MPs can devote themselves in full to electoral campaign

Today, on 4 April, the federal Chamber of Deputies meets for the last time. In the afternoon, a vote will be taken on the articles of the constitution that are to be declared susceptible to amendment. Then the House will be dissolved and the members of parliament will be able to devote themselves 100% to their electoral campaign. The last major parliamentary debate was on the weakening of the Genocide Act, in which the Greens and Socialists suffered a defeat against an alternative coalition. On 3 April the CD&V had a few less pleasant items in store for the purple-green majority: political appointments and the shortfall in the social security system. Prime Minister Guy Verhoostest and Minister for Social Affairs Frank Vandenbroucke replied to them (FF).

‘Never before have so many political appointments been made as is the case at the moment under the purple-green coalition. Not a day goes by without one or other member of a ministerial office being appointed. The political appointment of the inventor of Copernicus (the reform of the federal civil service, ed.) is the height of cynicism,’ said CD&V parliamentary party leader Yves Leterme, referring to the appointment of the Minister for the Civil Service Luc Vanden Bossche (SP.A) as CEO of airport operator BAIC. Leterme did not receive much explanation from Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) on the succession of appointments. The Premier did assure the CD&V that no further senior appointments were expected in the coming weeks and then lashed out scathingly, saying: ‘Your question is prompted by practices from the past. No, Mr Leterme, we will not do what our predecessors did’. Minister for Social Affairs Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) also spoke in very sharp tones. According to MP Greta D’Hondt (CD&V), the shortfall in the social security system will amount to EUR 630 million this year, and the government neglected to rectify this lopsided situation during the budget control. ‘You are letting yourself be influenced by rumblings from the Federation of Belgian Enterprises [VBO], which are angry because I have raised the minimum pensions,’ came Vandenbroucke’s reaction. According to him, the shortfall totals no more than EUR 300 million and there are indications that the amount could end up being even less. ‘With a reserve in the social security system of EUR 3 billion, we can dip into the red slightly and put a stop to this silly squabbling’.

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Johan Corthouts • De Morgen • 4 April

With seven weeks to go before the federal parliamentary elections, a solution has at last been found for the long-drawn-out political crisis in Antwerp. It began to dawn on the VLD that the crisis would lead to the Vlaams Blok notch ing up a resounding election victory. So they abandoned their fierce re sistance to Socialists Jean-Jobartan for the post of mayor, “in the interests of the city”. It was none too soon, either, since in the view of most commentators the electoral damage, at least in the Antwerp constituency, is already sizeable. Accord ing to many political commentators, the crisis also heralds the end of the open debate culture so cherished by the “Purple-Green” govern ment. The debate between the big guns in Antwerp degenerated, in front of the microphones and cameras, into an “open quarral culture” between the two biggest parties in the purple-green majority. This was no pretty sight, but guaranteed spectacle for the news services of the television channels and radio stations. In magnanimous mood, the VLD chairman Karel De Gucht also recognised that the open debate culture had been derailed. Proposals were put forward and standpoints formulated in front of the cameras, without any discreet preliminary consulta tion. The Purple-Green coalition’s fragile unity was damaged for a second time when the toning down of the Genocide Act had to be voted on in parliament. Greens and Socialists did not want to see the weakening of the Act go so far as to result in Ariel Sharon, for example, being placed out of range. Fortunately for Verhofstadt and Michel, who feared serious diplomatic fallout as a result of the aforementioned Act, the CD&V came to their aid, albeit not without gratefully pointing out how worn out the Purple-Green formula was. The ongoing parliament has now finished its final week and the first election debates are getting under way. Little by little the real election issue is coming back to the foreground: the slackening economy, in which around 100 jobs are disappearing every day. In this respect, the Purple-Green coalition received a shot in the arm. A study by the University of Antwerp’s Social Policy Centre (Centrum voor Sociaal Beleid) under the management of Professor Bea Cantillon (also a CD&V politician) reveals, for example, that since the Purple-Green coalition came to office, the lowest incomes have risen vis-à-vis other income groups, for the first time in 25 years. The only thing that has not been possible to bring about the successful “activation” of these same low incomes. The highest benefits and the lowest wages are too close to each other for that. With the Purple-Green concept of the “active welfare state” in mind, more wealth has indeed been produced under this government, but the state has remained as “inactive” as before, according to the CBS.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief

INTRODUCTION

With seven weeks to go before the federal parliamentary elections, a solution has at last been found for the long-drawn-out political crisis in Antwerp. It began to dawn on the VLD that the crisis would lead to the Vlaams Blok notch ing up a resounding election victory. So they abandoned their fierce re sistance to Socialists Jean-Jobartan for the post of mayor, “in the interests of the city”. It was none too soon, either, since in the view of most commentators the electoral damage, at least in the Antwerp constituency, is already sizeable. Accord ing to many political commentators, the crisis also heralds the end of the open debate culture so cherished by the “Purple-Green” govern ment. The debate between the big guns in Antwerp degenerated, in front of the microphones and cameras, into an “open quarral culture” between the two biggest parties in the purple-green majority. This was no pretty sight, but guaranteed spectacle for the news services of the television channels and radio stations. In magnanimous mood, the VLD chairman Karel De Gucht also recognised that the open debate culture had been derailed. Proposals were put forward and standpoints formulated in front of the cameras, without any discreet preliminary consulta tion. The Purple-Green coalition’s fragile unity was damaged for a second time when the toning down of the Genocide Act had to be voted on in parliament. Greens and Socialists did not want to see the weakening of the Act go so far as to result in Ariel Sharon, for example, being placed out of range. Fortunately for Verhofstadt and Michel, who feared serious diplomatic fallout as a result of the aforementioned Act, the CD&V came to their aid, albeit not without gratefully pointing out how worn out the Purple-Green formula was. The ongoing parliament has now finished its final week and the first election debates are getting under way. Little by little the real election issue is coming back to the foreground: the slackening economy, in which around 100 jobs are disappearing every day. In this respect, the Purple-Green coalition received a shot in the arm from an unexpected quarter, reports De Standaard (2 April). A study by the University of Antwerp’s Social Policy Centre (Centrum voor Sociaal Beleid) under the management of Professor Bea Cantillon (also a CD&V politician) reveals, for example, that since the Purple-Green coalition came to office, the lowest incomes have risen vis-à-vis other income groups, for the first time in 25 years. The only thing that has not been possible to bring about the successful “activation” of these same low incomes. The highest benefits and the lowest wages are too close to each other for that. With the Purple-Green concept of the “active welfare state” in mind, more wealth has indeed been produced under this government, but the state has remained as “inactive” as before, according to the CBS.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
Patrick Janssens becomes the new mayor of Antwerp

‘COMPARED WITH THE VLD, THE SP.A UNDOUBTEDLY EMERGES FROM THE CRISIS AS THE WINNER. BUT COMPARED WITH THE VLAAMS BLOK, BOTH PARTIES ARE LOSERS’

Patrick Janssens will be the new mayor of Antwerp. The SP.A’s and VLD’s top politicians in Antwerp reached agreement on this on Monday 31 March. For two weeks the Liberals had backed the counter-candidacy of Hugo Covieliers, the parliamentary party chairman of the VLD in the House, but on Monday the Liberal negotiators dropped their demand. At the weekend the Liberal party leadership had already paved the way for a compromise. In an interview in De Morgen (29 March) chairman Karel De Gucht gave to understand that a new bench of aldermen had to be put in place in Antwerp with all possible speed. For De Gucht, Easter was the deadline. He felt that the idea of holding fresh municipal elections was a disastrous plan. According to the Liberal chairman, the considerable media coverage of the resignation of the Antwerp bench of aldermen and the conflict between Socialists and Liberals over the mayorship has done politics no good. There is an image of a rotten political system, whereas politicians have never been as clean as they are now, according to De Gucht. ‘In Antwerp the Vlaams Blok has sprung a trap, and we have all fallen into it,’ says De Gucht.

At the VLD party conference in Antwerp, Guy Verhofstadt reiterated that the crisis in Antwerp could not drag on any longer. ‘Serious politicians must take the situation in hand instead of leading the city towards the Vlaams Blok like a lamb to the slaughter,’ Verhofstadt said. The chairman of the VLD’s Antwerp branch Ludo Van Campenhout recognises that his party is suffering loss of face, but concludes that maintaining the stalemate would only be the deadline. He felt that the idea of holding fresh municipal elections was a disastrous plan. According to the Liberal chairman, the considerable media coverage of the resignation of the Antwerp bench of aldermen and the conflict between Socialists and Liberals over the mayorship has done politics no good. There is an image of a rotten political system, whereas politicians have never been as clean as they are now, according to De Gucht. ‘In Antwerp the Vlaams Blok has sprung a trap, and we have all fallen into it,’ says De Gucht.

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But compared with the Vlaams Blok, both parties are losers. Liberals and Socialists are now hoping that voters will have forgotten their political exploits in Antwerp by 18 May. But it is unlikely that most voters will have such short memories.
Did the VLD’s about-turn in Antwerp come too soon?

The national party leadership felt that Van Campenhout had thrown in the towel far too soon.

On 31 March the local Antwerp VLD section announced that it would be backing the candidacy of the SP.A’s Patrick Janssens for mayor of Antwerp. A week earlier the VLD was still saying that the SP.A did not have the credibility to provide the mayor. The impasse had to be broken, if the city was not to be handed over on a plate to the Vlaams Blok, according to the message given by strong man Guy Verhofstadt. When the chairman of the VLD’s Antwerp branch Ludo Van Campenhout announced the following day that he was supporting Janssens’ candidacy, he said he was doing so in the interests of Antwerp. The about-turn did indeed come very quickly, and the spoils for the VLD were unimpressive. But the national party leadership felt that Van Campenhout had thrown in the towel far too soon. The VLD’s Antwerp branch Ludo Van Campenhout announced the following day that he was supporting Janssens’ candidacy, he said he was doing so in the interests of Antwerp. The about-turn did indeed come very quickly, and the spoils for the VLD were unimpressive. But the national party leadership felt that Van Campenhout had thrown in the towel far too soon.

KURT TUERLINCKX • GAZET VAN ANTERPEN • 2 APRIL

It is not the first time that the VLD at national level has come into conflict with its Antwerp branch. The relationship had already soured in this crisis when Leo Delwaide’s candidacy for the post of mayor was rebutted by VLD chairman Karel De Gucht, Minister-President Patrick Dewael and Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt. It has emerged from VLD circles in Brussels that the Liberal leadership only wanted to continue to drive home the stalemate in order to wrest additional compensation from the SP.A. The Antwerp branch decided otherwise, in the interest of the city. The VLD’s national leadership is now exerting heavy pressure on Van Campenhout, and this has even included threats of him being removed from the third place on the parliamentary list. Among Antwerp’s Liberals there is a growing aversion to the meddling from the Melsenstraat in Brussels (the VLD headquarters, ed.). They are trying to shift their own failings onto Van Campenhout’s shoulders, said one VLD member. The SP.A, VLD, CD&V and Agalev negotiators reached an agreement on Tuesday (1 April) on the memorandum on the fight against corruption in Antwerp. The VLD was given the guarantees for the security alderman, the Bureau for Integrity, and the abandoning of the parliamentary seat of Patrick Janssens, as soon as he becomes mayor.

WWW.ANTERPEN.BE

Wave of findings of fraude and corruption in Anwerp

After the fraud in the administration of the city of Antwerp and the ‘injudicious use’ of VISA credit cards by a number of Antwerp aldermen, last week saw a surge of fresh findings of cases of fraud and corruption, whether or not correct. It looked as though this was going to be the beginning of a new wave of insinuations and smears. Mayor Somers (VLD) of Mechelen, who meddled in the Antwerp crisis as candidate heading the list in the Antwerp constituency, got into a tangle with his OCMW chairman Backx (formerly of CD&V), who accused him of having entrusted the firm Slangen & Partners with an image campaign for his city without having followed the accepted procedure, and having organised an extremely expensive team-building weekend in Knokke for his bench of aldermen. Somers called the accusations slander and nonsense, but had to take heavy criticism from his CD&V coalition partner on account of remarks in his book on the blurring of standards and norms that the previous coalition in Mechelen - of which the CD&V had been a member - had perpetrated. A few days later a VLD provincial council member disclosed a number of anonymous complaints about malpractice at the inter-municipal company Cipal, the Centre for Informatics for the Provinces of Antwerp and Limburg. Detectives were in the first instance looking into a case of trafficking of humans in which at least one Cipal officer was allegedly involved. The man in question confessed that he was indeed involved in the trading of Moldavian women and was promptly dismissed by Cipal chairman Stijnen. The other case centres on a number of senior Cipal officers who had allegedly feathered their own nests with Cipal money. For the time being nobody has been placed under suspicion. Coincidence or not: Patrick Janssens, the new mayor of Antwerp, was deputy chairman of Cipal. Former chairman Ludo Helsen (CD&V) is talking of an orchestrated attack on the inter-municipal company.

WWW.CIPAL.BE

Focus on Flanders • 29 March - 4 April 2003 • Number 13
VLD plays Verhofstadt trump card

Verhofstadt’s ‘open letter to the citizen’ was pondered and weighed up

The Liberals celebrated their 2-day electoral conference in Antwerp’s municipal theatre. On Saturday the sixty proposals that Verhofstadt had worked out in his ‘open letter to the citizen’ were pondered over and weighed up. The proposals were adapted or fine-tuned here and there. But the main theme, a new tax cut in the following government, was not disputed. People in VLD circles are convinced that the ‘purple-green’ coalition has notched up a fine record. With an easing of the tax and premium burden for companies, a tax cut for individuals and a budget that has kept out of the red, the party has more than kept its election promises, it says. Verhofstadt is ready to do even better, but it was not clear from his conference speeches as to which coalition partners he wants to join forces with. First win the elections, is the message (FF).

Stevaert presents socialist tax cut

Stevaert already has a socialist minister ready to carry out this tax programme

The SPA also met in Antwerp last weekend to approve its election manifesto. The party leadership has undergone a metamorphosis over the last few weeks, on account of the numerous staff changes in the upper echelons of the party. Patrick Janssens made way for Steve Stevaert as chairman of the party, and himself took over from Leona Detiège as mayor of Antwerp. Detiège’s daughter, Maya, is first follow-up candidate on the parliamentary list and replaces the candidate heading the list, Janssens, in the House. Gilbert Bossuyt replaces Stevaert as transport minister, and current minister for employment Renaat Landuyt replaces Stevaert as the number two in the Government of Flanders - the Deputy Minister-President. For that matter, Stevaert’s chairmanship still had to be ratified by the party conference. This duly occurred with a ‘Stalinist’ majority of 97.6%. Stevaert had introduced a heart-warming moment for former mayor Leona Detiège, who had to make way for his party colleague Janssens. For the Liberals, he had a tax surprise up his sleeve (FF).

More than gratitude for tax cuts, the Flemish Liberals are relying on the bonus statesman factor that Verhofstadt will give them in order to win the elections on 18 May. The international tension, with the war in Iraq, has played into the Prime Minister’s hands, offering him a chance to take maximum advantage of this bonus. Verhofstadt devoted more than half of his speaking time to the conflict in Mesopotamia, and admitted that he had been genuinely deeply disappointed that the international community had not been able to avert the war. He again repeated his call for a unified European army. ‘The lack of military might is leading Europe to impotence. The excess of military strength is leading America to isolation’. Coalition partner Agalev received a smack on the cheek of ‘Operation Small Change’. At their own conference the VLD stood on Liberal toes by turning ‘fewer sheep and no wool’. However, it was striking that the VLD also looked at its coalition partner SPA with some envy. Moreover, through the brand new party chairman Steve Stevaert, the SPA is now venturing onto the terrain of the self-employed and the hotel, restaurant and catering sector - very much a Liberal stamping ground. Verhofstadt showed himself to be satisfied because the SPA had now also discovered tax cuts and family-friendly housing. ‘But they can still learn a lot. The original is always better than the copy,’ he added.

WWW.VLD.BE

At the party conference Steve Stevaert stood on Liberal toes by turning ‘fewer taxes’ into the new Socialist show-piece. At their own conference the VLD reacted with some considerable pique at this ‘late conversion’. Stevaert himself talks of ‘Operation Small Change’: taxes can only be cut on the condition that collection is better organised and that the international community had not been able to avert the war. He again repeated his call for a unified European army. ‘The lack of military might is leading Europe to impotence. The excess of military strength is leading America to isolation’. Coalition partner Agalev received a smack on the bottom. All that to-do about the transportation of weapons should now stop once and for all, Verhofstadt feels. ‘Any plane that lands in Ostend can also land in Luxembourg or Prague. Any plane that flies over Belgium can also fly over the Netherlands.’ It was not the only slap in the face that the Green coalition partner was to receive. The entire VLD leadership was happy to use the well-known conference trick of getting their own grassroots worked up by railing against the competition, and here the Greens were the scapegoat. Flemish Minister-President Patrick Dewael had it in for Agalev, which he accused of ‘dis-trusting companies and people’. Party chairman De Gucht swept the party’s direct rival CD&V into a heap as ‘a lot of sheep and no wool’. However, it was striking that the VLD also looked at its coalition partner SPA with some envy. Moreover, through the brand new party chairman Steve Stevaert, the SPA is now venturing onto the terrain of the self-employed and the hotel, restaurant and catering sector - very much a Liberal stamping ground. Verhofstadt showed himself to be satisfied because the SPA had now also discovered tax cuts and family-friendly housing. ‘But they can still learn a lot. The original is always better than the copy,’ he added.
With new Genocide Act, Ariel Sharon and George Bush Senior remain out of range

**FF EDITORIAL STAFF**

With the support of the Christian-Democratic opposition (CD&V) and the extreme right-wing Vlaams Blok, the Liberals [VLD and MR] have succeeded in reducing the scope of the existing Genocide Act. Foreign leaders who commit crimes against humanity can still be prosecuted in Belgium if Belgians are involved or people who have lived in Belgium for at least three years. If this is not the case, the matter will be referred to the country the perpetrator comes from. The new adapted Act is also applicable to complaints already lodged, such as the actions brought against George Bush Senior and Ariel Sharon. The adapted Act was voted through, in the night of 1 to 2 April, with an ‘alternative majority’ [i.e., a majority diverging from the majority in parliament] after a lively parliamentary debate. The fact that Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and Foreign Affairs Minister Louis Michel had an alternative majority for the motion shows how important they felt that it was for the Act to be toned down.

The diplomatic pressure from the USA and Israel, but also from international companies, has clearly had its effect, and Israel, but also from international states that American transport flights are allowed regardless of whether they are effected within or outside the NATO framework, according to a staff member of Verhofstadt’s office in De Morgen (29 March). The Belgian Government did not have to give permission for this, since ‘a climate of international tension’ has prevailed since 11 September 2001. On 26 March the government’s inner cabinet decided to begin talks on the adaptation of these agreements. But for Agalev MP Peter Vanhoutte, the position of the government and of his party in the government is no longer defensible. He feels that the government is putting parliament out of action and, after an incident with his parliamentary party leader Joos Wauters, is refusing to take part in the voting in parliament. Wauters feels that Vanhoutte’s decision ten days before parliament is dissolved does not come across as being very credible.

MP Peter Vanhoutte no longer supports government and party

**FF EDITORIAL STAFF**

According to Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) there is indeed an agreement with the Americans that allows the transport of ordnance to and from the American army bases in Germany over Belgian territory. Verhofstadt was replying to the criticism expressed in the House by opposition member Pieter De Crem (CD&V), who claimed that according to a treaty dating from 1971 these transport operations could only be carried out within the framework of NATO. There is also an agreement dated 4 September 2000, which clearly states that American transport flights are allowed regardless of whether they are effected within or outside the NATO framework, according to a staff member of Verhofstadt’s office in De Morgen (29 March). The Belgian Government did not have to give permission for this, since ‘a climate of international tension’ has prevailed since 11 September 2001. On 26 March the government’s inner cabinet decided to begin talks on the adaptation of these agreements. But for Agalev MP Peter Vanhoutte, the position of the government and of his party in the government is no longer defensible. He feels that the government is putting parliament out of action and, after an incident with his parliamentary party leader Joos Wauters, is refusing to take part in the voting in parliament. Wauters feels that Vanhoutte’s decision ten days before parliament is dissolved does not come across as being very credible.

Unemployment already stands at 7.17% of the Flemish labour force

**FF EDITORIAL STAFF**

Last month there were 15,379 more unemployed people looking for work in Flanders than in March of last year. However, in comparison with February the unemployment figures did fall somewhat. The total number of job seekers fell by 3,743 or 1.9%. In absolute figures, Flanders had 190,420 job seekers at the end of March. This is revealed in the monthly figures released by the Flemish Minister for Employment Renat Landuyt (SP.A.) on 1 April. The category of unemployed people looking for work is larger than the number of job seekers entitled to benefit. The number of Flemish job seekers on benefit totalled 146,158 at the end of March. That is 14,725 more than in March 2002 - an increase of 11.2%.

On an annual basis, the unemployment figure in Flanders rose from 6.59% to 7.16% of the labour force. Short-term unemployment, i.e., unemployment that lasts less than one year, rose on an annual basis by 8.8%, or by 9,729 job seekers, to 120,718. The group of people who have been seeking employment for between one and two years grew by 30.7%, or 7,711 job seekers, to 32,821 people. The number of job seekers older than 50 rose by 19.3%. The conspicuous rise among older unemployed people is partly the consequence of a change in the unemployment regulation. As a result of this, persons who are fully unemployed, entitled to benefit and are under the age of 58, must remain registered as job seekers. According to minister Landuyt’s office, the rising figures are attributable to the economic downturn that began well over a year ago.

ELECTIONS

SP.A-Spirit and Vlaams Blok winners in LLB-poll

**FF EDITORIAL STAFF**

In the quarterly poll carried out by La Libre Belgique, the SP.A-Spirit alliance emerges as the big winner, along with the Vlaams Blok. The alliance posts a gain of no less than 5.2%, bringing its rating to 20.2%. The Vlaams Blok gains 2.1% and stands on 17.4%. The VLD just remains the largest party in Flanders with 22.3%, although it has to concede 0.3% vis-à-vis the 1999 elections. The CD&V also loses ground (- 0.1%) in respect of 1999, and founders on 22.1%. The Greens lose one and half percentage points and fall below 9.5%. With 4.7%, the Flemish-Nationalists of N-VA do not quite make the 5% electoral threshold. Guy Verhofstadt remains the most popular politician, ahead of Steve Stevaert and Jean-Luc Dehaene. The right-wing VLD dissident Ward Beyen only manages to chalk up 0.3% with his Liberal Appeal list. The poll was conducted between 5 and 15 March, i.e., in the middle of the ‘Antwerp crisis’, and has the reputation of being quite reliable (margin of error: 2.25%, and only 13% of interviewees undecided).

WWW.LALIBRE.BE
Desimpel sells holding in Remi Claeys Aluminium to Sapa

The heirs of the late West Flanders top businessman Aimé Desimpel have sold their 54.9% stake in the listed aluminium group Remi Claeys Aluminium (RCA), which was subsumed under the holding company Aluclaeya Finance, to the Swedish listed manufacturer of aluminium sections Sapa. The Swedes paid EUR 27.80 for the RCA share, 40% above the closing price of EUR 19.75, but less than the EUR 32.20 that the shareholders had paid on the occasion of the initial public offering in 1998. As soon as the audit of the books is finished, Sapa will be making an offer for all RCA shares. The offer values RCA at EUR 77 million. Remi Claeys Aluminium has 1,100 employees, recorded a turnover of EUR 290.9 million last year, and is active in aluminium sections and building systems. Sapa posted a turnover of EUR 1.2 billion last year, and employs around 5,500 people in practically all countries in Europe. For the Desimpel Group, which is weighed down under a mountain of short-term bank loans, the sale is an opportunity to reorganise its financial position. The Desimpel Group had earlier withdrawn from operations in the hotel, restaurant and catering sector (FF).

Marc Deroo • De financiële-economische Tijd • 3 April

The Desimpel family will use the circa EUR 42 million that it will pocket for its shareholding to reduce the debt mountain with which its holding company De Speyebeek is having to contend. ‘The sale is a good solution to our problems and puts De Speyebeek in a much more comfortable situation,’ says Xavier Desimpel, joint managing director of RCA. Desimpel is not worried about overlapping between Sapa and RCA. According to him, redundancies or divestments are not on the agenda. ‘For us, Sapa was always a model company. We know their style. There are many synergies. Sapa is mainly strong in small sections, whilst we are many synergies. Sapa is mainly strong in small sections, whilst we have a greater know-how in the field of large sections. For them the Benelux is a blank space on the map of Europe’. It is not yet known for certain whether he will stay on as managing director. Meanwhile, the other joint managing director of RCA, Chris Depreeuw, is remaining in his post.

Virtual Renforcement du Investissement: Government expenses with highest priority

VRIND: GOVERNMENT EXPENSES WITH HIGHEST PRIORITY

Largest job losses in March

Focus on Flanders • 29 March - 4 April 2003 • Number 13
Enormous loss at NMBS/SNCB, satisfaction among rail passengers

The Belgian Railways NMBS/SNCB posted a record net loss last year of EUR 911.7 million, according to an announcement made by managing director Karel Vinck and financial manager Luc Lallemant. To be sure, the bulk of this loss consists of extraordinary one-off costs, more especially the write-down in the subsidiary companies ABX Logistics (parcel service, EUR 562.4 million) and Interferry-boats (IFB, EUR 93 million). Nonetheless, the operating result and operating cash flow were also in the red. The operating result fell from EUR 38.1 million to - EUR 71.2 million. On presenting these figures, Karel Vinck again reiterated that the largest loss consists of extraordinary one-off costs, more especially the write-downs have been incorporated.

The NMBS/SNCB debts are taken over by the government. Despite the poor financial situation of the Railways, passengers seem to be a lot more satisfied with services than they were last year. On 1 April the company unveiled a satisfaction poll, which shows that general satisfaction has risen from 6.84 to 7.15 out of ten. 2002 was also the year in which the NMBS/SNCB attained the punctuality percentage laid down by the management contract for the first time. In 2002 95.2% of all trains travelled with no more than a five-minute delay.

The seascape genre interests curator Willy Van den Bussche of Ostend’s Museum of Modern Art only from the nineteenth century onwards, when painters began to do more than merely create a realistic representation of the sea, and started using the motif to express their personal emotions and a cosmic feeling. The starting point in the exhibition is Turner, in the form of two brilliant works on loan from London’s Tate Gallery. The suggestive creation of atmosphere and the light effects in both canvases pointed the way to impressionism and abstract art. In the first room, the bleak beauty of Permeke’s North Sea views is contrasted with the equally sensitive, but more delicate seascapes painted by Courbet.

HOW SATISFIED ARE TRAIN PASSENGERS?

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<td>6.54</td>
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SOURCE: NMBS - RUG-PDH

The way in which this French master deals with the ephemeral atmosphere above the sea is a joy to the eye. The dialogue with Permeke’s darker tones and high-spirited touch is unusual but fascinating.

There are also well-filled ensembles by Theo Van Rysselberge and Leon Spilliaert. Van Rysselberge worked in Knokke and Heist, among other places, and evokes the atmosphere and colours of the Flemish dunes and beaches with accuracy and aplomb. The selection of Spilliaert’s seascapes perhaps constitute the highlight of the exhibition for connoisseurs.

Less well known in Flanders is the German expressionist Emil Nolde. A number of superior seascapes by this artist have been lent by the foundation that keeps and conserves his work. Nolde’s vivid, vital colours are unique. The very charm of the exhibition lies in the fact that it acquaints us with the sea through the vision of very diverse poet-
CULTURE

ic personalities: Ensor, for example, who laughs at the affectation of middle-class decorum on the beach but also evokes the bewitching light of the North Sea with great subtlety, or Magritte, who appreciated the sea as a

Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

- 9 April: Steve Earle, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
- 11 to 22 April: Ariodante by GF Haukel, conductor Christoph Poppen, Director: David Alden; Flanders Opera, Antwerp; info: www.vlaamsopera.be
- 9 to 12 April: Thomas Hauter/Cie Zoo, Creation 2003, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be
- 10 to 12 April: sonic square # 7, bedroom activism, dance and electro-acoustic music, Kaaitheaterstudio’s, Brussels www.kaispel.be
- 8,9 and 11 April: Mariza (Port), Fado, Stadsschouwburg Brugge, De Warande Turnhout and De Spil, Roeselare; info: 050/44.30.60
- 10 April: Leif Ove Andnes, Piano with Chopin, Grieg, Debussy, Moyoshi. PSK, Brussels; info: 02/507.82.00 www.pskpba.be
- 12 April: Capella Turchini conducted by Antonio Flario, Policolora e Devozione, De Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be
- 13 and 15 April: Camera Musica Mosana, Johannes Passion, CC Leopoldsburg and Velinx, Tongeren; info: 011/34.65.48
- 13 April: Stephen Malkmus, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
- 17 April Daniel Reuss, conductor, Claron McFadden (Soprano), Stella Doufexis (Soprano) and others with Deus Passas by Ethm, PSK, Brussels; info: 02/507.82.00 www.pskpba.be
- 21 April: Shakira, Sportpaleis, Antwerp; info: 0900/260.60
- 21 April: Festival of Contemporary Dance, Loddingh, Museum of Antwerp, info: 09/221.17.03
- 21 April: Pina Bausch, ‘The right to dream’, exhibition, Brewery Belle Vue, Molenbeek; info: www.euroculture.be 02/513/29/84
- 22 April: Maria Magdalena, sinner from the Middle Ages until today, exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03
- 23 April: Jacques Charlier and Leo Copers, exhibitions, SMAK, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03 www.smak.be
- 25 April: Les Choristes, ‘Abroad’, exhibition with work by Raveel, Richter, Pistoletto and others, Galerie Louise Bourgeois and Luc Tuymans have painted their interpretation of the sea, especially for this occasion. www.beauroom2003.be

EXPO

- From 22 March to 17 January: Jacques Brel, ‘The right to dream’, exhibition, Schilknaapstraat 50, Brussels; reservation required; info: www.jacquesbrel.be 02/511.10.20
- Until 31 August: The big Sexperiment, scientific exhibition, Technopolis, Mechelen, info: 015/34.20.00
- Until 29 June: Music Planet, one century of pop music in an exhibition, Brewery Belle Vue, Molenbeek; info: www.euroculture.be 02/513/29/84
- Until 6 April: Maria Magdalena, sinner from the Middle Ages until today, exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03
- Until 13 April: Jacques Charlier and Leo Copers, exhibitions, SMAK, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03 www.smak.be
- Until 20 April: ‘Abroad’, exhibition with work by Raveel, Richter, Pistoletto and Tapes, Roger Ravelmuseum, Machelen aan de Leie (near Deinze), info: rogerravelmuseum.be
- Until 20 April: Narecolespy, retrospective exhibition with work by Dave Mc Kean, Auditorium Tweebronnen, Leuven; info: www.beeldbeeld.org
- Until 6 April: Lacaton e Vassal, Architects, Bordeaux – Paris, exhibition, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- Until 4 May: Louis Van Lint, retrospective exhibition, Museum of Elsene, info: 02/574.94.74

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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