Agreement on DHL expansion at Zaventem

Today and tomorrow the Federal Government will reiterate to the castle headstede of Petit-Leez in the little Walloon town of Gembloux, for a mega council of ministers meeting on the socio-economic problems facing the country. Topping the agenda is the investment plan put forward by the courier company DHL. According to De Tijd (16 January), federal Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) and Deputy Prime Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) have already been holding private talks with DHL’s senior management for weeks on the subject of an extension at Zaventem, and an agreement is reportedly as good as in the bag. All that remains is for the agreement to be sounded out with the Federal Government partners at the council of ministers. On 14 January the Minister-President of the Government of Flanders Bart Somers (VLD) reiterated in the Flemish Parliament that there was no political or public support in Flanders for additional night flights out of Zaventem, but did cautiously add that federal minister Anciaux’s distribution plan could increase the support. Employers and employees were criticising him for thereby turning his back on thousands of Flemish jobs. The Brussels Government is also still opposed to any increase in the number of night flights. [FF].

WIM VANDE VELDEN/KATRIEN VERSTRAETE • DE TIJD • 16 JANUARY

Johan Vande Lanotte has played a major role in the solution that has been found for DHL. Instead of letting himself be put off by DHL’s politically unfeasible request for guarantees for a substantial increase in the number of night flights, he shifted the discussion to noise pollution. That offered some room for manoeuvre in the negotiations. A distinction could be made between not very intrusive and very intrusive night flights. A whole series of measures aimed at limiting noise pollution are to be tabled at the federal summit of senior ministers in Gembloux. There are not only DHL’s new noiseless aircraft, but also the flight distribution plan. The ministers will examine the possibility of some night flights being scrapped to enable more capacity to be freed up for DHL. With that objective in mind, they will look into the possibility of moving charter flights to regional airports. Guy Verhofstadt and Johan Vande Lanotte want to offer DHL the necessary certainty that the planned extension in Zaventem would be possible until around 2010. Looking beyond 2010 is mere guesswork. Verhofstadt still has in mind the long-term prospect of a second national airport being developed for cargo traffic.

WWW.DHL.BE
WWW.BIAC.BE
On Wednesday evening the Flemish Parliament approved the introduction of provincial constituencies for the regional elections on 13 June. VLD, SPA and Spirit, absolute advocates of this introduction, received the support of the Vlaams Blok on this occasion. The NV-A, which tabled the bill, also voted in favour. Groen! abstained, whilst CD&V voted against. There were 73 votes for (enough for the required two-thirds majority), 15 abstentions and 32 votes against. At the same time the federal home affairs committee approved the bills introducing an electoral threshold of 5% and the system of follow-up candidates for the regional and European elections. Here the majority voted in favour, CDH abstained and the rest of the opposition voted against. With this approval in the Flemish Parliament and the parliamentary committee, the purple majority is getting what it wants, to the great dislike of the opposition party CD&V. Just before the vote, Blok heavyweight Filip Dewinter announced that his party would be voting in favour. Afterwards, he was in triumphant mood. In his view, with this support the majority had broken the cordon sanitaire. Groen! also criticised the Liberals and Socialists for making common cause with the extreme right. In polling terms, it is by and large the Socialists, Liberals and the Vlaams Blok that benefit most from the change. The introduction of larger constituencies is detrimental to the opposition party CD&V which, thanks to its strong local presence in Flanders, fares better at the electoral threshold. Groen! MP Geysels complained that the democratic parties were setting the rules of the elections ‘with the support of the extreme right’.

This made Bruno Tobback (SPA) angry. ‘By abstaining, Groen! is making the Blok important’, he said in a reaction after the vote. ‘Geysels knew that with an abstention of the Greens the provincial constituencies would nonetheless be voted through. They also get something out of it. And what is more, he could then say that we’re making common cause, as it were, with the Blok’. Tobback calls that position hypocritical. The SPA parliamentary party leader denies that the cordon sanitaire has been broken. ‘We have not held any talks with the Blok and have not gone along with any of their wishes’. André Denys (VLD) concludes that the two-thirds majority had been reached ‘without any form of horse trading’. Denys is pleased that the Flemish Parliament is to be elected in the same way as the Lower House and the Senate, ‘because people don’t want things to be complex’. According to opposition leader Van Rompuy, the provincial constituencies are merely ‘electoral self-service’ that will lead to a ‘democracy of heavyweights’.

WWW.VLAAMSPARLEMENT.BE

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**SIMULATION OF SEAT DISTRIBUTION IN FLEMISH PARLIAMENT BASED ON ELECTORAL RESULTS OF 18 MAY 2003**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
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**BEL20-INDEX: NEW WEIGHT OF SHARES**

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**Belgian Stock Exchange INDEX**
Employers and trade unions do not give up DHL

‘A move to Bierset would entail huge investments and the departure would be disastrous for employment in Zaventem’.

The courier company DHL claims that its investment plan for the extension of Zaventem into its European distribution centre by 2012 will create between 5,400 and 9,600 direct jobs on top of the 2,850 existing ones. For a government that has made job creation its number one priority, that is an offer difficult to reject. But DHL’s extension plans have met with stiff opposition from the many residents’ committees in and around Brussels, which are opposed to any extension because of the noise pollution the flights cause. DHL is asking for the environmental licence’s limit of 25,000 night flights to be raised to 34,000, and that, certainly for the Government of Flanders, is wholly out of the question for a start.

At the moment Zaventem sees 19,000 night flights per year. Furthermore, there is neither a political majority nor social support in Flanders for an extension at Zaventem, concludes Flemish Minister-President Bart Somers (VLD). He is therefore excluding the idea. But the DHL offer is attractive and Belgium should not miss out on it. After he had secured agreement from the Minister-President of the Walloon Government Jean-Claude van Cauwenbergh (PS), Prime Minister Verhœst (VLD) proposed Bierset (near Liège) as an alternative. Somers can agree to this, but has attached one condition, namely that airport policy be regionalised. In concrete terms, that means that the National Airport of Zaventem would become Flemish and that Flanders would no longer have to bear the costs of the extension at Bierset. The Flemish network of enterprises (Voka) and the trade unions reacted indignantly to the Government of Flanders’ resignation. DHL is also grievously surprised (FF).

EVELYNE HENS/KATRIEN VERSTRAETE
DE TIJD • 13 JANUARY

DHL’s reaction was one of considerable disappointment. ‘We are surprised that the Government of Flanders is showing so little motivation to keep DHL at Zaventem. We had counted on greater support,’ said Xavier de Buck of DHL. The company is still defending an extension at Zaventem and is still hoping for a solution. Should this not be forthcoming, then the situation in Bierset will be examined, as will alternatives abroad. Flemish Environment Minister Ludo Sannen (Groen!) revealed that Bierset is currently already leading to too much noise pollution in South Limburg and that he was using all means to oppose an increase in night flights at Bierset.

Voka (representing Flemish employers and Chambers of commerce) calls Somers’ standpoint ‘incomprehensible in these times of high unemployment’. ‘The Government of Flanders is offered thousands of jobs on a silver platter. But it says it doesn’t need them, and that they should go to Wallonia,’ says Marc Andries of Voka. The Flemish Employers reject a move to Wallonia. ‘That kind of move would entail huge investments and the departure would be disastrous for employment in Zaventem’.

The Federation of Belgian Businesses (VBO) had already said that the political establishment ought first to focus on Zaventem for the extension of DHL. The ACV called the Government of Flanders’ attitude ‘absolute madness’. Somers’ comments are ‘dramatic’, says Lode Verschingsel of the ACV’s airport committee. ‘The Government of Flanders appears no longer to entertain any (inter)national ambitions for Zaventem, but seems to be reconciling itself to a cosy regional airport. The economic consequences are incalculable’.

www.voka.be
www.vbo.be
www.dhl.com

Former principal private secretary to prime minister thinks that zaventem should disappear

The debate over DHL’s plans have enabled the whole discussion to divert to the fate of the national airport at Zaventem itself, which directly and indirectly employs 60,000 people. In the Sunday newspaper Zondag, Luc Coene, former principal private secretary to Prime Minister Verhofstadt and currently deputy chairman of the National Bank, put forward the standpoint that in the long run Zaventem should disappear, because it is on the wrong side of Brussels. He feels that the only solution is the development of a second airport in Bierset or Chievres. In his view, as soon as the second airport is there and DHL has moved, the rest of the airport itself should be moved. A few hours later, Coene softened his view somewhat. He was only talking about the ‘relocation of activities that caused substantial noise pollution’. Coene’s comments were taken with a large pinch of salt both in the Federal Government and in the VLD. State Enterprises Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) even thinks that DHL can continue to expand at Zaventem until 2006 or 2007, ‘if other activities are reduced’. According to VLD party chairman De Gucht, Coene’s remarks carry no political weight whatsoever. Coene lives in Tervuren and is a prominent member of the action committee that opposed the flight distribution plan put forward by Flemish Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit). Coene has chosen an unfortunate moment to make his remarks. They come at a time when the government wants to sell part of its 65% stake in the airport operator BIAC. The government has appointed the ING Bank to look for a new private-sector partner. De Standaard [12 January] points out that in addition to the many questions over the future of Zaventem, the interests of the many minority shareholders (KBC, Dexia, AvH, GBL, P&V) could also play a part in the sale. After all, they not only have a sequential right to sell shares themselves, but also a preferential purchase right.

www.biac.be
Vande Lanotte wants free train travel for commuters

He announced in Parliament that the NMBS would approve his proposal

Public Enterprises Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) wants to gradually attract commuters to public transport. Within five years travel between home and the workplace should be free of charge. In an initial phase he wants to enable the staff of the state enterprises themselves to travel free of charge by train to their work, and then gradually to generalise this to take in all workers. He has announced the scheme in a New Year’s letter to the management and staff of the state enterprises NMBS (SNCB) and De Post (La Poste). The government will have to defray the cost of this offer, but if private companies compete with their prices, why shouldn’t state enterprises be able to do so as well, says the minister, who is using the opportunity to launch a fierce criticism of Europe’s absurd liberalisation plans. In the meantime the government is continuing to pump money into company cars that are making traffic jams longer, complains Vande Lanotte. He is also not afraid of intervening actively in the policy of the National Railways (NMBS) by refusing to approve the NMBS’s operating budget for 2004. He is calling on Managing Director Karel Vinck to talk to the trade unions first, for the annual budget of his Move reform plan already takes account of 1,121 lay-offs though natural wastage and 1,626 voluntary redundancies, for which he does not yet have an agreement. Vande Lanotte is also refusing to approve a second train fare increase. His government partner VLD opposes a subsidisation of the railways and the taxing of company cars (FF).

Guido De Spieghelaere • Knack • 14 January

In his New Year’s letter Vande Lanotte explains that a radical price cut is necessary to bring about a break in the trend: to get commuters, in their numbers, to leave their cars in favour of the train. An employer currently pays 60% of the railway season ticket for train travel to and from work. The 40% paid by the employee should be taken over by the employer and the government. Vande Lanotte wants a decision quickly, for free commuting by train should be a reality by the end of the present period of office. Meanwhile he wants to start by having the scheme applied to the staff of De Post and Belgacom, which will cost the NMBS (the government) EUR 14 million a year. With a generalisation to all civil servants and employees, the bill rises to EUR 250 million.

The NMBS board of directors has not approved the principle of free travel to and from work. Karel Vinck is not against the idea, provided that the government offsets the cost price of the scheme during the current financial years. But he does not believe that that will happen: in his short career in the railways, he has discovered that the government has trouble repaying its debts. The department of the State Enterprises Minister brushes aside that doubt. But Vande Lanotte is still quite enthusiastically counting on pay-back effects here, i.e., more passengers. The railway company is less optimistic. Is it for that reason that the minister is opposing the price rise proposed by the NMBS? Actually it probably is, in part – as a bit of teasing. He is prepared to accept the price increase of 3.16% on 1 February, even though it is well above the traditional adjustment for inflation, but he cannot accept the second increase of 2.4% in July.

Emmanuel Vanbrussel • De Morgen • 12 January

It is not Vande Lanotte’s aim to demonise the car, but he has objections about the favourable tax treatment of company cars. ‘We are currently paying a high price for an environmentally irresponsible policy via the tax deductions for company cars. We must call that price into question’. But the liberal coalition partner VLD says no. ‘You can’t penalise company cars. For the VLD, that’s out of the question. You can’t cut income taxes and then raise the taxes on company cars – which are nonetheless a part of the salary structure. That’s simply not logical. I would also point out that the Federal Government has recently taken measures to make the ownership of a car more attractive. It makes no sense to badger people to give up their cars,’ says Dirk Sterckx, MEP for the VLD. The latest figures from the automobile federation Febiac show that in 2003 46% of all newly registered cars were purchased by companies. For the employer a company car is cheaper than a pay rise, and a company car also offers the employee tax benefits. Sterckx wants to see more train traffic (both passengers and goods), just like Vande Lanotte, but does not see the point of more subsidies for the NMBS. “In the space of 23 years, the number of railway passengers has scarcely grown, despite billions in subsidies,” affirms Sterckx.

NMBS agrees to free rail commuting after all

Minister Vande Lanotte appears to be getting his way on the subject of free commuting by rail. On 14 January he announced in Parliament that the NMBS would be approving his proposal, after he had assured the railway company that it would not have to foot the bill for additional costs. The basic principle is that the employer will refund 80% of the rail season ticket, and the government the remaining 20% (FF).

De Morgen • 15 January

Vande Lanotte is hoping that from 2005 onwards the private sector will commit itself to making an extra effort when collective labour agreements are concluded. The intention is that the Federal Government will also chip in a little extra, too. On top of the EUR 10.9 million already provided for every year for discounts to loyal NMBS passengers, the government will earmark extra money to finance the system. For 2004 an extra EUR 4 million is already being provided for in the budget. With that money the semi-state-controlled companies, which are now already responsible for three-quarters of the rail season ticket, will also be taken on board to begin with. From 2005 the private sector will have to enter the system as well. That year the extra effort will be EUR 7 million, whilst in 2006 the amount will be EUR 11 million extra, and in 2007 EUR 15 million extra. When fully up and running, free commuting will therefore cost the government almost EUR 26 million.

www.nmbs.be
WWW.JOHANVANDELANOTTE.BE
Focus on Flanders • 10 January - 17 January • Number 2

**ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT**

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**THE MARLY FIRE**

**Flemish minister Sannen draws lessons from Marly**

**SANNEN NOW WANTS TO AVOID ANY SUCH CONFUSION AND COMMUNICATION CACOPHONY RECURRING WHEN ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS OCCUR**

On 9 December a fire broke out during the demolition of the bankrupt Marly coke factory on the edge of Brussels. Grey-black clouds of soot blew over Flanders and Brussels. There was increasing unrest among the residents in the surrounding municipalities. The Federal Government remained aloof and although the factory is on Brussels territory, the Brussels authorities rejected any responsibility. When the Flemish Environment Minister Ludo Sannen (Groen!) joined the debate, there was once again the impression that the Greens always make a complete mess of things. Sannen now wants to avoid any such confusion and communication cacophony recurring when environmental disasters occur, and has invited all interested parties to make agreements (FF).

**MATHIAS DANNEELS • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 14 JANUARY**

‘I do not have competency for disaster management,’ says Sannen. ‘The management of incidents with possible far-reaching consequences for the population is a matter for the mayor, governor or federal ministers, with the Interior Minister at the head. Unfortunately I have heard nothing from Interior Minister Dewael [VLD]. I found it even more regrettable that Prime Minister Verhofstadt started wagging his finger, and promised to look into who was at fault.’ The cacophony gets even louder when everyone who has measuring equipment is actually busy taking measurements. Is it toxic? Can you eat potatoes from your garden? Should all children be fetched home from school as quickly as possible? ‘I was quite troubled by it, but could do little more than what was expected of me, namely have measurements taken and avoid panic setting in.’ Sannen is annoyed that Marly has become an almost exclusively Flemish matter. ‘That is not the case at all, but I do not want to duck out of my responsibility. This Friday I have invited all interested parties to prevent such a calamity happening again. The parties involved are the federal ministers Patrick Dewael [VLD, the Interior] and Freya Vanden Bossche [SP.A, federal Environment], Flemish Minister Byttebier [Groen!] and the ministers Foret, Detienne, Gosuin and Chabert for Wallonia and Brussels respectively. Anyone prevented from attending by the ‘super ministerial council meeting’ will delegate a departmental staff member. The flow of information has to be better. The co-operation between the regions may never be found to be wanting in situations such as this. And there should be clearer agreements about each party’s areas of competence’. Sannen hopes that Brussels and Walloonia will be receptive to the Flemish soil sanitation decree. ‘On Flemish territory possible dangerous sites are first cleaned before demolition works are carried out. That costs money, but reduces the risk of accidents.’

[www.vlaanderen.be](http://www.vlaanderen.be)  
[www.brussels.irisnet.be](http://www.brussels.irisnet.be)

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**COMPANIES**

**Possible American take-over of Real Software**

The Flemish software company Real Software is holding talks with its banks until mid-March in order to arrive at a definitive agreement on debt rescheduling. Among other things, EUR 35 million in debts should thereby be turned into shares, as a result of which the banks will obtain a 76% stake in the company. The moratorium on interest and capital repayments that Real Software has secured expires halfway through March. According to De Tijd, two American companies are also very interested in acquiring Real Software, namely Sun Capital and Gores Technology Group (GTG).

**LUC VAN AELST • DE TIJD • 14 JANUARY**

The negotiations with the banks are progressing with extreme difficulty, but there are other scenarios. Both the management and the majority shareholders had separate contacts with potential purchasers last week. According to sources close to Real Software, two names are still currently in the running: Sun Capital and Gores Technology Group (GTG). The latter, in particular, has a very good chance of taking over Real Software. GTG is an American group that acquires worldwide participations in technology companies. GTG is allegedly particularly interested in Real Software’s solutions for the retail sector. Last year, it also acquired the British company Anchor, which supplies IT solutions to the retail sector. Real Software reportedly has a well-filled order book in the retail sector. One problem, however, is carrying out the contracts. Theo Dilissen, managing director of Real Software, concedes that the retail division has difficulty delivering the projects. But he neither confirms nor denies the negotiations with GTG. ‘We have been holding talks with various parties for some time now,’ was all the chief executive was willing to divulge.

[www.realsoftware.com](http://www.realsoftware.com)  
[www.gtg.com](http://www.gtg.com)

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**TRAVEL BETWEEN HOME AND WORKPLACE**

**IN %, 1998/1999**

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**SOURCE: DE MORGEN**

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Headscarf debate erupts in the Flemish media

SULTAN BALI fears that a ban would drive Muslim girls en masse to Islamic schools

FF EDITOR

Tif Paris sneezes, Brussels gets a cold. In southern Belgium, in particular, people are extremely sensitive to issues inflaming public opinion in France. That cliché appears also to apply to the debate on headscarves (chadors), although not everyone seems to agree that the wearing of headscarves is also a problem in Belgium. Initiatives have been launched in the two largest French speaking parties, MR and PS. MR Chairman Duquesne has invited the parties to a roundtable discussion on the subject and Social Integration Minister Marie Arena (PS) has set up four working groups whose job it will be to get the intercultural dialogue started.

In an opinion piece in the weekend edition of De Morgen (and La Libre Belgique) [10 January] Interior Minister Patrick Dewael (VLD) initiated a wide-ranging public debate on Flanders on the subject. Like French president Chirac, Dewael feels that veils and other ‘conspicuous religious symbols’ should be forbidden ‘for civil servants such as judges, policemen and teachers’. The separation of church and state should be total [and thus so, too, should that between Islam and the state], the government should remain neutral and therefore, according to Dewael, pupils at public schools [where the Community, the province, the city or the municipality is the organising authority] should not be allowed to wear veils, either. With this opinion Dewael ranged himself behind his French-speaking companion Louis Michel (MR), who had defended this standpoint the previous day in Le Soir.

Up until now the general course of action has been that the heads of schools have decided whether or not to allow veils to be worn. The Catholic education network also applies this rule. Dewael regards the counter-argument that the wearing of a veil is the expression of the freedom of religion and the right to a perception of one’s own culture as unconvincing. The reality is different, the minister says. In practice, Muslim women are often ‘ordered’ by Muslim men to wear a veil, and implicitly accept this. And that is a form of oppression that stands in the way of equality between men and women.

On the Flemish side, apart from the VLD, the Vlaams Blok appears to be the only party supporting a ban on veils. Government partner SPA is opposed to a legal regulation and wants to leave the initiative as regards whether or not the wearing of headscarves should be permitted up to the schools themselves. The CDS&V does not favour a legal initiative either, and is asking for the majority to adopt a unanimous standpoint. Sultan Bali, chairwoman of the Immigrant Women’s Centre, is of the view that the majority of Muslim girls who wear a headscarf choose themselves to do so and that they should therefore continue to have the right to do so, just as they have the right to go on to further education. She fears that a ban would drive Muslim girls en masse to Islamic schools.

Opinions

FILIP ROGIERS • DE MORGEN • 10 JANUARY

The Rue de la Loi is fearful of the Pandora’s box that is being termed ‘the debate on values’, and there are four reasons for the anxiety. Firstly, the subject is a difficult and delicate one. To what extent can, should or must the legislator meddle in something which, strictly speaking, falls within the realm of people’s private lives, namely religious perception. Secondly, because - no matter how often we say that the discussion must cover all religious faiths and cultures - such a debate nonetheless directly targets the Muslim community in Belgium. And thirdly, elections are to be held on 13 June and everyone fears that, irrespective of the open mind with which everyone approaches the discussion, the extreme right wing will be the only one to gain from the issue. Of all parties the Flemish Socialists of the SPA are today once again respecting the greatest silence. ‘Rather fear that the politicians have again placed an issue on the agenda for which they themselves do not have a solution,’ says Steve Stevaert in the weekly Humo. And then there is a fourth, more deep-rooted and almost cultural-historical reason why the debate on church and state in Belgium is far more awkward than it is among our neighbours to the south: the cultural difference between the north and south of Belgium. Wallonia is closer to Paris and the principles of the French Revolution. French-speaking Belgians are somewhat stricter in the doctrine of separation of church and state. Flanders, on the other hand, is more circumspect in these matters. That is to say, on account of its severe, Catholic past history, it is traditionally more sensitive to the principle of ‘freedom of religion’, and that goes for public issues, too.

Still aside from the elections, other politicians are asking why the debate on headscarves and the like has to be held right now, of all times. Is it only because MR, in particular, heard the commotion that was being kicked up in Paris? Because statesman and Liberal Michel does not want to be left behind by Chirac? How great is the need in Belgium? Until further notice, we have been spared situations such as those witnessed in French inner cities, where Muslim girls not wearing a veil or headscarf have been assaulted and raped. Actually none of the four above-mentioned reasons holds water when it comes to showing fear of such a debate. However, there is a fifth reason, although strangely enough no-one has mentioned it up until now, except Groen! For with this kind of debate will we be pushing the immigrant community in our country into the position of suffering subjects (‘can they do such and such?’) again, while young men called Mohammed or Said still suffer structural discrimination on the job market.

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Opinion

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 12 JANUARY

There are mainly electoral reasons behind the French-speaking Liberals wanting to join the battle against headscarves. A section of the MR’s grassroots was none too pleased with the MR’s support for voting rights in municipal elections for non-naturalised immigrants. The MR leadership was looking for something with which to placate this group and found it in the headscarf problem. For the headscarf ban, France is calling upon the old conception of neutrality, the negative neutrality that was replaced here thirty years ago by positive neutrality or pluralism. The old neutrality meant that in public education, it was not allowed for any visible manifestation of individuals’ opinions, preferences or characteristic traits to be seen. Under pressure from Dewael’s generation, that neutrality has been forsown and replaced by pluralism, such as belongs to the culture in Great Britain, for example. Since then, not impartiality but respect for the individuality of other people, is quoted as the highest value in the liberal body of thought. So Patrick Dewael’s decision regarding headscarves is not wholly comprehensible. Instead of creating a problem, Patrick Dewael would have done better using his political energy to solve one: the integration process for which he made such efforts as Flemish Minister-President risks grinding to a halt because not enough money is being earmarked for it.

VLD party executive follows Dewael

Although individual Liberal politicians have made very different noises in the recent past, the VLD party executive has ranged itself behind the standpoint of Interior Minister Dewael, and Liberal MP Hilde Vautmans is preparing a proposal for a resolution on the basis of that standpoint. Education Minister Marleen Vandevoorten will hold a consultation with schools, education networks and representatives of the various religions on ‘overly conspicuous religious symbols’ (FF).

ISABEL ALBERS • DE STANDAARD • 13 JANUARY

Vandevoorten is reluctantly following Dewael in advocating a blanket ban: ‘Equal opportunities in education is a crucial point for me. I am not in favour of letting schools decide themselves, as that can lead to the exclusion of certain groups. But I want to look before I leap as regards a possible blanket ban. I will get the debate going now, and if it is shown that the headscarf is indeed an element of oppression, we must prohibit it.’

www.vld.be

Moerman has plan to save national collections

she can count on the support of Prime Minister Verhofstadt and of the PS

Federal Science Policy Minister Fientje Moerman (VLD) has plans to save Belgium’s scientific, historic and artistic collections. These are kept in the Royal Library, the Royal Museums for Fine Arts of Belgium (Kunstberg), the Museums for Art and History (Parc du Cinquantenaire), the Africa Museum (Tervuren), and six other Federal Scientific Institutions (WFI) in Brussels. Moermans wants to borrow EUR 73.8 million for this from the European Investment Bank. For the repayment, she can find EUR 30 million in her own budget. Her colleagues will have to pay a little more than half of the amount, spread over ten years. So far Moermans has not enjoyed much success with her fellow ministers. However, she can count on the support of Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) and of the PS, the party of Moermans’ predecessor Charles Picqué. The museums’ management bodies are enthusiastic (FF).

KARL VANDEN BROECK • DE MORGAN • 14 JANUARY

The way in which Belgium keeps some 60 million works of art, books, manuscripts, documents and maps in institutions such as the Royal Library or the Royal Museums for Fine Arts simply cries out for revenge. The buildings are dilapidated, the collections are often not even inventoried, millions of newspapers and books risk crumbling to dust because they are printed on acidified paper, and paintings are in need of restoration.

The management bodies of the institutions, and also the Royal Household, hoped that Verhofstadt’s second government would set to work on an emergency plan to rescue Belgium’s treasures. When the government came to office there was no sign of any specific commitment in the coalition agreement. Yesterday, there was nonetheless a breakthrough. Science Policy Minister Fientje Moerman (VLD) wants to contract a loan of EUR 74 million and use this to digitise the major collections. This will enable a large number of threatened books, maps and photos to be saved. Digitising also offers the advantage of collections easily being opened up (and even marketed) via CD-Rom and the Internet.

Moerman yesterday received the support of Guy Verhofstadt, who is known to be personally interested in the fate of the federal scientific institutions. That is good news, but more important still is the fact that the PS is inclined to back Moerman’s plans. This party previously always provided the minister for scientific policy, but was never able to achieve a breakthrough on the federal scientific institutions.

Moerman is approaching the matter sensibly. Instead of begging for money from her colleagues, as her predecessor Charles Picqué did, she is proposing to take out a loan from the European Investment Bank. She even wants to finance a part of the funding from her own budget. Her colleagues will have to pay a little more than half of the amount, spread over ten years.

Because Moerman wants to save Belgium’s treasures with federal funding, she is lifting the whole question out of the murky waters of community matters. Cultural policy is a matter for the communities, but with the successive state reforms, Belgium’s ‘crown jewels’ have remained in federal hands. Because only Flanders had the money to invest in the federal scientific institutions, Wallonia and Brussels feared that the treasures would at some stage end
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, Kasteellaan 97, 8700 Tielt and can also be obtained by e-mail.

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