in Ghent. According to this study, which was commissioned by the Flemish Minister for Employment Renaat Landuyt (SPA), scarcely 3.2% of Flemings are involved in the starting up of a business. We do not have to go far to find the reasons for this, says researcher Delphine Guichard in ‘Doing Business’, that the simplification of administrative procedures has not really been a success during the Purple-Green government, ‘due to resistance from the administration’, according to Minister-President Patrick Dewael.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
The chronology of a crisis week in Antwerp

City Secretary Fred Nolf who is suspected of having spent EUR 12,500 to buy furniture with public money immediately drew his conclusions

The Bench of Aldermen of the City of Antwerp met for crisis talks on 11 March in the morning. The reason was the wave of rumours surrounding City Secretary Fred Nolf. Nolf was alleged to have bought wedding rings with a Visa card belonging to the City, and was also named in the corruption inquiry into contracts that the City of Antwerp concluded with the advertising firm J.C. Decaux for the supply of urban furniture. In a letter, Fred Nolf, just back from a holiday cruise in the China Sea, twice rebutted all accusations and made it clear that he would not be making any move to stand down, as the Christian-Democratic CD&V, among others, had demanded. The Bench of Aldermen’s decision at the end of last year to raise to EUR 2,000 the maximum limit of the Visa cards used to pay for ‘costs specific to the duties of office’, was also on the agenda. SPA chairman Patrick Janssens, VLD parliamentary party chairman Ludo Van Campenhout and Agalev local councillor Johan Byttebier urged for the matter to be clarified. The Vlaams Blok had an extraordinary local council meeting called on 11 March, to deal with the alleged ‘affairs’. In two motions, the Blok called for the preventive suspension of Fred Nolf and asked for a legal action with respect to the contracts with J.C. Decaux (FF).

WIM VANDE VELDEN • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 11 MARCH

The Antwerp Bench of Aldermen deliberated on the motions tabled by the Vlaams Blok, and rejected them. Alderman Erwin Pairon (Agalev), feels that the atmosphere of scandal surrounding the use of Visa cards by senior civil servants and aldermen in Antwerp has been blown out of proportion. In order to call a halt to the row over the use of the Visa cards, the Bench decided to set up a working group headed by ombudsman Wim Vandenbroeck. He has until 13 June to compare the use of the Visa cards with the expenses incurred by other administrations, and make proposals for better monitoring. Specifically, the working group has to establish what expenses are permitted, and how much each item of expenditure can run to.

On Tuesday evening the extraordinary local council meeting convened to discuss the alleged corruption. But during the course of that same day a new, much more damaging matter surfaced. In the in-depth investigation into the accounts of the non-profit organisation Soma, which pays out the money for funds from the Social Incentive Fund, the alderman for social affairs Tuur Van Wallendael (SPA) came to the conclusion that the City Secretary, his assistant and the city’s chief accountant had used the Soma money for private purposes, more especially for the purchase of furniture, a GPS system and a camera. Fred Nolf, who is suspected of having spent EUR 12,500 to buy furniture, immediately drew his conclusions and resigned. The two others, his assistant Freddy Vandenkerckhove and city treasurer Roger Bekkert, were suspended as a preventive measure. The three, Nolf included, also risk having criminal proceedings brought against them. Van Wallendael took the file to the public prosecutor’s office. But apparently at least as harmful for the city council’s image is the use of Visa cards by some aldermen. At the council meeting the far right opposition party Vlaams Blok produced a long list detailing purchases of clothing, perfume, glasses frames, handbags, etc., and demanded the resignation of the mayor and the bench of aldermen.

BART BRINCKMAN • DE STANDAARD • 12 MARCH

The Vlaams Blok examined the mayor’s and the aldermen’s Visa accounts for 2002. They can use a Visa card belonging to the City to pay for a certain amount by way of ‘costs specific to the duties of office’. However, numerous aldermen bought themselves clothes at the city’s expense, and perfume, handbags and personal gifts were also paid for by Antwerp taxpayers. Nobody wanted to say anything about political responsibility. Strictly speaking, the mayor and aldermen operate to the letter of the rules and regulations. But from the point of view of political ethics, matters are far more difficult. Although not all the aldermen went off the road, political sanctions are nonetheless not simple. There is a good chance that the majority parties (VLD, SPA, Agalev and CD&V) will be satisfied with a tightening of the rules and regulations governing costs. Mayor Detiège talked of ‘mistakes’ made by her aldermen. The Vlaams Blok called on the entire Bench of Aldermen to stand down. The majority parties urged for an external audit to be carried out to take a close look at the allowance system and large-scale contracts. A recruitment procedure has also been set in train to staff an internal audit, which will thoroughly investigate all of the city’s and police force’s accounts.

WIM VANDE VELDEN • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 11 MARCH

The chairman of the Antwerp SPA, Robert Voorhamme, feels that the Antwerp Bench of Aldermen, headed by the mayor, Leona Detiège (SPA), is not reacting appropriately to the scandals in the city. He criticises the mayor for acting too hesitantly and ducking out of difficult decisions. ‘Why can’t the bench of aldermen draw up a code of ethics within one week, so that all the fuss surrounding the use of the Visa cards can swiftly be laid to rest. But it’s not being done,’ says the chairman of the Antwerp SPA, critically. According to Voorhamme, Detiège is letting herself be led by people on the bench who feel that they have been treated ‘disrespectfully’ by the critical questions posed by SPA party chairman Patrick Janssens. ‘They feel that Janssens wants to gain popularity at their expense. Therefore the matters are willingly presented as a squaring of accounts within the SPA. That is not the case.’ Voorhamme, who is on the same wavelength as Janssens, is mainly surprised at Detiège’s hesitant attitude since she herself has never put a foot wrong. ‘What is more, Detiège’s position is at odds with the party line. We want transparency, and not to give the impression that someone is being protected. If things are not permitted because they are contrary to good management, then the people involved should be removed, irrespective of the party they belong to. Politics in Antwerp has been dominated by senior civil servants for too long. That has made the city sick and un governable’.

FF EDITORIAL TEAM
The Flemish Press urges for collective resignation

Flemish minister Van Grembergen calls out for a strong political signal by Antwerp politicians

FF EDITOR

The day after the resignation of City Secretary Fred Nolff, the Flemish press focused on the responsibility of the Bench of Aldermen. The purchase of clothing, handbags, glasses mounts and birth announcement cards with Visa cards were ‘costs specific to the exercising of their duties’. According to a memo from city treasurer Bekaert, ‘clothes, shoes, books, food and promotional gifts’ were admissible, and therefore mayor Leona Detiège (SP.A) feels that the aldermen were not in the wrong. Nonetheless the Bench of Aldermen decided to pay back to the City’s treasury all expenses paid for with the Visa cards, and to draw up a clear code of conduct concerning payment cards as quickly as possible. Alderman for Education Kathy Lindekens (SP.A), who spent the largest amount (EUR 2,300) and has therefore been the target of most criticism, gave her Visa card back.

The mayor and her Bench of Aldermen did not originally consider stepping down. But the pressure on Detiège and her team has gradually increased to the point of becoming unbearable. In a debate in the Flemish Parliament on 12 March, the Vlaams Blok voiced the view that the Flemish Government should take disciplinary measures against the Bench of Aldermen, place the city council under legal restraint and send in a government commissioner. The Flemish Minister with responsibility for municipalities, Paul Van Grembergen (Spirit), replied that Antwerp’s politicians should arrange for their own reorganisation themselves, and added that they should send out a strong political signal. On 13 March the commentators in the Flemish press were of the view that the situation in Antwerp’s City Hall was no longer tenable. Detiège and her aldermen not only have to wonder whether they have committed errors in the field of professional ethics. They have lost their credibility among the people and had better resign, went the advice, albeit expressed with varying degrees of forcefulness according to the commentator.

After deliberation within the respective parties, the awkward decision was taken just a few hours later. The VLD aldermen Dirk Grootjans (Security), Leo Delwaide (Port and Economic Affairs), Ann Coolsaet (Town and Country Planning) and Luc Bungeneers (Finance) were the first to step down after a meeting with VLD chairman Karel De Gucht. Then th SP.A aldermen Tuur Van Wallendaal and Kathy Lindekens and the CD&V aldermen Marc Van Peel (Personnel Affairs) and Eric Antonis (Culture) tendered their resignation. Finally the two Agalev aldermen Edwin Piron (Environment) and Chantal Pauwel (Communication and Sport) did the same after an appeal by party secretary Jos Gysels. Mayor Leona Detiège (SP.A) stays in office ad interim at the request of Minister Van Grembergen to guarantee the continuity.

Opinions

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 13 MARCH

The fact that the Bench of Aldermen protected the senior civil servants for so long in spite of it all and delayed in instituting an inquiry illustrates once again the weakness of government in Antwerp, the excessive power the administration wields over politicians, and the way in which the two infect each other with a blurring of standards and a lack of ethics. The question now is whether it will be able to control the anti-political wave that it has itself established an inquiry illustrates once again the weakness of government in Antwerp, the excessive power the administration wields over politicians, and the way in which the two infect each other with a blurring of standards and a lack of ethics. The question now is whether it will be able to control the anti-political wave that it has itself created. For the time being the demonised Vlaams Belang - CD&V, VLD, SP.A and Agalev - should not shortly hypocritically come complaining that the denounced Vlaams Blok has again booked an electoral gain.

PETER VANDERMEERSCH • DE STANDAARD • 13 MARCH

Resign. That is the only thing left for Antwerp’s Mayor and Bench of Aldermen to do. If they do not, the parties currently forming the majority - CD&V, VLD, SP.A and Agalev - should not shortly hypocritically come complaining that the demonised Vlaams Blok has again booked an electoral gain.

Politically speaking, the problem is much more far-reaching than a few thousand euros for skirts or a weekend break in a hotel. The genie has escaped from the bottle. Now it is a matter of the credibility of this Bench of Aldermen and of a coalition of parties that went on board together with one major objective: to drive back the Vlaams Blok.

www.antwerp.be

The Flemish minister Van Grembergen calls out for a strong political signal by Antwerp politicians.
Confidence in politicians at low point
only 13% of Belgians still have faith in politicians

The 'European Trusted Brands 2003' survey conducted by Reader's Digest among some 1,750 Belgians reveals that only 13% of Belgians still have faith in politicians. In 2002 that figure was still 19%. This is certainly a very poor result when compared with other professions, such as teachers (82%), doctors (88%), pharmacists (90%) and firemen (97%). Faith in the national government has also fallen from 40% to 34%. However, policy in areas such as health care (62%) and education (60%) does enjoy a good level of confidence. Confidence in the Euro among Belgians has risen from 67% to 80%, whilst trust in the European Union scores appreciably better than the European average (56% compared with 45%). De Standaard and De Morgen take up the cudgels for the politician. The politician has been declared an outlaw that can do no good any more (De Morgen), since there is no longer any honour to be had in the political arena (De Standaard) (FF).

Opinions

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 12 MARCH

Of course the cyclical downturn in the economy, the stock market climate and the threat of war will have something to do with it, since the general public is happy to place everything that goes wrong on politicians’ shoulders, but even so this score is excessively low. The permanent life in the public eye and under the incessant glare of the spotlights, where every conflict and faux pas is blown up at times to the point of absurdity, has resulted in an extremely negative image being created. The politician has now been declared an outlaw who is constantly suspected of impure motives, double agendas and everything else that anyone can do wrong in this lifetime.

BART STURTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 10 MARCH

Politicians that feel superior to the people are seriously in the wrong. But if they mix too much with the people, that is also reprehensible. Great popularity points to populism, and is therefore wrong. But a low score in the polls is proof of colourlessness and standoffishness. Wrong. Politics should be about content. But it should only last nine seconds, otherwise we’ll zap to another channel. Politicians have to have vision, yet they are asked to display this in a boxing ring. Privileged and less privileged observers watch it all disparagingly. The most astonishing thing is that politicians put up with all this. They allow themselves to live at the rhythm of the media that despise them.

Forecasts of election result by experts (see P.5)

The 28 do not want the letter to be seen as an expression of support for the extreme right - it is about a principle. Manu Ruys: ‘The cordon is unworthy of a democracy. And what is more, it’s a clumsy move by the other parties. It helps the party to grow bigger without any effort. You simply cannot get round it: the Blok is a fully-fledged group in parliament and therefore has the right to take part in the goings-on of that parliament. The party should be given the opportunity, just as the communist party was given that opportunity at the beginning of the cold war. Almost everyone spat the party out at the time, but it was treated as being of full value in the political hemisphere. That is how it should also be with the Blok’. In addition to Ruys, those signing the appeal included former senior diplomat Erik Suy, former CD&V MP Herman Suykerbuyk, businessman Freddy Van Gaever, law professor Boudewijn Bouckaert (VLD) and lawyer Matthias Storme (N-VA).
Opinion polls carried out by polling firms for newspapers and/or television channels or political parties no longer have the monopoly on the making of forecasts of the election result on 18 May. On 10 March, under the leadership of Professor Lode Vereeck of the University of Diepenbeek (LUC), a forecast was published on the basis of the election result expected by a group of experts. Vereeck had his panel made up of policy makers, journalists and former politicians. Moreover, anyone can forecast the result by visiting the web site: www.verkiezingsvoorspeller.be. In the Netherlands this survey based on predictions instead of voting intentions has already proved to be reliable in three successive elections. In particular with the panel of experts, Vereeck believes that he will be able to predict the election result with a fair degree of accuracy. The business paper De Financieel-Economische Tijd also has an alternative to the traditional opinion polls. From 11 March, it will be putting a ‘political stock market’ on its web site at www.tijd.be. Participants can buy and sell shares in all Flemish parties that have at least one representative in the Lower House. The participants are playing with their own money. As their predictions get closer to the election result, they can also earn money on their prediction. According to the FET, research abroad also shows that these electoral markets generally provide for more effective forecasts than polls. On the first day, 170,000 shares were traded on the Electoral Market. A daily graph of the prices will be included through to polling day.

The first results of Professor Vereeck’s survey are now known. According to the experts and politicians, VLD and CD&V become the same size, with a slight loss of ground for the VLD (22.3%/–0.3%) and a slight gain for CD&V (22.3%/+0.1%) in respect of the 1999 elections. SPA-Spirit records a 3.5% gain and becomes the third party (18.5%). The Vlaams Blok gains 1.5% and reaches 17.1%. The biggest losers are the Greens (9.3%/-1.7%). The Flemish Nationalists of the N-VA do not reach the electoral threshold (attaining 4.7%), whilst the right-wing tear-away Liberal Appeal (LA) list under former VLD member Ward Beysen accounts for 2% of the votes. It is the first poll in which the LA is included as a fully-fledged entity. That might explain the slight fall in the result posted by the Liberal government party VLD. The anti-employment-tax party Vivant records 1.4%, according to the survey. There will be new forecasts on 14 April, 14 May and 17 May.

The prices on the first day of the Electoral Market (De Financieel-Economische Tijd, 12 March), show similar percentages: VLD leads with 22.8%, ahead of CD&V (22.41%), SPA/Spirit (18.45%), Vlaams Blok (17.25%), Agalev (9.36%) and N-VA (5.44%). www.tijd.be www.verkiezingsvoorspeller.be (Table p. 4)

**POLYTRIN BELGIUM**

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**NUMBER OF CHICKEN FARMS**

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**FOOD AND HEALTH**

The discovery that fowl pest in the Netherlands had spread from the northern province of Gelderland to the southern province of Zeeland, where it had struck in Breskens, barely ten kilometres from the Belgian border, has caused growing alarm among chicken farmers in West and East Flanders on the other side of the border. Yet it was not in this border area, but further to the east, in the Noorderkempen region of Antwerp province, that the first suspected case of fowl pest was detected. On 11 March, in a chicken farm in Poppel, a borough of Ravesi, 2,000 chickens succumbed in the space of a few hours. According to Piet Vantheunen, head of the federal Food Agency (FAVV), the chickens showed symptoms of the disease, but the results of laboratory tests to ascertain whether it is indeed the virus infection that is to blame, will only be known on 14 March. The remaining 10,000 chickens on the farm were gassed (FF).

**TOM COCHEZ • DE MORGEN • 13 MARCH**

Pending the lab results, Minister for Public Health Tavernier (Agalev) does not want to take any chances. ‘We are taking precautionary measures applying to the whole country and measures applying to a buffer zone around the farm. There is a nationwide ban on the export of live poultry and hatching eggs. That amounts to a complete standstill until 14 March.’ Only with the explicit approval of the FAVV is permission granted for the transport of poultry intended for immediate slaughter or day-old chicks intended for farms that are still empty. In the buffer zone (a radius of 10 km around the farm, ed.) a blanket ban is in force on the transport of poultry, other birds, poultry manure and used litter. The FAVV is opening an epidemiological inquiry to look into how the fowl pest blew over to Flanders from the Netherlands. One poultry farmer was quoted as saying: ‘We are being told by people in the Netherlands that the wind is the main culprit, and since a northerly wind is blowing at the moment, we are anything but reassured.’

www.favv.be
Liberalisation of port services toned down after fierce protest

The European Parliament accepted an amendment that obliges shipowners, who want to carry out their own loading and unloading work, to apply for a permit from the national authorities.

The Flemish dockworkers have recently been giving vent to their dissatisfaction with European commissioner De Palacio's port services directive - first airing their grievances in Brussels on 7 March and then again a few days later at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Under the terms of the draft directive, the unloading and loading of ships no longer has to be carried out by dockworkers, but can also be done by the ships' crew, albeit under very specific conditions. For example, only crews of ships registered in the EU can carry out unloading and loading work, and they are subject to the social legislation of the country where the goods transhipment occurs. Self-dispatch does not tally with the Law-Major, which protects the status of dockworkers in Belgium. The trade unions fear that introduction of the directive would open the door to social dumping and problems in the field of security.

The Antwerp Port Authorities are supporting the dockers' action and are opposed to the abolition of the Law-Major, but lamented the fact that the strikes on 7 and 10 March led to major disruptions to goods handling. Strike action was carried out in all Flemish ports on those days, but not in the foreign ports in the vicinity, which resulted in various ships diverting to Dunkirk, Vlissingen or Rotterdam. On Friday the demonstration in Brussels passed off in an atmosphere of anger and the dockworkers ended up coming in contact with the riot police. In Strasbourg where some 1,500 Flemish dockworkers formed the largest group in an international demonstration, serious disturbances broke out near the European Parliament. Nonetheless the actions seem to have had an effect. At the proposal of the Flemish MEP Dirk Sterckx (VLD), the European Parliament accepted an amendment the following day that obliges shippers, who want to carry out their own loading and unloading work, to apply for a permit from the national authorities. The trade unions are moderately satisfied about the amendment and now want to wait and see what position the Member States' transport ministers adopt. Flemish MEPs Kathleen Vanden Brempt (SP.A), Bart Staes (Agalev) and Nelly Maes (Spirit) are disappointed because the self-handling of goods by the ships' own crews has not been completely removed from the guideline. In addition to transhipment of goods, the embarkation and disembarkation of passengers and towing services are also being liberalised. On the other hand, the European Parliament removed the liberalisation of pilot services (which in the case of Antwerp involves pilotage of large seagoing vessels through the Western Scheldt) from the directive.

Opinion

MARC DE ROO • DE FINANCIËL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 12 MARCH

It is Belgian dockers, more than any others, who risk falling victim to the directive. Most European countries apply less strict regulations for loading and unloading, but in Belgium the Law-Major stipulates that ships shall only be loaded and unloaded by recognised dockworkers. The new directive is a missed opportunity. The European Commission has subided to the pressure by the shipping companies into making everything 'cheaper'. The Law-Major works, and neither employers nor the port authorities are looking for self-handling. The system comes at a price, since handling by dockworkers is expensive. But as the dockworkers rightly, albeit not very subtly, point out: what if ship handling is soon carried out by untrained Filipino seamen? The safety and efficiency of the handling operation would then undoubtedly be jeopardised.

That is why there is an obligation to obtain a permit, comes the reply from Europe. But on what basis will the permits be granted and who will monitor the process? Every Member State is free to do as it wishes in this respect. Belgium could retain the Law-Major via the permit obligation. But if other Member States do not bother about the monitoring, Belgium's ports will soon be faced with a huge competition problem. Europe would have done better to work out legislation harmonising the profession of dockworker on the basis of a less stringent Law-Major. Then you would get an upgrading of the dockworker's profession. Now it is being downgraded, and you will be getting workers who do not know their job, as in other sectors that have been 'liberalised to breaking point'. Everything becomes freer and cheaper - until disasters occur, like the recent shipping disasters. Suddenly people find that the sector was given too much freedom, oil tankers are unsafe, and crews are not skilled enough to keep their ships on course. Then it is the very politicians who approved the liberalisation who often lose no time in calling for everything to be made stricter.

STARTERS IN EUROPE

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SOURCE: FLANDERS APS-GRAYDON
Brussels police to get 500 extra policemen

After consultation between the federal government and the Brussels mayors, the Brussels police force is to get approximately 500 more policemen by the end of next year. One hundred and sixty of these are to be deployed for the transport of detainees and supervision of courthouses. This means that the Brussels-capital and South-zone police zones can now keep the 140 police officers they currently deploy for the transport of detainees, free for local police duties. In addition, all graduates of the police colleges are to first undergo a six-month ‘training period’ in the capital. From May 2003 onwards, 100 graduates will be reinforcing the Brussels police force as a result. This spans the difficult period to April 2004, when the ‘Brussels bonus’ comes into force. This bonus is designed to persuade policemen to continue to work in Brussels. The Verhofstadt government reckons that the ‘Brussels bonus’ will have full effect from that point on. This bonus amounts to EUR 250 net per month for every officer who has made up his mind to work in the capital for five years. Over and above that, the Brussels police force may recruit a hundred or so auxiliary policemen. Their job in the field means they have a better chance of passing the police officer’s exam. In May 113 police officers and 54 auxiliary policemen graduate from the Brussels police college. ‘All together there will be about five hundred extra policemen for the Brussels police force’, said Brice De Ruyver, security adviser to Prime Minister Verhofstadt. ‘We are hoping that some 300 to 400 of those will remain in the capital. We are not naive. The Brussels municipalities also have to take measures to make the job of police officer in the capital attractive, for example by providing for crèche facilities’. The police plan could not cost any money, but for the increase in the security forces the federal government is taking resources from a fund reserved for the organisation of the European summit meetings. The amount involved is EUR 12.5 million this year. ‘That money has not been completely spent’, says De Ruyver. In the last few months, 2,500 candidates have reported to one of the police colleges to follow a basic course to become policemen. A tenth of the candidates are from Brussels.

Bruges’ Groeninge museum in a new garb

The young architects worked out a ‘smart scenography’, in which white mosaic tile floors and red carpeting dominate

The Bruges Groeninge Museum is world renowned for its collection of Flemish primitives, but up until recently it was wallowing in an atmosphere of old-fashioned stuffiness, a ‘Bruges-La-Morte’ perfume, as Knack (12 March) calls it. The Bruges city council therefore made grateful use of the quiet period following the major Van Eyck exhibition staged in the framework of Bruges 2002 to dress the museum, a modernist (art deco) design of architect Josep Víñer, in a new garb. After a competition, the young Brussels firm of architects 51N4E was designated to give the museum a radical overhaul. The young architects, who call themselves ‘space producers’, worked out a ‘smart scenography’, in which white mosaic tile floors and red carpeting dominate. But both De Morgen (8 March) and Knack doubt whether the cool, aesthetic decor shows off the collection to better effect. The interventions certainly have a shock effect, but too often they draw the attention away from the works. The space producers could have adopted a more subservient attitude, De Morgen (12 March) feels.

FILIP VERHOEST • DE STANDAARD • 11 MARCH

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ERIC RINCKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 8 MARCH

It begins straight away with the little white mosaic tiles that have been used for the museum’s floor. You immediately get the impression that you are in a swimming pool or shower cubicle - with all the bareness typical of such places. The white floors and white-painted walls generously reflect the daylight streaming in from above - too generously, in fact. The floor lights up, to the extent that the Flemish primitives appear to be drenched in a pearly white glow. Their deep warm colours become hazy as a result of this excessive lighting. The idea is to display the top works by Van Eyck, Vander Goes, Vander Weyden and Memling in all their nakedness and stripped of their historicising frills. There is nothing against that. After all, every age has its own exhibition codes. The works are given plenty of space and that is good, but the contrast with the decor is too great. The old masters do not prosper in such a chilly, minimalist staging. Better are the rooms with the red carpets. Although these carpets colour the white walls with a rosy hue and throw a reflected glow onto the paintings, they at least provide for a warmer atmosphere and muffle the noise. There are further interventions in the predominantly chronological route. Paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been hung closely above and next to each other to recreate the atmosphere of an art collection of the time. Unfortunately a kind of swimming pool stand in white tiles has been built facing the works. For the early nineteenth century académiciens, the rooms have been painted black. This is an excellent move, as the contrast has a beneficial effect on the colours and the
works gain extra appeal. The sculpture room has been done up in the same way, but the monumental work by Rik Wouters, ‘Huiselijke Zorgen’ (Domestic Concerns) is swallowed up in the black of the environment. The room with nineteenth-century paintings is a low point: a few dozen landscapes have been hung huddled together as was customary in ‘the drawing room’ of that time. A bunch of little chairs in the middle of the room draws more attention. This room shows most clearly where things go wrong in the Groeninge: the concept imposes itself too much, with the architects wanting more than anything to make a statement. The mise en scène calls for attention, and does so at the expense of the art.

www.vooruit.be

Diary

MUSIC, DANCE THEATRE

• 19 March: Die Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen conducted by Daniel Harding with compositions by I. Stravinsky, WA Mozart and L. van Beethoven, PSK, Brussels; info: www.sofil.be

• 27 March: Guecka Brothers (India), PSK, Brussels; info: www.sofil.be

• 21 to 23 March: The monumental work by Rik Wouters, ‘Huiselijke Zorgen’ (Domestic Concerns) is swallowed up in the black of the environment. The room with nineteenth-century paintings is a low point: a few dozen landscapes have been hung huddled together as was customary in ‘the drawing room’ of that time. A bunch of little chairs in the middle of the room draws more attention. This room shows most clearly where things go wrong in the Groeninge: the concept imposes itself too much, with the architects wanting more than anything to make a statement. The mise en scène calls for attention, and does so at the expense of the art.

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