Belgians in favour of strict traffic policy

Belgians are overwhelmingly in favour of harsh traffic fines and unmanned cameras, according to a European study conducted in 2002 in 23 European countries on measures to increase road safety. The Foundation for Research on Road Safety in the Netherlands was the first body to process the study’s findings and compared the Dutch figures with those of six other European countries, including Belgium. This shows that Belgians are more in favour of tough penalties for speeding offences and drink-driving than other Europeans. However, Flemish Transport Minister Gilbert Bossuyt (SPA) observed that Flanders is dependent on other countries for such figures and cannot present any figures of its own to prove that the tough Flemish traffic policy is bearing fruit. According to the Belgian Institute for Road Safety, figures for each region will not be available before 2006. For Bossuyt that is reason enough to have not only the traffic statistics, but the entire traffic policy regionalised as quickly as possible (FF).

DOMINIQUE MINTEN • DE STANDAARD • 19 DECEMBER

Belgians are even overwhelmingly in favour of unmanned cameras that are triggered by speeding (79%) and jumping of traffic lights (83%), as compared to an average of 70% and 62% respectively, in the other countries. At the same time police controls still appear to be on the low side, in comparison with the other countries. Only 15% of Belgians received a fine or penalty for speeding in the 3-year period prior to the study. That is the lowest figure out of the seven countries. Sixty percent of Belgians ‘agree or most definitely agree’ with the proposition that speeding offences should be penalised more severely, and 82% ‘agree or most definitely agree’ with the proposition that the penalties for driving under the influence should be tougher. Flemish Transport Minister Gilbert Bossuyt (SPA) is happy with the results. ‘They show that there’s a basis for our tough policy. But to keep that basis we need figures that show that the policy is bearing fruit, and those figures are lagging behind. Therefore I have approached the federal minister Fientje Moerman (VLD), who is responsible for the National Institute for Statistics, and urged that a regionalised approach be adopted to traffic statistics. Subsequently the traffic policy should be regionalised’.

INTRODUCTION

Both in the Federal Government and in the Government of Flanders, the ‘balloon’ (minister-makes-tentative-proposal) phenomenon is booming, observes De Standaard (13 December). What the paper is referring to is the recent trend of ministers un-leading political ideas (whether or not well-founded) on the public – ideas that opponents can then attack to their heart’s content. De Standaard lists a few: doing away with the priority stamp in the postal service (Vande Lanotte, SPA), getting rid of the distinction between first and second class in trains (Stevaert, SPA), having all plastic waste deposited in a single PMD bag (Sannen, Groen!), making the Flemish national day a paid day (De wael, VLD), bringing the Olympic Games to Flanders (Somers, VLD), introducing a minimum income for self-employed persons starting up their own business (Somers VLD), screening a docuseries to improve the image of entrepreneurs (Ceyssens, VLD), establishing a second national airport (Verhofstadt, VLD)… and about twenty more. The high number might be attributable to two successive election years, and ministers’ desire to carve out a profile for themselves on that account. But a flood of ideas such as this is of course not without its dangers. Not only is there a risk of saturation among the public, but there is also a very real danger of the ideas turning out to be little more than so much hot air. Unfortunately, there are a great many that fall into this latter category. Either they have not been fully tested, or public opinion is not in favour, or they are technically unfeasible. A minister with too many ‘empty’ balloons (ideas) soon risks making a fool of himself, in De Standaard’s opinion. And yet a great many politicians do not seem to be too worried about that, partly because the media continues to report on this ‘competition of ideas’ without the slightest reserve. It is a politician’s urge to gain attention and in that respect ideas are much easier than actual accomplishments in times of budgetary shortage. De Standaard warns that unfortunately this irresistible urge undermines the perception that politics is a virtual game that has little to do with reality. This can have a very adverse effect on the degree to which politicians are taken seriously, and can dent people’s confidence in the political establishment, as manifestly demonstrated by the HLN and LLB opinion poll (see p. 2). A further danger is that people immediately take the idea to be reality, even before a bill on the subject has been tabled in parliament. This has led in the past to very unpleasant misunderstandings (among others, as regards the scrapping of the radio and television licence fee) as to the actual entry into force of a measure. On 17 December De Morgen ran the headline ‘Adultery no longer grounds for divorce’. However, a bill on this does not even exist yet. This could have very unpleasant consequences for the unfaithful spouse who takes the news too literally and has lost his or her sense of timing.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief

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focus on FLANDERS • 13 December - 19 December • Number 44
Hugo Covéliers no longer VLD faction chairman in Senate

Covéliers stated that he remained loyal to the party executive and that he wanted to consult his political grassroots as to his political future.

Hugo Covéliers is no longer the VLD’s party leader in the Senate. At the express request of party chairman De Gucht, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and Patrick Dewael, nine of the eleven Liberal senators voted their chairman out. All too frequently in recent times, Covéliers had made slighting remarks in public about the party leadership, about the prime minister, about the party chairman and about the coalition agreement. De Gucht feels that in doing so he has caused his party harm. Moreover, he had already received warnings on previous occasions, to which he appeared to be indifferent. Covéliers recently compared his party chairman to an Albanian mafia leader. De Gucht stressed that Covéliers’ dismissal had nothing to do with the ‘tough’ way in which he defended the VLD’s party standpoint on the immigrants’ voting right, the party will be held for this purpose. As regards her, Covéliers presented himself within the VLD as the representative of the centre-right wing and tried to take the wind out of the Vlaams Blok’s sails in his home city of Antwerp. At the beginning of this year he was a candidate for the post of mayor or in the wake of the crisis in Antwerp’s bench of aldermen, but on that occasion he had to give way to the SPA candidate Patrick Janssens. This summer he just missed out on a ministerial post when the Federal Government was formed. Commentators feel that this made him bitter and frustrated. At the VLD’s party executive meeting on 15 December, however, Covéliers stated that he remained loyal to the party executive and that he wanted to consult his political grassroots as to his political future. The first expressions of support are now received within the party (FF).

STEVEN SAMYN  •  DE TIJD  •  16 DECEMBER

The Liberal think-tank Nova Civitas yesterday announced that it was indignant at Covéliers’ dismissal. ‘He symbolises the VLD’s dark-blue main artery’, according to a motion from the organisation’s Antwerp and Ghent department. Nova Civitas is warning the VLD leadership that undermining the centre-right wing could have serious political consequences. Nova Civitas feels that Covéliers has got small thanks for the courageous way in which he defended the party’s standpoint on the voting right for immigrants, ‘whilst left-wing dissidents such as Patrik Vankrunkelsven were left alone.’ ‘The orchestrated removal of Covéliers cannot be narrowed down to the person,’ writes Chairman Boudewijn Bouckaert and deputy chairman Marc De Vos. In their view, Hugo Covéliers symbolises not only the VLD’s dark-blue main artery, but also represents the first generation of VLD liberalisers and is a cornerstone of Antwerp liberalism. Nova Civitas sorrowfully observes how the current VLD leadership is allowing the party’s dark-blue artery to languish and completely misunderstands both the importance and danger of the political reality in Antwerp. Bouckaert warns the VLD leadership that undermining the centre-right wing in the party could have serious political consequences. According to Bouckaert, there is a threat of the Vlaams Blok turning into the last port of refuge for the traditional Liberal, centre-right VLD voter.

www.vld.be

VLD continues battle on immigrants’ voting rights

the small left-wing Liberal party Vivant declared to be in favour of a cartel with the VLD in the forthcoming regional elections.

Besides the less happy news of the fall in the opinion poll and the removal of Covéliers, the VLD was at least able to report some good news, too. The members of the small left-wing Liberal party Vivant declared themselves to be in favour of a cartel with the VLD in the forthcoming regional elections. The VLD had already promised Vivant battle positions on the cartel list, and as far as they were concerned the name Vivant could also figure on the ballot paper. Vivant’s most important point of combat is the reform of the social security system, and in that respect they advocate a guaranteed basic income for everyone, whether or not they are in work. In the elections on 18 May the party won 1.2% of the votes in Flanders. VLD Chairman Karel De Gucht was delighted at Vivant’s decision. He also heralded a large-scale modernisation of the party programme in the spring of 2004. Two conferences will be held for this purpose. As regards the immigrants’ voting right, the party chairman announced that he himself would defend the VLD standpoint in the House with as much firepower as the VLD senators had done in the Senate (FF).

CONFIDENCE IN FLEMISH GOVERNMENT (SEE P.3)

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Source: Het Laatste Nieuws
Opinion

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 16 DECEMBER

The VLD are in a lose-lose situation as far as the immigrants’ voting right is concerned. In the first place, purely politically speaking: nobody is going to budge an inch, either forward or back, on this matter. There is a political majority in favour of the proposal, which means that the VLD will irrevocably lose this battle, however they care to thash about in the process. And the more vehemently they continue to oppose it, the bitterer the taste of defeat will be. Nobody denies the VLD the right to oppose the voting right, but in terms of political strategy, it is beginning to look almost like masochism. The party is beginning to bleed on all sides. On the right wing they are losing, because there is a group there that will never be able to be convinced that the VLD is serious about its opposition, if only because it is not making a government issue out of it. The more violently it rants and raves, the more hypocritically it comes across to this group. The only party benefiting from this is the Vlaams Blok. The VLD is also losing on the left wing of the party, where it has nonetheless expended a great deal of
time and energy on liberalisation. For the left-wing Liberals can scarcely see themselves reflected in the negative, cranky behaviour of their party on this issue, with the filibuster scene being the absolute low point. The SPA benefits from that. It’s already been said: a party with an overly pronounced left wing and right wing sooner or later ends up doing the splits, as a result of which your trousers begin to tear. For the VLD there’s no bright side to be found in this matter. The most logical thing would therefore be to remove it from the agenda as quickly as possible. But that’s clearly not the intention.

If the results of the La Libre Belgique poll - which henceforth is organised in conjunction with VTM, Het Laatste Nieuws and RTL-TVI - are converted into reality in the regional elections next June, the SPA-Spirit cartel will become the largest party in Flanders and will be able to demand the Minister-President’s post. Were federal elections to be held, the PS might become the largest party in Belgium and then it could demand the federal prime minister’s post. VLD Chairman Karel De Gucht blames the rise of the Blok on the SPA-Spirit, which is ‘ramming the municipal voting right for immigrants down the Flemings’ throats’. SPA Chairman Stevaert says that the VLD has cooked its own goose with the way in which it opposed this voting right. The Blok is triumphant. CD&V is keeping quiet; Chairman Yves Letemere casually points out that the poll was held at the time when his own parliamentary party leader Pieter De Crem was advocating having the cordon sanitaire broken.

www.hln.be
www.lalibre.be

Faith in purple government teams waning

RUUD GOOSSENS • DE MORGEN • 15 DECEMBER

Voters are not exactly wildly enthusiastic about the ‘Purple’ government under the leadership of Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt. But 33% of those questioned (throughout the country) still have faith in the team. In May that figure was 40%, and in September 36%. VLD Chairman Karel De Gucht attributes the falling confidence to the media, among other things: ‘Over the last four years the press thought well of everything, whilst with this government they reckon nothing’s going right.’ According to SPA Chairman Stevaert the drop in confidence in the Verhofstadt government is an important signal. ‘At a time when people are being laid off left, right and centre, politicians cannot put on a spectacle such as that seen in the Senate. That conveys a very poor image. It’s time for a different form of government. A more serene approach can be adopted. The only thing is, I fear that the VLD will become even more jittery in the wake of this result.’

www.hln.be

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

Opponents of the measure claimed that the voting right for immigrants would cost the SPA-Spirit cartel many votes. SPA Chairman Steve Stevaert has never argued with that. But in the opinion poll conducted by La Libre Belgique, Het Laatste Nieuws, VTM and RTL-TVI, which was carried out in the middle of the Senate debate on the immigrants’ voting right, his SPA-Spirit cartel (25.1%) does nonetheless clearly emerge as the largest political formation in Flanders. The Flemish Liberals of the VLD (23.4%), the largest party in the elections of 18 May, drops 0.8% under its election result and is now 1.7% adrift. The Vlaams Blok has taken advantage of the debate on immigrants’ voting rights and climbs from 17.9 to 19.4%. This has it breathing down the neck of the Christian-Democrats (CD&V, 20.3%), who lose 0.7%. Even more striking is the personal score of Vlaams Blok leader Filip Dewinter (28%), who climbs into third place behind Guy Verhofstadt and Steve Stevaert (both on 40%), but ahead of Bert Anciaux (Spirit, 24%), Jean-Luc Dehaene (CD&V, 23%), Frank Vandenbroucke (SPA, 20%) and Johan Vandelaanotte (SPA, 18%). SPA-Spirit and the VLD are blaming each other for the progress booked by the Vlaams Blok. The Flemish-National N-VA (4%) and Groen! (3.7%) remain under the electoral threshold of 5%. The poll was carried out by the independent research consultancy INRA by means of direct interviews (not by telephone) with 750 Flemings, 750 Walloons and 500 Brussels and is considered by specialists and politicians as the most reliable of its kind (FF).

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 15 DECEMBER

NRA also sounded out people’s faith in the Purple government. This shows that Verhofstadt’s federal team has arrived at an all-time low: 33% (-3%) still have faith in them, as compared with 34% who distrust the federal team. The Government of Flanders led by Bart Somers (VLD) does even worse, and can lay claim to just 25% (-3%) of people who still place their trust in it, as compared to 37% who are distrustful of it (FF).

www.hln.be
www.lalibre.be
TAX POLICY

Tax amnesty bill voted through, after scathing opinion from the council of state

In a second opinion on the bill aimed at regulating the tax amnesty (officially referred to as the One-off Tax Exemption Declaration), the Council of State raised fundamental objections, declaring the bill to be in contravention of the principle of equality and European law. The regions first have to approve the regulation, as it also contains a section on evasion of inheritance tax and registration fees. Since these are a regional competency, they must be regulated by Flemish, Walloon and Brussels decrees. In Flanders a problem would immediately arise, for there is no majority in favour of the tax amnesty in the Flemish Parliament. The Christian Democrats and the Vlaams Blok are opposed, but the Greens, too, who form part of the majority, are also refusing to give their approval on the issue. However, the purple government has not taken account of the opinion. The bill was approved by the majority in the House, against opposition. The CD&V will now challenge the regulation in the Court of Arbitration. ‘If the Court of Arbitration were to rescind the law, it could yet be adapted,’ said VLD spokesman Bart Tommelien (FF).

JOHAN CORTHOUTS • DE MORGEN • 18 DECEMBER

‘The Council of State is whistling back the government. It says that the whole bill has been brought about by pulling out all the stops,’ says Hendrik Bogaert, CD&V MP, who had asked the Council of State for an opinion. ‘It clearly won’t be possible for the law to come into force on 1 January 2004. The Federal Government will have to wait until the Government of Flanders lays down the rules for the tax amnesty for registration fees.’

The court had already previously expressed criticism of the faults in respect of the regional taxes. Finance Minister Didier Reynders (MR) had therefore removed all references to regional taxes in his bill. But the Council of State feels that these adaptations do not go far enough. The entire regulation risks being in violation of the constitutional principle of equality. We might have to wait until after the regional elections in June before Flanders can put its part of the tax amnesty to the vote. The Finance Ministry is not letting itself be overawed by the Council of State’s criticism. The Council of State also criticised the tax amnesty being extended to include bearer shares, a provision which is allegedly also in contravention of the constitution. The regulation would also involve Belgians with money abroad losing their anonymity vis-à-vis the tax authorities, and that, according to the Council, goes against European rules.

FISCAL AND SOCIAL POLICY

Agreement on doctor’s fees subject to conditions

By the end of 2005 patients will pay EUR 20 for a consultation at their GP’s practice instead of the current EUR 18, and EUR 30 for a house visit instead of the present EUR 25. The increase will be implemented in three phases. In fact patients themselves will not feel the effect of the increase to any great degree, since the non-reimbursed amount actually borne by the patient will only rise by 52 cents and EUR 1.75 respectively. These figures are contained in the agreement concluded by doctor’s unions and the health insurance funds. The health insurance funds (and therefore the government) will be bearing the bulk of the price increases. However, doctors will not receive their increase just like that. The money to finance the hike in fees must come in part from a more rational approach to prescriptions on the part of the doctors themselves. Antibiotics and medicines for high blood pressure, in particular, should be prescribed much more sparingly. The budget for specialists is also being raised substantially, albeit without any conditions attached. Social Services Minister Demotte (PS) is satisfied with the agreement and hopes that it will make it possible for EUR 30 million to be saved. He is hoping that the break in the trend will already be visible at the end of next year. However, not everyone is equally satisfied. Pharma.be, the association of the pharmaceuticals industry, is of the view that there will come a time when doctors will have to choose between their fee and their patient (FF).

Opinion

WIM WINCKELMANS • HET NIEUWS-BLAB • 17 DECEMBER

The pharmaceutical companies fear that doctors will face a dilemma: either think of their patient or think of their wallet. But that’s just a little too simple. Figures were recently published in this newspaper, which provided ample evidence that far too many strong antibiotics are used in our country. The same goes, for example, for a number of drugs for stomach ulcers. Other examples can be cited. In other words the chance of doctors being faced with a choice is extremely small as regards these categories of medicines. A positive change can be discerned. Doctors are more prepared than they used to be to assume responsibility, albeit under political pressure. Even the thorny problems of co-operation between doctors and referral to specialists, which have been debated for years, could now be settled. There is therefore something in exchange. The government budget for general practitioners will have risen by 40% since 1999. Specialists have been able to distribute 26% extra. It would be difficult to find another sector in the economy that can present such large wage increases.

www.socialsecurity.fgov.be
www.pharma.be
If the quota of doctors is enlarged too much, there is a risk that the financial reassessment of the GP will serve for little

Opinion

STEFAN HUYSENTRUYT • DE TIJD • 17 DECEMBER

The weightiest burden still affecting the revaluation of the GP is that of the number of GPs. There is a fixed number and on the Flemish side also an entrance examination for the studies. The fixed number is on the low side, among other things on account of the increasing number of women doctors and the ageing of the profession, and has to be raised. But there is a danger of minister Demotte relaxing the quota system for doctors too much. The minister is under enormous pressure from the French-speaking, who have never really made any effort to restrict access to the studies. This means that they will shortly be faced with a huge number of newly qualified doctors who will not be able to gain access to the profession. If the quota of doctors is enlarged too much, there is a risk that the financial reassessment of the GP will serve for little. The larger cake will then have to be shared out among more doctors, so that at the end of the day everyone will end up with less.

Flanders invests heavily in research

In 2001 2.53% of gross regional product went into research, compared with a European average of 1.89%.

The Flemish minister Van Mechelen (VLD) is responsible for research policy, as well as the budget and town and country planning. In this capacity he contests the claims that Flanders is lagging behind in Europe as regards its research budget. Fresh calculations made by the Flemish administration reveal that with 2.68% of gross regional product in 2002, Flanders is close on the heels of the USA (2.72% of GDP). Of that 2.68%, industry reportedly pays out 1.93% and the government 0.75% (Flanders 0.55, federal 0.16, Europe 0.4). In 2001 2.53% of gross regional product went into research, compared with a European average of 1.89%.

Van Mechelen calls research the anchor of our welfare. Last week he had budgets approved by the Government of Flanders for a GRID, a bio-incubator and port community services. A GRID is a system that links PCs to each other so that together they form a supercomputer. Van Mechelen wants to enable the Flemish research sector to acquire experience with this. A bio-incubator is a building for small start-up biotechnology companies that need very specific equipment. One such building is to be found in Ghent, and minister Van Mechelen is having this extended. Finally, the port community services is a computer program for the port of Antwerp (FF).

Biotechnology is one of Flanders’ spearhead sectors. Flemish universities can no longer purchase bulky scientific equipment with ordinary research credits. An extra EUR 25 million is now available for this purpose. The port community services is a computer program working out to have the loading, unloading and storage of goods dealt with as an integrated whole throughout the port area. That can cost EUR 5 million. ‘Flanders should concern itself with logistics and distribution, among other things. We should quite simply be the best in those areas. That’s not something you achieve just like that. But with this software, we’ll be there in the near future. That’s what research policy is all about’, said the minister.

Of course the research policy has other objectives besides economic development, although that is nonetheless the main aim. ‘Companies don’t stay here because of our low wage costs, but because of the location and the know-how, and you only have that if you have top-quality research on a lasting basis’, the minister went on. ‘In the nineties we thought that we could keep companies here by firmly “anchoring” them here financially. That still plays a role, but less so. Then we thought that they stayed here because the research was done here. But companies are also shifting their research these days. Why do they go off to India for software? Because that’s where the best people are! So the catch phrase now is: “firmly establish the research and make sure it stays here”. How do you do that? By making it extremely attractive for the researchers - through their status and above all by offering top-quality research opportunities.’ Therefore, according to Van Mechelen, Flanders should aim at developing top-flight research centres. ‘We’ve already got some flagship centres. IMEC in Leuven is one such centre for micro and nano-electronics. Six of the world’s top ten players in this field place their research orders here. That’s what we have to have’. The Flemish Research Policy Board (VRWB) and chairman Karel Vinck, are examining the fields in which Flanders could excel and could develop top-class research centres and networks. In Van Mechelen’s opinion, these could be new sectors, but also very traditional ones. ‘Steel, for example. Arcelor is currently closing more or less everything in Europe that’s not on the coast. Sidmar-Zelzate is still standing. But we can expect that in ten years time all blast-furnaces will be located near the ore mining. What might remain here would be the steel cold work, so we have to see to it that we’ll soon be the best at that. And for that reason we’re investing in this research.’

www.innovatie.vlaanderen.be
The unsuccesful European Summit: the comments

According to prime minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD), too much importance was attached to national self-interest among the ministers present, but he was nonetheless euphoric over the European defence agreement

FF EDITOR

After the unsuccessful European summit in Brussels, the Flemish press was harsh in its judgement of Spain and Poland, and the way in which the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi ran the negotiations. A dispute over the distribution of power, or rather on a more balanced weighting of votes in an enlarged European Union of 25 Member States, caused the summit to end in stalemate on 13 December.

So for the time being there is no European Constitution, and it will most probably not see the light of day before the European elections. Former European Commissioner Karel Van Miert called Berlusconi a comedian and an incompetent man, who for that matter isn’t even on speaking terms with some ministers. Van Miert says that the fact that Spain and Poland are clinging to their status of large Member State, with but two votes less than the much larger Germany, is chiefly the fault of Jacques Chirac, who made this concession at the Nice summit. The new Member States will paralyse the operation of the EU after they join, with the result that the countries that want to make progress will eventually have no choice but to form a ‘Hard Core Europe,’ says Van Miert in De Morgen (15 December).

According to the former EU commissioner, Washington is setting one member state against another. The US can thereby count on its vassals, some candidate member states led by Poland.

According to Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD), too much importance was attached to national self-interest among the ministers present. But he was nonetheless euphoric over the European defence agreement – the only tangible accord to come out of the summit. This includes a European central staff for the planning and leadership of military operations, albeit without a permanent headquarters. The close cooperation with NATO does remain a priority factor, however. Therefore the European unit has been housed in NATO’s Shape military headquarters in Mons, and NATO liaison officers are to be involved in the European defence system. However, Verhofstadt does not feel that Europe is now in a crisis, and he is arguing in favour of further steps being made with a ‘European avant-garde’.

Jean-Luc Dehaene, deputy chairman of the European Convention also feels that there is no crisis. He regards the defence agreement as the summit’s most important achievement as well. Meanwhile, there are reasons to explain why Belgium is playing a role in the European advance guard, and the Netherlands to a much lesser degree.

Opinion

JIM LANNOO/KRIS VAN HAVER • DE TIJD • 15 DECEMBER

The row surrounding the Stability Pact is keeping the Netherlands outside the hard core of Member States who are setting themselves up ever more explicitly as the ‘Core Europe’. The European avant-garde currently consists of France, Germany and Belgium. Paris and Berlin are increasingly on the same wavelength. There is even talk of a Franco-German Union in the making. And Belgium is being tolerated as an appendage to this Franco-German empire. The three are appointing themselves as the heirs to the European body of thought and are trying to give their cooperation greater weight by also involving other members of the Union. With Luxembourg, that’s not a problem. With the Netherlands, things are rather trickier. The Netherlands is by nature more oriented towards the north and the Anglo-Saxon world. And after the events of the last few days (the Netherlands cannot accept France and Germany flouting the budget rules of the Stability Pact, ed.), distrust of the Franco-German dictates is on the increase. The sixth founding member of the EU, Italy, had to adopt a detached position in its role as EU president. Moreover, the figure of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi does not exactly inspire confidence. Schroeder and Chirac are therefore looking further afield than the six. They appear to be increasingly prepared to take account of the views expressed by London. For example, the European defence agreement, which they launched in April in Belgium with Verhofstadt, has been wholly redrafted according to London’s wishes, after months of negotiations with the British partners. The only question that remains is what initiatives lend themselves to closer cooperation between a small number of Member States. On defence issues, London continues robustly to range everything under the NATO hat. For co-operation on judicial matters and asylum, Germany appears to be the most obstructive in the Union, and France and Germany are not touting the European line even for the budget rules.

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SOURCE: HET LAATSTE NIEUWS
**ECONOMY AND CULTURE**

### TeleNet bond sale is good news for municipalities

The Flemish telecom company TeleNet, mainly known for its high-speed Internet connections via the Flemish cable broadcasting network, can count on such a high level of interest in the current bond sale that it now wants to raise EUR 500 million instead of EUR 400 million, reports **De Tijde** (13 December). There will also be a second operation of 320 million dollars' worth of securities (zero coupon bonds with an 11.5% yield). Demand for bonds was no less than four times higher than the number on offer, according to Duco Sickinghe, general manager of TeleNet. The bond sale forms part of an extensive refinancing operation.

The success is a stroke of luck for the mixed inter-municipal companies, which last year sold their television broadcasting network to the company and are shareholders in TeleNet (with a 33% stake). TeleNet still had to pay them a large amount in arrears and had previously planned to pay with bonds that could be converted into TeleNet shares. However, with this successful operation there will be no convertible bonds, but the shareholder creditors will receive cash. In the Flemish mixed inter-municipal companies the Flemish municipalities have the energy group Electrabel as partner. Both Electrabel and the municipalities can therefore look forward to receiving cash payments in the near future (FF).

**BERT BROENS • DE TIJD • 18 DECEMBER**

The operation will only formally be concluded on 22 December. The bonds ended up with institutional investors, in Belgium, elsewhere in Europe and in the USA. Of the new money, EUR 225 million goes to the banks that lent TeleNet EUR 1.25 billion last year. This results in the company's bank debt falling to EUR 740 million. A further EUR 250 million is going towards the payment of arrears to the mixed inter-municipal companies that sold their cable network to TeleNet. The total selling price for those cable networks was EUR 944 million. 'The quarter of a billion will be paid before the end of this year. That means that 83% of the total price is paid in cash and the rest in shares. The inter-municipal companies will be receiving their arrears more quickly than they had been agreed, and what's more, in cash,' says Sickinghe. A large part of the last payment goes to the energy group Electrabel, the municipalities' private-sector partner in the mixed inter-municipal companies. Nonetheless, the successful operation is good news for the municipalities, which are having a hard time of it financially. A third instalment of the money, some EUR 100 million, is being repaid to Electrabel, which at the time pre-financed the modernisation of the networks that were sold. Around EUR 90 million goes to other shareholders, including the Investment Company for Flanders (GIMV), which lent TeleNet funds. TeleNet claims that it can repay the bonds. 'Our total debt still stands at EUR 1.5 billion, but is spread over a longer period and is subject to a lower rate of interest,' says Sickinghe.

www.telenet.be

### Antwerp offers an impressive Rubens programme in 2004

On 6 March 2004 the doors will open on the major Rubens retrospective in Lille, the European Cultural Capital. Antwerp, the city where Rubens lived and worked, has faithfully co-operated, but is itself also staging an additional and impressive Rubens programme.

However, this will not be a major commemoration along the lines of the 1977 event to mark the four hundred anniversary of the Baroque painter's birth, but a series of exhibitions aiming to move off the beaten track and shed a fresh, new light on the artist. The programme was presented by an Antwerp delegation, headed by the alderman for culture Eric Antonis, in Madrid, where the Prado houses one of the world's most impressive collections of Rubens paintings. Six works from the collection have been lent for one of the seven Antwerp exhibitions (FF).

**ERIC RINCKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 17 DECEMBER**

Rubens is indeed much more than a painter of chubby girls and quivering flesh. The whole project is therefore being presented under the heading 'Rediscover P. P. Rubens'. 'We want to update Rubens,' says Carl Depauw, curator of the Rubens House and one of the driving forces behind the project. 'We want to bring about a new dialogue with his work, freshen him up and make him "sexy" again. For example, we should view Rubens as a film director with a whole crew under him.' No fewer than seven exhibitions will be staged in the course of 2004 in which Rubens takes pride of place or which have something less directly to do with him. At the same time Antwerp wants to place the emphasis on the impressive range of Rubens works permanently on display in the city.

For although a number of Rubenses will be leaving Antwerp's museums to make the trip to Lille 2004, there will still be more than enough to be seen in Antwerp's museums and certainly in the historical churches: the Raising of the Cross and the simply phenomenal Descent from the Cross in the cathedral, Rubens' little-known burial chapel in the church of Saint James, the Carolus Borromeus Church that Rubens designed, and the lovely series of paintings in the church of Saint Paul, where Rubens is displayed alongside other Antwerp masters. 'Rediscover P. P. Rubens' was presented in Madrid. Three of the event's exhibitions will open on 6 March. The aim of "A House full of Art" (Rubens House, 6 March - 13 June 2004) is to present, on the basis of some ninety objects, a sample of the art collection that Rubens amassed during his lifetime. Collecting art was a popular pursuit among the well-to-do and accorded status. But Rubens also bought art in order to learn from it and to use it as teaching material for his pupils. His collection was extensive, wide-ranging and of a very high quality. 6 March sees another exhibition open, which focuses primarily on Rubens the collector. The Plantin-Moretus Museum will be exhibiting a wide selection from Rubens' library, which at the time was one of the largest in Antwerp. The
Diary

MUSIC, DANCE THEATRE

• 18 January: Händel und Gretel by Engelbert Humperdinck, director: Andreas Homoki, Flanders Opera, Ghent; info: 070/22.02.02 www.vlaamseopera.be

• 10 January: Hänsel und Gretel by Engelbert Humperdinck with Elea de la Merced (soprano) the Opera conducted by Iwan Törzs with Mozart, conductor: Kazushi Ono, De Munt, Brussels; info: 070/23.39.39 www.desingel.be

• 31 December and 1 January: Orchestra of the Opera conducted by Iwan Törzs with Elea de la Merced (soprano), New Year’s Eve concert, Flanders Opera, Ghent and Antwerp; info: www.vlaamseopera.be

• 4, 5 and 6 January: Frank ‘Pay & Pony’, performances at: Kaaitheater studio’s Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be

• 7 to 11 January: Once by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, dance, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be

• 7 January: Voices: Razbar Ensemble (Iran) De Singel, info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be

• 7 and 9 January: Lunch concerts in Flanders Opera with Mozart (divertimentos) and Till Eulenspiegel by Richard Strauss, Antwerp and Ghent; info: www.vlaamseopera.be

• 8 January: Symphonic Orchestra of Flanders conducted by David Angus, symphonies by Haydn and Mozart, conservatory, Brussels; info: www.vlaamseopera.be

• 10 January: Cielo O Cte Conuido lberico conducted by Elias Arizcuren, with composition by Philip Glass, Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be

EXPO

• From 22 March to 17 January: Jacques Brel, ‘The right to dream’, exhibition, Schildeknaapstraat 50, Brussels; reservation required; info: www.jacquesbrel.be

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