Three new VLD ministers in the Flemish Government

On 5 June the VLD group in the Flemish Parliament appointed Bart Somers as the new Minister-President of the Flemish Government. Somers, mayor of Mechelen and the candidate who headed the VLD list for the Lower House in the province of Antwerp, replaces Patrick Dewael, who is moving to the federal government. The party leadership did not stop there and also replaced two other ministers in the Flemish Government, bringing in two new faces in their place. Marino Keulen will be the new Flemish Minister for Economic Affairs, Housing and Foreign Trade, replacing Jaak Gabriëls, who will go back to being an MP in the federal parliament. Patricia Ceyssens replaces Guy Van Hengel as Flemish Minister of Sport, although the responsibilities will most probably be reshuffled to flesh out her portfolio. Van Hengel remains minister in the Government of the Brussels Region (FF).

ERIC DONCKIER • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG • 6 JUNE

The name of Bart Somers as Minister-President of the Flemish Government only surfaced on Wednesday. The VLD opted for him, as opposed to Dirk Van Mechelen, because Somers is a better communicator, and in these TV times, therefore, communication prevails over content. Reports have also been doing the rounds the last couple of days that the VLD would not only be appointing a replacement for Patrick Dewael, but would also be replacing Jaak Gabriëls with Marino Keulen. The meeting of the VLD group in the Flemish Parliament lasted more than an hour and a half. In fact, the group only had to ratify what Verhofstadt, Dewael and De Gucht had decided for them. It turned into such a long meeting because a lot of emotions were involved. André Denys was first to leave the meeting, disappointed because he had failed again to secure a ministerial post. After the meeting, VLD chairman Karel De Gucht and the chairman of the parliamentary party, Francis Vermeiren, said that the choice of Somers, Keulen and Ceyssens should be understood as a positive signal. Marino Keulen, from Mechelen, was editor-in-chief of the VLD members’ paper De Burgerkrant (‘The Citizens’ Paper’) and is skilful at dealing with the media. Patricia Ceyssens, a mother of three, was chairperson of the Welfare, Public Health and Equal Opportunities committee in the Flemish Parliament.

INTRODUCTION

During his assignment as informateur, Elio Di Rupo (PS) had already set the tone for the new legislature. Gloom and statistics’concerned Somers in the offing and the vulnerable groups in society therefore deserved extra attention. Guy Van Hengel took over the torch from him, in his role as forateur (charged with forming a new government), and produced a draft coalition agreement that reflected his sense of crisis. One of the creation of 200,000 jobs is the main objective. The recipe for achieving this goal – namely by means of a reduction of labour costs – is of liberal origin. In doing so, Verhofstadt is responding to the lamentations of the employers’ organisations who complain that they are wrestling with wages, rigid working times and the way of life in neighbouring countries. But unlike the easing of labour cost under the ‘Verhofstadt I’ government, this cut in the cost of labour is not linear but selective. Socialists and Liberals have found common ground on this point, concludes De Standaard (4 June). The Socialists accepted the easing of the tax and premium burden as a means of job creation, and the Liberals agreed to a selective implementation. Reductions of the labour cost of semi- and unskilled workers, employees over 55, part-time workers, and employees from the non-profit sector, and the fixing of ceilings for the labour cost of specific know-how (such as those of engineers or scientists) are first up for the measure. To get 100,000 unemployed people into work, Verhofstadt is planning to have the employment offices provide guidance to the persons in question. Another novelty is the proposal of the VLD to combine and fix the ceilings for the labour cost of specific know-how, and to create a selective implementation. Reductions of the labour cost under the ‘Verhofstadt I’ government, this cut in the cost of labour is not linear but selective. Socialists and Liberals have found common ground on this point, concludes De Standaard (4 June). The Socialists accepted the easing of the tax and premium burden as a means of job creation, and the Liberals agreed to a selective implementation. Reductions of the labour cost of semi- and unskilled workers, employees over 55, part-time workers, and employees from the non-profit sector, and the fixing of ceilings for the labour cost of specific know-how (such as those of engineers or scientists) are first up for the measure. To get 100,000 unemployed people into work, Verhofstadt is planning to have the employment offices provide guidance to the persons in question. Another novelty is the solution proposed by Verhofstadt to combine the various systems of time credit, early retirement and other forms of reduction of working hours in a time savings account. This will allow every employee to save working days to build his career in a flexible manner. After years of palaver, work will finally begin on bringing the statutes of blue-collar worker and white-collar worker into line. However, the latter two proposals have been sensitive issues among employers since time immemorial. How they will work in practice will be revealed at a roundtable conference of government and social partners in the autumn. Verhofstadt clearly hinted that he was expecting an active contribution to job creation by the social partners. ‘A creative and solidarity-minded Belgium’, as the draft coalition agreement is called, contains a lot more. What remains in place after the forthcoming negotiations between Socialist and Liberal heavyweights will be perfectly easy to check, for Verhofstadt has remained true to his open communication policy. The media was immediately given the opportunity to peruse the memorandum and a brief comparison with the end result will allow us to see what elements have died a silent death and what has been added. Therefore De Financieel-Economische Tijd (4 June) calls the working paper ‘cut-and-paste memorandum’.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief

CONTENTS

Politics
Debatselier advocates state reform 2
Federal government talks under way 3
Verhofstadt want to send Belgian troops to Congo 3
Christian Labour movement not for sale 4

Economy and social policy
Corporate failures rise by 5% 4
Landuyt asks federal support for employment programme 5
Positive credit office must reduce risk of debt 5
Umicore makes largest takeover in its history 6
De Beers ends contract with 15 Antwerp customers 6

Justice
Powder letters point to Iraqi refugee 7

Culture
The magic of the Queen Elisabeth Competition 7
**De Batselier and Dewael advocate state reform in two phases**

The major new distribution of competencies is scheduled for after the regional elections in 2004 but the SPA already wants to carry through a minor political reform in 2003.

As so many other Flemish politicians, the president of the Flemish Parliament Norbert De Batselier (SP.A) has also written a book.Broadly speaking the book deals with a number of specific proposals for a further, moderate state reform of Belgium. The fact that he presented his book, entitled ‘Dynamics or Dynamite?’, in the middle of the negotiations on a new federal government, ensured that it received the necessary extra attention. The major new distribution of competencies is scheduled for after the regional elections in 2004 but the SPA already wants to carry through a minor political reform in 2003. The fact that the VLD and SPA are more or less on the same wavelength in this respect was apparent from the presence of Minister-President Patrick Dewael at the presentation of the book (FF).

BART ECKHOOUT • DE MORGEN • 3 JUNE

In an initial phase, De Batselier wants to consolidate the political autonomy of the federal states. He would like to see Flanders able to write its own constitution. That constitution ought not to be merely a carbon copy of the federal model but should contain clear political choices, such as the right to basic transport, traffic safety, or taxes according to capacity and wealth. It is no coincidence, therefore, that De Batselier has expressed three ‘red’ priorities. This first phase should be dealt with at the time the federal government is formed in De Batselier’s opinion. After the regional elections in June 2004 a quieter political climate could come into being for a more far-reaching transfer of competencies. A federalisation of the traffic policy, employment, arms exports, a division of the constituency and judicial district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde and an increase in fiscal autonomy should be included on the agenda. De Batselier wants to see the financing of the regions no longer dependent on an allocation on (federal) personal income tax, but wants to see the regions able to determine a personal income tax rate themselves. At the same time a study should be carried out into the consequences of a possible division of the family and health policy.

De Batselier has already received support for his view from Patrick Dewael, currently still Minister-President of the Government of Flanders and soon-to-be number two VLD member in the federal government behind Guy Verhofstadt. At the book presentation, Dewael recalled that he had already argued in favour of a ‘realistic strategy’ in two phases, on the occasion of the presentation of his Twelfth-Night memorandum. In the federal coalition agreement, ‘agreements have to be made concerning method, timing and intrinsic agenda’, Dewael stipulated. The Minister-President criticised the ‘federal patronising’ which he says he discerns in Elio Di Rupo’s informateur’s memorandum. ‘It is not the federal government’s job to urge the federal states (communities) to co-operate in all kinds of areas. The federal states (communities) make those decisions autonomously’. SPA chairman Steve Stevaert joins in with the plea for a gradual state reform. ‘For the first time we are moving into a new situation in which no competencies can be traded in for money’, said Stevaert, ‘but a period in which the federal level perhaps wants to relinquish competencies in order to hand over the financing to the regions’.

BART DOBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 2 JUNE

Norbert De Batselier remains true to himself in his book. He thus maintains that the income-replacement social security benefits [unemployment allowances, pensions, illness and invalidity benefit] should remain federal, whilst the cost-compensation arrangements such as medical care or children’s allowance should be eligible for defederalisation [regionalisation] - not its financing, says De Batselier, but the expenses. In the De Batselier model, the Communities [federal states] would receive funds in accordance with the objective needs to pursue a health and family policy of their own, and in accordance with the distribution ratios used in the financing of the health insurance funds. Health insurance funds with more ill, old or care-dependent members receive more. To determine this, researchers have laid down eight criteria that are used as distribution ratios for the distribution of the money. Something similar could happen for the Communities. However, the most striking proposal in De Batselier’s book concerns personal income tax. The president of the Parliament advocates more fiscal autonomy for the federal states [regions/communities], more specifically in the field of personal income tax. At the moment the federal government collects approximately EUR 28.65 billion in personal income tax every year, and passes on EUR 10.3 billion of this [i.e. 36%] to the regions.

De Batselier therefore proposes that Belgium cut the existing federal rates in income tax by the same 36%. To fill the gap, the regions would introduce their own tax, with their own rates. And just as in the federal personal income tax, the regions would have to charge higher rates on higher incomes than on lower incomes. In De Batselier’s proposal, the regions can fix their rate every year. An entity that is able to decide on how to spend its own revenue will think more carefully before spending that money, according to De Batselier.

### CONSUMER CREDITS (IN MILLIONS OF EURO)

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SOURCE: TIJD-GRAPHICS
Federal government talks get underway

In his draft coalition agreement, the formateur places great emphasis on the socio-economic challenges

Guy Verhofstadt in his role as formateur (the person charged with forming a new government, ed.) presented his memorandum entitled ‘A creative and solidarity-minded Belgium’ to the Liberal and Socialist government negotiators at his official residence on 3 June. The title is the same as that of the report that the informateur (the politician investigating on behalf of the Crown whether a proposed cabinet formation will succeed, ed.) had handed over to him. In so doing, Verhofstadt aims to show that he wants to encourage the creativity that is needed to generate the money that will make solidarity possible. The Socialists will not have failed to notice Verhofstadt’s use of Di Rupo’s title, but both the PS and SP.A remain critical. More than anything, they first want to check that Verhofstadt’s proposals do not jeopardise the budgetary balance. In his draft coalition agreement, the formateur places great emphasis on the socio-economic challenges. He champions a two-time EUR 750 million selective cut in corporate charges which should foster employment among five target groups: semi- and unskilled workers, part-time workers, those in jobs requiring specific knowledge, older workers, and non-profit workers. Together with accompanying measures, these measures should create 210,000 new jobs (FF).

Boudevijn Van Peteghem • DE STANDAARD • 4 JUNE

Verhofstadt is sketching a budgetary framework: a balanced budget up to and including 2005 and budget surpluses thereafter - 0.4% of the GDP in 2007. In that year, the total debt should stand at 87% of the GDP, as compared to its current level of more than 100%. This makes the budgetary time schedule less ambitious than that of the 2001-2005 long-range plan for the budget. The formateur wants to support creativity in order to generate the money that will allow solidarity. ‘We will be reconciling the two. It is one and the other. The two are inextricably linked’.

Two selective cuts in corporate social charges - EUR 750 million in 2004 and the same again in 2005 - will help to create around 200,000 jobs. A special policy for employers that fall victim to restructuring should create jobs. The formateur wants to help 100,000 unemployed persons find work by implementing a monthly job guidance system. The punch check will be abolished.

The memorandum says that the money for health care will be increased by a percentage to the amount of twice the percentage of economic growth. It contains a strategy for the reduction of greenhouse gases that will allow Belgium to meet the Kyoto standards. The government will help people to invest in more environmentally friendly housing, production, or driving. Verhofstadt wants to step up the fight against crime by introducing a nuisance policy in every major city. The abolition of judicial leave (a proposal made by Steve Stevaert, ed.) should help clear the judicial backlog. The memorandum includes 12 initiatives for reducing paperwork.

Verhofstadt wants to send Belgian troops to Congo

He feels that Belgium cannot just stand by and look at

FF EDITOR

Guy Verhofstadt, as formateur, wants to send Belgian soldiers to the Congolese region of Ituri. He feels that Belgium cannot just stand by and look on as a humanitarian tragedy unfolds in the region around the city of Bunia in Eastern Congo. Rival tribes are carrying out massacres amongst each other and child soldiers are being deployed. Verhofstadt proposes the possibility of a Belgian intervention in his draft coalition agreement. Belgian troops would operate under a UN or EU mandate. However, the proposal runs counter to the (albeit not binding) recommendations of the Rwanda commission, of which Guy Verhofstadt was the great inspiration in its day. That commission investigated the murder of ten Belgian UN peacekeepers in Rwanda on the eve of the genocide that took place in that country in 1994. One of the recommendations advised against the deployment of Belgian soldiers in former Belgian colonies. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Michel (MR) has long been a supporter of a more active Belgian policy in Central Africa. However, SP.A defence specialist Dirk Vander Maelen is against sending Belgian troops, as is caretaker Spirit. The CD&V, on the other hand, is in favour of deploying Belgian troops in peacekeeping operations. ‘Otherwise an active Africa policy is not credible’, says Sabine de Bethune (CD&V). Earlier, the UN Security Council had already decided to send a military intervention force to Bunia, led by France, and for which Belgium is providing logistical support.

Opinion

Bart Sturtevagen • DE STANDAARD • 3 JUNE

The idea is remarkable because Verhofstadt was the driving force in the Rwanda commission that came to the conclusion that Belgium, as a former colonial power, would do better henceforth to refrain from such interventions. This dovetails with what the outgoing Prime Minister recently said about the need for a more closely integrated European defence policy. The argument for that, after all, is that diplomacy has little effect if there is no military force with which to back it up. If Belgium wants to have greater success over the next four years in its efforts to help put a stop to the bloodletting and unfathomable misery in the heart of Africa, it will be difficult to achieve if it is not willing to exact peace on the ground. Acting as though we are playing a leading role in that process, but relying on others to do the dangerous work involved, would not be credible.
**Corporate failures up by 5%**

On the basis of figures collected from all commercial courts, the research bureau Graydon has calculated that the number of corporate failures in Belgium is up 5% on last year. What is more, more and more large companies are being wound up. This year, 36 companies with more than 50 employees have already folded, the big names being the graphics company Brepols, the garage chain Speedy and the textile group Sofinal-Cotesa. In total, 11,500 jobs have already been lost on account of corporate failures, according to Graydon. Jan De Boitselier, managing director of Graydon, is quoted in *De Morgen* [3 June] as saying that the fact that it is now the turn of the large companies can be attributed to the downward trend in the economic cycle which has had a domino effect. Economic recession begins with retail businesses because they are left in the lurch by the consumers and are forced to close the books. In a second phase come the wholesale businesses, the suppliers of small companies with difficulties, and only then come the really big companies. Graydon only dares to make very rough predictions as to when the wave of failures will come to an end. De Boitselier maintains that the economy will again start to show signs of improvement ‘by the autumn or winter’ of this year. As soon as employers see that improvement is on the way, they themselves will also have greater confidence in the future.

**WWW.GRAYDON.BE**

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**Labour Movement**

**Christian Labour movement is not for sale**

The ACW big guns reacted with suspicion at the political declarations of love made by the CD&V and the SP.A

On 29 May the Christian Labour Movement ACW held its labour celebration, *Rerum Novarum*. In their speeches Jan Renders, ACW chairman, Luc Cortebeeck, chairman of the Christian union ACV, and Marc Justaert of the Christian health insurance fund criticised the tendency of politicians to promise heaven and earth before the elections, whilst barely a few days after the elections the first tidings of woe were to be heard on the slowdown in growth, budgets that were too low and alarming unemployment figures. Cortebeeck showed himself to be in favour of an easing of the tax and premium burden, but provided that it did not make a hole in the social security system. The ACW big guns reacted with suspicion at the political declarations of love made by the CD&V and the SP.A.

EVELYNE HENS • DE FINANCIËLE-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 30 MAY

Justaert, Renders and Cortebeeck talked of the political declarations of love made by the SP.A and the CD&V. ‘It is not surprising that political parties are making eyes at us. They know that we remain a strong movement.’ The ACW is not letting itself get trapped. ‘We are not for sale or for rent. We are suspicious of outstretched hands whose only real purpose is to win votes’. The ACW leaders stressed that the ACW was ‘not a political party but an independent social movement’. The ACW is asking the people who are making overtures from within the government to implement the ACW’s concerns for more social welfare and less inequality in policy. They are asking the Christian-Democrats (CD&V), on the basis of their Christian inspiration, to be spokesmen for the weak and vulnerable. ‘They are our political wing with whom we continue to hold structural consultations’. But the leaders added that in the future they would ‘also cooperate with politicians from other parties (than the CD&V) on specific matters’.

In Wednesday’s edition of *De Morgen*, Renders warned of the threat of impoverishment of the political landscape if Agalev joined the SP.A-Spirit cartel. ‘Agalev has to plot its political strategy itself, but the party risks losing its stock of ideas if it goes on board with a larger entity’. Renders also hopes that under the chairmanship of Yves Leterme, the CD&V ‘will once again listen to the ACW’s concerns’.

WWW.ACW.BE

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**Elections**

**Agalev accepts SP.A Senate seat in Limburg**

Jacinta De Roeck, the candidate who headed the Green party Agalev’s list in the province of Limburg, will be co-opted as senator by the SP.A. The decision was made by the Limburg branch of the party. In doing so, she accepts the offer made by SP.A chairman Steve Stevaert who had made his proposal two days after the Greens’ disastrous election defeat. Agalev lost all its federal seats in both the Lower House and the Senate on 18 May. De Roeck stressed that she would nonetheless be sitting as an Agalev senator and that the Limburg branch’s decision had nothing to do with any co-operation with the SP.A-Spirit cartel. The decision on this latter issue will be taken at a national party conference at the end of June.
Minister Landuyt requests federal support for employment policy

If the New Federal Government Arranges for an Additional Easing of the Corporate Charges, This Should Be Coupled with Training for Younger Workers

The poor economic situation continues to take its toll on the labour market, as well as in other areas. The number of unemployed persons rose in Flanders over the last year by 12% to 186,029. Of these, 146,172 were entitled to benefit. Unemployment is particularly worrying among youngsters under twenty-five who are entitled to benefit (+17.6%) and older workers over the age of fifty (+27.1%), although for the latter group we should add for the sake of completeness that a change in the unemployment regulations has caused a large number of older job-seekers to be included in the unemployment figures again. The increase in the number of job-seekers who have been out of work for between one and two years is nothing short of alarming (+42.9%). The Minister of the Government of Wallonia, colleague Marie Arena (PS), the current Minister of Employment by her party LaVantelinkx (PS) at the federal Ministry of Employment by her party colleague Marie Arena (PS), the current Minister of the Government of Wallonia, would be encouraging. ‘It offers the prospects of a new élan’. If the new federal government arranges for an additional easing of the corporate charges, this should be coupled with training for younger workers. This would mean that an easing of the charges could be granted to workers over the age of 50, provided they make their experience available to newcomers in the company. Landuyt is also hoping to have the job-card system - currently only intended for young persons - extended to unskilled and semi-skilled job-seekers. With this call, Landuyt is backing the idea that was put forward by the outgoing Flemish Minister-President, Patrick Dewael. He wants to give companies three months’ unemployment benefit for every semi- or unskilled person the company employs. Landuyt also wants to extend the system of start-up jobs for the self-employed. At the moment a number of young people are working in Bruges and Ostend as employees in cooperatives, which give them financial help when making the step towards starting up their own business. These examples should be followed throughout Flanders.

Office for positive credit should reduce debt risk

More and more Belgians are no longer able to pay their debts, according to figures from the National Bank’s central office for negative credit. At the end of last year 400,000 Belgians were registered as having debt problems owing a total of EUR 1.9 billion. In order to tackle the problem at source, the government has decided to expand the central office for negative credit, which handles problem cases, to also include all consumer credit and mortgage loans that are being paid off without difficulties. The idea behind the new ‘central office for positive credit’ is to give lenders as comprehensive a view as possible of their customers’ financial situation, thus allowing them to keep track of their creditworthiness more effectively. Indeed, as of 1 June lenders are even obliged to consult the central office when a person requests a loan. The result will be an increase in the number of registered contracts from 550,000 to 5.5 million, and in the number of people from 400,000 to 4 million (FF).

By registering all loans and obliging financial institutions to consult this data before granting credit, the outgoing Minister for Economic Affairs Charles Picqué wants to prevent private individuals being pushed into debt by skilful commercial banks. The financial institutions that do not consult the central office risk a penalty. The current system - the central office for negative credit - only registered defaulters. ‘The registration of defaulters is useful in preventing the borrowers’ situation from worsening but it is not very effective in preventing the risk of excessive debts’, according to the governor of the National Bank Guy Quaden. The idea that even the purchase of a refrigerator on instalment credit will henceforth result in registration in the central office for positive credit has already led to critics’ fears of ‘Big Brother’ situations. But Jean Hilgers of the National Bank has affirmed that the central office will not violate people’s privacy. Access to the database will be limited to lenders and debt brokers. Also, access control is based on electronic signatures allowing all users to be traced.
Umicore makes largest takeover in its history

The takeover makes Umicore a world player in the precious metals market

De Beers ends contract with 15 Antwerp customers

The South African diamond giant De Beers informed fifteen of Antwerp’s forty-five ‘sight-holders’ this weekend of the termination of their exclusive sales contract. The number of sight-holders, who own the exclusive right to buy and sell De Beers diamonds, amounts to some 120 worldwide. After a selection based on ethical, legal and financial criteria, De Beers has retained 80 of them. Sight-holders owe their name to the viewing sessions organised by De Beers for the sale of its diamonds, and which only they may attend. Dealers and manufacturers have lost their supplier following the move. The news came as a bombshell in Antwerp’s diamond circles (FF).
‘Powder letters’ point to Iraqi suspect

The investigation led to the arrest of a man of Iraqi nationality who had posted the letters in the town where he lives – Deinze in East Flanders

Since 11 September 2001, hundreds of harmless 'powder letters' containing flour, sugar or ash have been sent through the mail by pranksters in Belgium. Some of these practical jokers have been caught and given light punishments. But the ten letters containing powder sent on 3 and 4 June proved far more dangerous. The first lab analyses show that they contained hydrazine and phenarsazine, two toxic substances that cause irritation to the skin, eyes and throat. Five envelopes were received at the clerk of the court's office at the Court of Cassation in Brussels, at Ostend airport, at the Port Authority building in Antwerp, and at the Saudi Arabian and British embassies. The other five envelopes were intercepted at the Deinze and Ghent postal sorting centres. These were addressed to the Prime Minister's office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Brussels Court of First Instance and the US embassy. The letters were signed 'International Islamic Society'. The judicial inquiry into the sender of the letters has been centralised in the terrorism unit of the federal public prosecutor's office in Brussels. The letter to the Brussels Court of First Instance points to a link with the trial underway against 23 Muslim fundamentalists, including the Tunisian Nizar Trabelsi, who was apprehended two days after 11 September, had contact with Osama Bin Laden and is suspected of planning attacks in Belgium. According to judicial sources, a message on at least one piece of card enclosed in a letter read: 'Set our brothers free. Bastards.' The Crisis Centre at the Ministry of the Interior released a statement aimed at the public calling on people not to panic because the letters targeted various authorities, and not the civilian population. Also, the quantity of toxic substances was not alarming (FF).

Opinion

FRANS DESMET - HET NIEUWSBLAD - 5 JUNE

The letters are not very dangerous for the public but the unknown sender(s) are sending out a malicious signal of implacable hate. The psychosis caused by these poison letters is far more dangerous than their content, and it is probably precisely that panic and chaos that the senders are aiming to achieve. They probably have to be sought in radical Muslim circles sympathising with Nizar Trabelsi and his companions who are standing trial in Brussels. The role of Ostend and Antwerp as hubs for the transport of American arms headed for Iraq may also have played a part. Of course that latter motive is totally irrational. Our country was critically opposed to the Anglo-American war against Sadam Hussein and has already had to face numerous outbursts of anti-Belgian feeling in the West on that account. The Trabelsi affair is equally invalid as a good 'motive'. Anyone abusing Belgian hospitality in order to plan terrorist attacks should be subject to the full weight of the legal apparatus. That is far more sensible than, for example, summoning foreign heads of state to appear before our courts on account of alleged crimes against humanity on the basis of our over-ambitious genocide law.

The Magic of the Queen Elisabeth Competition

The competition is regarded as the ultimate test for piano virtuosos

The Queen Elisabeth competitions for piano and violin have lost nothing of their attractiveness after more than half a century. The competition has a cast-iron reputation abroad, and of all international competitions, it is regarded as the ultimate test of strength for piano and violin virtuosos. Television viewers can once again enjoy the virtuosity and versatility of the young pianists who reached the final this year. The Belgian public broadcasting corporation’s second channel, Canvas, will be broadcasting parts of the competition daily. The fact that classical music in this formula seems to captivate such a wide public is chiefly due to the competition element, the jury, the judgement of ‘specialists’ and the awarding of points. And all this despite the somewhat formal etiquette that still holds sway over the finals in the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels (FF).

GEERT VANDER SPEETEN • DE STANDAARD • 2 JUNE
You can think of all kinds of reasons for watching the event. Now that classical music is casting off its formality, the Elisabeth competition remains true to its status as a high mass, with a rock-solid belief in a concert etiquette that a young audience abhors. A competition also evokes ineradicable associations with major sports tournaments. Artistic performances are expressed in points and musicians have to perform before a jury. Past experience shows us that the competition does not offer any guarantees for a brilliant solo career. It appears first and foremost to promote a super-race of technically gifted pianists and violinists. Yet the competition element remains the Elisabeth competition’s primary asset. This is where the magic stems from. In the final evenings an excitement and intensity are created, akin to a talent quest in which young stars give of their best. What is more,
the competition takes place in its purest form: a concert with orchestra and soloist, with the Major Repertoire on the billing [plus the compulsory piece of contemporary music]. The fact that heroic performances are put on by extremely young musicians appeals to the imagination. It is no coincidence that the public’s favourite this year is a sixteen-year-old child prodigy from China.

Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

• 10 June: Lloyd Cole, Botanique, Brussels; info: 02/518.37.32
• 11 June: Antí Di Franco Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
• 10 to 22 June: La Traviata by Giuseppe Verdi, Flanders Opera, Ghent; info: 70/22.02.02 www.vlaamseopera.be
• 17 June: Marilyn Manson, Brabanthal, Leuven; info: 0900/26060
• 19 June: Goldfrapp, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
• 22 June to 6 July:
• 25 June: Opera Grands Vins, concert tour, Brussels. info: 02/548.24.24
• 23 June: Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, conducted by Simon Rattle, PSK, Brussels; info: 02/607.82.00 www.bozar.be
• Until August: Africalia, the Caravan, moving African circus in Flemish towns www.africalia.be
• Until 30 June: Africalia: urban music, rap, street dancing, slam, info: www.africalia.be
• 10 June: Young People and the Kills, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
• 25 June: Oromutta, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
• 22 June to 6 July: mostly Händel Festival, organisation: PSK and De Munt with the opera Agrippina and the Oratorium Belshazzar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
• 24 June: Richard Thompson, de Handelsbeurs, Gent, info: 09/282.51.23 www.handelsbeurs.be

EXPO

• From 22 March to 17 January: Jacques Brel, ‘The right to dream’, exhibition, Schildknaapstraat 50, Brussels, reservation required, info: www.jacquesbrel.be 02/511.10.20
• Until 31 August: The big Sexperiment, scientific exhibition, Technopolis, Mechelen, info: 0/15/34.20.00
• Until 29 June: Music Planet, one century of pop music in an exhibition, Brewery Belle Vue, Molvenbeek, info: www.euroculture.be 02/513/29/84
• From 1 March onwards: The Groeninghemuseum in Bruges reopened after facelift, info: 0/40/44.78.12
• Until 30 August: 50 Years of Matchbox, Toys museum, Mechelen, info: 0/15/55.70.75 www.speelgoedmuseum.be
• Until 28 September: 2003 Beaufort, Contemporary art in the dunes and on the beaches of the coastal towns, open air exhibitions with Jan Fabre, Wim Delvoye, Anne & Patrick Poirier, Dniel Spoerri, Henk Visch, Antony Gormly and others, info: coastal tourist offices www.beaufort.be
• Until 28 September: Marines in confrontation: Seascapes in painting, PMMK, Ostend; info: 0/59/70/11/99 www.pmmk.be
• Until 15 June: The City as loft, KCAP/ASTOC/Kees Christiaanse, exhibition De Singel, Antwerp, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
• Until 15 June: David Goldblatt, photographer, exhibition, PSK, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
• Until 14 September: Kin Moto na Brussel, exhibition by popular Congolese painters, City Hall, Museum for Central Africa (Ter-vueren), info: 02/412.58.81 www.africalia.be
• Until 15 June: One century of Abstract art in Brussels and Wallonia, Botanique, Brussels; info: 02/218.37.32
• Until 22 June: Gert Verhoeven, exhibition, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, info: 09/282.51.23 www.museumd.be
• Until 17 August: Fatal women 1860-1910, exhibition, KMSK, Antwerp; info: 03/242.04.16 www.antwerpen.be/cultuur/kmska
• Until 28 September: Jan Fabre, Searching for Utopia, exhibition, Zwart Huis, Knokke, info: 050/61.36.65
• Until 29 June: SMAK exhibitions: Ars The fading of colours by Patrick Guns, info: www.smak.be
• Until 6 July: Artists on the move: meeting between North and South with Philip Aguirre, Soly Sissé, Gerald Dederen, Michel François, Moshac Gaba, Kan Si, Laone Lopes, Birame Ndiaye enz., De Markten, Brussels
• Until 9 November: Guided by Heroes, exhibition, Z33, Hasselt
• Until 3 August: The four seasons in the art of the Low Countries, City Museum Leuven; info: 016/22.69.06 www.leuven.be
• Until 22 June: Jan Vanriet, exhibition, De Zware Panter, Antwerp, info: 0/5/233.13.45
• Until 28 June: Crisis Brodahl, Galerie Annette de Keyser, Antwerp; info: 03/231.90.56
• Until 21 June: The Bibliotheca Alexandrina, exhibition, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, Brussels, info: 02/519.53.11

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