Loan helped Flemish Government to attain budget standard

Flemish Budget Minister Van Mechelen (VLD) announced at the beginning of the year that the Authorities of Flanders had EUR 464 million in the coffers at the end of December. This meant that the Government of Flanders easily attained the EU’s budget standard. With the announcement, Van Mechelen surprised friend and foe alike, since in the summer there was still a cash deficit. Was this the result of the rigorous expenditure policy that he had pursued in the second half of 2003? Opposition party CD&V did not think so, and suspected that the government was shifting bills for 2003 into 2004. Flemish Parliament MP Luc Vanden Brande was able to demonstrate that this week, with the help of the Audit Office. Last year the Government of Flanders did not pay an allocation of EUR 217 million to the transport company De Lijn (regional trams and buses). The company only received the money at the beginning of this year and borrowed money at the end of last year from the KBC bank. This deferment enabled Flanders to attain the budget standard. According to Minister Van Mechelen (VLD), the deferment is legal and by no means exceptional (FF).

BART HAECK • DE TIJD • 27 FEBRUARY

The transport company receives allocations from the Authorities of Flanders for its operations and for investment. These allocations were not paid in full last year. The Audit Office reported that De Lijn concluded a loan agreement with the KBC for EUR 217 million on 19 December 2003. De Lijn repaid the loan on 16 January, when the Authorities of Flanders had paid the allocation. In order to borrow the money for 17 days, De Lijn paid EUR 291,000 in interest. The deferment impacted on the budget results for 2003. According to an agreement with the Federal Government and the other federated states, Flanders had to attain a surplus of EUR 361 million. Without the loan contracted by De Lijn, this would not have been possible. A spokesman for the Flemish Budget Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD) conceded that the operation helped the government to achieve the agreed budget surplus. ‘It is an option that can be taken in order to attain the budget targets. Everything was done according to the rules.’ The allocation to De Lijn is recorded on the budget, but can still be paid following a previous rule. ‘Since De Lijn was in a financially sound position in 2003, it was not necessary to pay the allocation in full,’ said the spokesman. De Lijn only got into cash problems at the end of the year.

INTRODUCTION

On 1 March it will finally happen: the start of Marc Dutroux’s long-awaited trial in Aarlen. Belgium will once again be in the international limelight for a while, if the number of accreditations for foreign journalists is anything to go by. By way of a warm-up, a series of articles have appeared in the Flemish press over the past few weeks, covering the kidnappings of the six girls by Dutroux planned in the year prior to his arrest in 1996, and featuring portraits of Dutroux himself and his associates (his wife Michelle Martin, accomplice Michel Lelievre and fellow defendant Michel Nihoul), including their criminal records and their troubled youth. In the autumn of 1996 the Belgian public was in a kind of state of shock. After the horror of the discovery of the bodies of Julie and Melissa and An and Eefje, and that of Dutroux’s colleague Weinstein, indignation grew, since there was an increasing belief that the kidnappings could have been avoided if the police and the judiciary had done their job better. It turned out that Dutroux was a repeat offender. He had already done time for – yes, that’s right – kidnapping and indecently assaulting under-age girls, but was released on parole in 1992. The number of blunders that were discovered grew and grew. When examining magistrate and popular hero Michel Connerotte was removed from the investigation in October, because he had attended a ‘spaghetti evening’ in aid of the victims, public rage exploded. The so-called White March in Brussels on 20 October constituted the culminating point of the public drama. The politicians drew their conclusions and, with the cameras rolling, announced the setting up of a commission with hearings, which outlined all the mistakes made by the police and the judiciary and exposed the areas of dysfunction. But Dutroux was to escape again before a start was actually made on the reform of the judiciary and the police in the spring of 1998. The media had been divided into two camps since the autumn of 1996: the believers, who think that Dutroux, via middle-man Nihoul, operated on behalf of paedophile networks with branches reaching up to the very highest levels, and the sceptics, who are of the view, like examining magistrate Langlois, that there is no proof of that. Knack (25 February) recalls that the stories about networks appeared in the media at a time of growing hysteria, when suddenly everyone was being accused of paedophiliac tendencies and the judiciary even had phone taps installed. But despite all the media attention, today the fear and disgust have gone, and have been ‘hardened into rancour and a feeling of powerlessness,’ concludes Knack. Is it surprising that the Dutroux affair is suffering from a surfeit of coverage? VRT research reveals that only 20% of Belgians are planning to follow the trial.

Frank Vandeveer | editor in chief
The Belgian Government can book the Belgacom pension fund (EUR 3.6 billion) and a consideration for the pension costs of Belgacom employees (EUR 1.4 billion) as ordinary income in the 2003 budget, according to a decision by the European statistical bureau Eurostat. The Belgian Government is still the majority shareholder in telecom operator Belgacom, and thanks to the additional EUR 5 billion on the income side, has been able to close its budget with a surplus of 0.2% of Gross Domestic Product. According to the opposition party CD&V, the taking over of the pension fund was little more than an exercise in accounting embellishment in order to keep the budget out of the red. For Budget Minister Vande Lanotte (SP.A), the news of the approval came as a shot in the arm, as it means that he can close his fifth positive budget in a row. Eurostat does warn, however, that the operation will in the long run be a neutral budget item: the capital transfer will be neutralised over time by the increase in spending on pensions. The European Commission had previously expressed concern at the falling trend in the ‘primary balance’ in the Belgian budget. This gives the difference between income and expenditure, not taking interest charges into consideration. The Belgian Government is counting on a one-off operation to rescue its budget for 2004 as well. It is hoping that the tax amnesty for tax dodgers will bring in EUR 850 million and has already booked that amount on the income side of its 2004 budget. 2005 will therefore be the first year without extraordinary income operations and ‘the year of truth’. The government relies on a recovery in economic growth for 2005 (FF).

ISABEL ALBERS • DE STANDAARD
26 FEBRUARY

The smaller the primary balance the more ‘structurally unsound’ the budget is. It is a concern that Vande Lanotte recognises: ‘Therefore in 2005 we will again need a budget that can be balanced without one-off measures. With an economy that’s picking up, we must gradually book a 1.5% budget surplus between 2005 and 2012. That represents an improvement of 0.3% per year, which is feasible.’ There is no doubt that in the coming election campaign the Socialist and Liberal heavyweights, with Vande Lanotte and Guy Verhofstadt in the vanguard, will be proudly trumpeting the fact they have presented balanced budgets five years in a row - something that neighbouring countries are unable to boast. They are not wrong, but in all fairness it should be added that this has only been possible thanks to the low interest rates. Since Belgium has, in relative terms, a much higher debt burden than its neighbouring countries, it has also benefited more, in relative terms, from the low rate of interest. That means that it has been easier to keep our budget in line in a period of recession and low interest rates. According to the official figures announced by Eurostat yesterday, the public debt at the end of 2003 stood at 100.5% of GDP. Vande Lanotte regards that as a very positive result.

CD&V intensifies fight against tax amnesty

The tax amnesty is chiefly a federal matter. However, it is also applicable to taxes for which Flanders is competent, such as inheritance tax that has been evaded, and a Flemish decree is in theory needed for that, although the Minister-President of the Government of Flanders Bart Somers (VLD) has put the need for a decree into perspective. After all, the tax office cannot start an investigation in tax amnesty cases. Groen! is also a member of the Government of Flanders, and that party is opposed to the tax amnesty and therefore to such a decree. Opposition party CD&V also confirmed in De Standaard (25 February) that it would not co-operate on a decree permitting a tax amnesty for inheritance tax that has been evaded, if it were to be in office in the Flemish Government after 13 June. Via the member of the Flemish Parliament Wivina Demeester, it is proposing an alternative: lower inheritance tax. Demeester submitted a draft decree in the Flemish Parliament to this effect. The CD&V also announced that it would shortly be lodging a petition with the Court of Arbitration for annulment of the federal tax amnesty law. The VLD is calling this initiative irresponsible, because it will slow down the entire tax amnesty operation and will only increase uncertainty among those who might have recourse to it.
On 28 February the annual building trade fair Batibouw opens its doors to the general public once again. Traditionally the banks use the occasion to offer potential house buyers their most competitive mortgage rates - and these have become very attractive indeed in recent years, with interest rates at an all-time low. For the same amount, a potential buyer could borrow 40% more at the end of the 1990s than at the beginning of the 1990s, according to Philippe Janssens of the Antwerp real estate firm Stadim. Low inflation also means that the difference between renting and borrowing has become very small, so that more and more Flemings can afford to buy their own home. Only a quarter of Flemish families still live in rented accommodation, and according to the ING study department, the proportion of rented accommodation on the market fell from 38% to 28% between 1990 and 2000. Of course the rising demand has put up the prices of houses for sale. Over the last 20 years that price has risen by an average of 5.9%, according to ING researcher Van De Cloot, quoted in De Tijd (25 February). But there is no talk of a bubble effect in the housing market of the kind we have seen in the share market, says Van De Cloot. House prices are tending rather towards an adjustment (FF).

**JOHAN CORTHOUTS • DE MORGEN**

25 FEBRUARY

In the last five years, house prices in Flanders have risen by 43%. Last year a house in Flanders cost EUR 155,000, excluding renovation costs. This is an average figure, since some districts saw much larger price rises. Maaseik and Turnhout, districts close to the Dutch border, scaled the highest peaks. In Maaseik (Limburg province), prices have risen by no less than 63% in the last five years, whilst in Turnhout, in the province of Antwerp, prices have gone up by almost 60%. This makes the capital of the Kempen and its environs the most expensive region in Flanders. Here a house costs nearly EUR 200,000, 10% more than the average price of a house in Brussels and 20% more than in Antwerp. ‘In Turnhout and Maaseik the effect of the Dutch making cross-border purchases most certainly comes into play,’ says Philippe Janssens of the Antwerp real estate firm Stadim. ‘The Dutch can deduct their mortgage from their professional income, so they can offer 50 to 60% more for a house.’ In the districts of Veurne and in Halle-Vilvoorde, houses on the market fetch an average price of around EUR 190,000. The high property prices in coastal municipalities such as Koksjde and Oostduinkerke have recently been pushing the prices up in Veurne and surrounding areas, now that more and more eager buyers are trying their luck in the hinterland. The district of Halle-Vilvoorde is traditionally at the top of the list. The Flemish belt around the capital is the residential area par excellence for the more well-to-do double-income households in the Brussels area.

The rising demand among people wanting to buy a home of their own has led to a further rise in prices in recent years. Janssens: ‘Someone buying a home for his own use can generally pay between a quarter and a third more than an investor.’ When he buys, an owner-resident does not have to take into account the costs associated with the property standing vacant or tenants failing to pay, but an investor does. An owner-resident is also eligible for a reduction in the advance levy on income derived from real estate, the annual tax that he has to pay on his property, and for an exemption from registration fees, which are provided for by the Flemish Authorities. An investor does not have these benefits.

Thanks to tax incentives from the authorities, among other things, the property market has remained very buoyant, despite the high prices. However, the market does appear to have arrived at its zenith. The peak has almost been reached. Last year, sales of apartments did register a rise but house sales stabilised. Therefore Janssens does not expect to see property prices continuing their upward climb. ‘The adjustment on the market has happened. Prices might remain high for a while, but if sellers notice that they do not find a buyer quickly, the adjustment will soon follow.’

WWW.STADIM.BE
WWW.INGBELGIUM.BE

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**Picanol lands Chinese order**

The loom manufacturer Picanol from West Flanders has won a contract for 512 looms with the Chinese textile company Weiqiao. The company is a member of the largest Chinese textile group Tianjin, which already announced that it would be buying no fewer than 2,380 looms this year, and Picanol is also in the running for that contract, or a part of it. More than anything, the news must have helped the West Flanders group at least momentarily to forget its disappointing results. In 2003 the group’s operating profit fell from EUR 34.77 million to EUR 23.16 million. Turnover fell from EUR 519.44 million to EUR 483.67 million, and consolidated profit was down from EUR 22.39 million to EUR 12.61 million. The low dollar played a part here, too (FF).

**RENÉ DEWITTE • DE TIJD**

21 FEBRUARY

Picanol, which invoices 100% in euros and exports 97% of its turnover, has suffered a great deal from the low level of the dollar, which has eroded its results. Margins have also been under pressure. ‘We have not accepted certain orders on account of the price,’ said Chairman Patrick Steverlynck and General Manager Jan Coene, when explaining the results yesterday. As for the forecast results for 2004, they would only venture to say that 2004 would be a difficult year, but that they were ‘optimistic’.

Steverlynck and Coene announced that China would be increasingly important for Picanol in the future. In the past Picanol concentrated solely on the market for more expensive looms, representing some 40,000 looms worldwide. Of those, ‘close on’ 8,000 came Picanol’s way. There is also a market for cheaper machines, accounting for 50,000 looms a year. With the development in China of the simple Olympica pneumatic weaving machine, Picanol now wants to ply the world market for cheaper looms from its Chinese plant. Picanol is thinking of markets such as China, Brazil, India and Eastern Europe.

WWW.PICANOL.BE
Traffic fines make work-load unbearable

PRELIMINARY FIGURES SHOW THAT THE NUMBER OF ROAD FATALITIES IN THE FIRST HALF OF 2003 FELL BY ALMOST 30%

Du Four has put traffic policy in Flanders at the top of the agenda again just before the new Traffic Act comes into force (on 1 March). He has instructed his police force to reduce the number of traffic fines they give out. For, according to Du Four, the installation of unmanned cameras recording speeding offences on Flemish roads has led to such an increase in the volume of reports that the staff of his office are no longer able to process them. Hefty traffic fines are pointless if they cannot be processed within a reasonable time scale, says Du Four. A number of public prosecutors from other offices agree with him on this. This is quite the wrong signal to be sending out, says federal Transport Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit), an opinion endorsed by a number of mayors in East Flanders. Anciaux points out that the new Traffic Act, which enters into force on 1 March, introduces the system of on-the-spot collection - for large fines, too. It means that fines will be dealt with administratively and will no longer resort under criminal law, which will save the offices of the public prosecutor a great deal of work. Anciaux feels that the new Traffic Act should be tougher on offenders, improve driving behaviour and therefore save lives. And according to the minister, it’s heading in the right direction. Preliminary figures show that the number of road fatalities in the first half of 2003 fell by almost 30%.

However, De Standaard (23 February) raises some questions about the collection of fines by the police, a development implying that the workload is shifted onto the police themselves. Fines are still collected by means of the ‘pre-war’ system of ‘fine stamps’ which the person fined has to go and buy in a post office - not exactly a system likely to result in a lot of time being saved. As long as the processing and collection by the police cannot be done electronically, there is a risk of the Act leading to more policemen being tied up with office work, and the problem will simply have been passed on from one body to another (FF).

The federal Transport Minister Bert

Anciaux (Spirit) describes Du Four’s comments as ‘sending out the wrong signal.’ He points to the new Traffic Act, which will see to it that traffic fines are processed via more administrative channels. One of the basic ideas behind the new Act was to lighten the workload of the public prosecutor’s offices. Therefore the system of on-the-spot collection was extended to include serious offences. The police can handle this kind of collection, without the intervention of the public prosecutor’s office. Only in the event of non-payment is an offence subsequently liable to follow-up by the judicial authorities. But the question that then arises is whether the police can take on that work. Inquiries reveal that the police forces, both local and federal, are unable to estimate what these duties will lead to in terms of extra workload. For the police it boils down primarily to an adaptation of their computer systems. That requires time and could therefore only be ready long after the new Act has come into effect. But the police are receiving offers of assistance. The East Flanders federal traffic police have developed a computer program, which will shortly be distributed to all federal units, and is reportedly also to be made available to local forces.

An on-the-spot fine has to be paid within five days. One handicap is that fines still have to be paid for with ‘fine stamps’. Payment by bank card is statutorily possible, but is not likely to be immediately possible due to a lack of portable card readers.

Opinion

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD
23 FEBRUARY

The government must stop wrongly shifting problems from one side to another. Reporting traffic offences is a job for the police. Dealing with those fines is not a police matter, but for a small number of cases, and neither is it a matter for the judiciary. This is an administrative job that should be contracted out. It could be farmed out to the private sector (collection agencies), but also to a government agency, if the latter is able to attain the same performance standards. There are huge numbers of superfluous employees in government departments. Instead of being paid to do nothing, they could quite easily be deployed for these duties.

For years now, MP Jos Ansoms (CD&V) has had a bill ready on the administrative handling of traffic fines. Nothing has come of it. When Flemish politicians are asked how that is, they invariably refer to their Wallon counterparts who are not willing to go along with it. If no Flemish majority is required for immigrants’ voting rights in municipal elections to be pushed through, then there should be no Francophone majority required to decide on traffic fines being processed as administrative work. If the Flemish parties wanted, this would be law tomorrow.

WWW.VERKEERSWET.BE
WWW.MOBILIT.FGOV.BE - WWW.BIVV.BE

EMPLOYMENT AND POVERTY

DEGREE OF POVERTY

ITALY • SOUTH-EUROPEAN MODEL
GREECE •
ITALY •
SOUTH-EUROPEAN MODEL

DEGREE OF EMPLOYMENT (15-64 YEARS)

ITALY •
SOUTH-EUROPEAN MODEL
Greece •
ANGLO-SAXON MODEL
ITALY •
SOUTH-EUROPEAN MODEL

SOURCE: DE MORGEN/OECD

fOCUS ON FLANDERS • 21 FEBRUARY - 27 FEBRUARY • Number 8
SP.A gets euro-critical

**Gennez comes to the conclusion that the European Union is sacrificing social protection in favour of a liberalisation of the economy**

Almost sneakily, 60% of all our laws depend on European decisions, but there is little public debate on those decisions. All the democratic parties, from Liberals to Socialists and Christian-Democrats, are in agreement on the European Union. However, the Flemish Socialists now wish to distance themselves from this non-critical unanimity. SP.A party chairman Steve Stevaert asked his deputy chairperson Caroline Gennez to set forth her criticisms in a little book. Gennez comes to the conclusion that the European Union is sacrificing social protection in favour of a liberalisation of the economy that is too far-reaching. In the new SP.A standpoint on the European Union, the aim is no longer consensus, and therefore the party is not in any hurry to approve the European constitution. As Gennez puts it, 'first check and see whether there's anything in it for the average Belgian'. The SP.A is therefore directly opposing the official standpoint of the Belgian Government. Prime Minister Verhofstadt is dedicating himself to achieving a definitive agreement on the new constitution before the elections to the European Parliament on 13 June. One of the people responsible for preparing the constitution, incidentally, is the candidate heading the CD&V list, Jean-Luc Dehaene (FF).

**ANJA OTTE • DE STANDAARD**

More than anything, the SP.A wants to approve a good text (for the European Constitution). If that can be done quickly, so much the better, but that's not realistic. This is why her party is asking for a transitional period. The second criticism: Europe is accused of all manner of sins. Gennez defends herself by claiming that 'it is normal, before the elections, for a party to make an analysis of what's going wrong'. 'If Europe indirectly interferes in certain sectors, you should say so.' For the rest, Gennez says that the SPA are not 'Euro-sceptics' but 'Euro-critics'. What is wrong with Europe? The EU suffers from a 'techno-bureaucratic complex' - the ideal cover for the right wing (of the likes of Frits Bolkestein, the liberal Commissioner for the Internal Market) to implement measures that the SP.A is targeting. The liberalisation of the railways is not just bad for passengers; it's also bad for Kyoto, the employees, and for companies that have their goods transported by rail.

Opinion

**LUC VANDER KELEN**

*Het Laatste Nieuws • 25 February*

Europe is a bit like a faith or creed; criticism of it always goes down badly. The criticism cannot be effectively countered, possibly out of frustration that the project is suffering from indifference. There are a number of reasons for this. 1. Europe is located in Timbuktu. Theoretically, the European institutions work from Brussels, but the physical proximity makes no difference. Because, 2. Europe is over our heads. The technical jargon and the institutions are incomprehensible for the average man or woman. 3. Europe is intangible. It takes decisions on matters that its citizens have no grasp of. And 4.) Europe is a whipping-boy. Should something go wrong somewhere, Europe gets the blame. National politicians are to a large degree responsible for this evolution, since no project can inspire enthusiasm if it is not advertised. In fact, the parties send the wrong politicians to the European Parliament. They are either at the end of their career and take up the position as a reward for services rendered, or are politicians-cum-technicians who are strong on issues but never make it onto popular ‘infotainment’ TV programmes.

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**Sp.a-spirit alliance gnaws away at green unity**

Ff Editor

Advocates of an independent course for Groen! have of late been looking on in sorrow as the SPA-Spirit alliance has raked in leading party members and environmentalists. After the defection to Spirit of former Agalev MP Fauzaya Talhaoui, who will be standing for a safe seat on the alliance’s list for the elections to the European Parliament, Bart Martens, chairman of the Association for a Better Environment (Bond Beter Leefmilieu - BBL), announced that he would be standing ‘as an independent candidate for change’ on the SPA-Spirit alliance’s Antwerp list. Martens is the face of the BBL and is held in high esteem in many environmental groups and committees. According to him, Groen! on its own is too small a force to be able to put environmental subjects on the political agenda. He feels that a pooling of progressive forces is necessary in order to counter a right-wing dismantling of the existing environmental policy, as is currently happening in the Netherlands. In the meantime, there is discord in Groen!’s ranks over the way in which the defections to the alliance should be tackled. The leading figures in Antwerp, such as the mayor of Mortsel Ingrid Pira and the Antwerp alderman Erwin Paireon are calling on party chairperson Vera Dua to tolerate the alliance between Groen! and Employment Minister Landuyt (SP.A) over the introduction of services cheques for crèche services. Byttebier continues to oppose the fact that tempering agencies can deploy carers for day nurseries using these services cheques. Byttebier is supported in this by the secretary of the Christian trade union LBC Walter Cornelis.

**WWW.GROEN.BE**

**WWW.BONDBETERLEEFMILIEU.BE**

**WWW.DIENSTENCHEQUES.BE**
Stevaert introduces free buses to the Netherlands

**Stevaert wants to use his stunt to demonstrate the damage that can be done to daily life by a government without socialists**

S.P.A Chairman Steve Stevaert is not shy of the occasional stunt. He recently announced that he wanted to introduce free bus services to the Netherlands, so that, on the basis of their contacts with ‘the average Dutchman’, Flemings can see how the cost of living there has risen since PM Balkenende’s government of Christian-Democrats and Liberals took office. The cabinet’s austerity policy has made its mark on health care and in wage policy, according to Stevaert, who wants to use his stunt to demonstrate the damage that can be done to daily life by a government without socialists. Many Dutchmen cannot afford a home of their own, send their children to Belgian schools and have to put up with long waiting lists for operations, which are also more expensive (FF).

**Opinion**

RUUD GOOSSENS • DE MORGEN
25 FEBRUARY

The passengers on Stevaert’s buses would be well advised to take a few extra travel tips with them.

1. The Socialists have been members of all federal and all regional governments in Belgium since 1988. But Stevaert doesn’t like the role of favourite and operates best as an underdog and an anti-establishment figure. And that’s a whole lot easier when you’re in the opposition. Since Stevaert can hardly demand that role in Belgium, he sets about playing the opposition figure in the Netherlands, and pushes Yves Leterme’s CD&V into the role of a party belonging to the majority. It’s a great communication stunt, but wouldn’t it be more logical for Steve Stevaert to defend the achievements of the purple-green Government of Flanders whilst Yves Leterme says what he feels has gone amiss over the last five years in our neck of the woods?

2. What’s more, Yves Leterme is chairman of the Flemish Christian-Democrats, not of the Dutch Christian-Democrats. There are substantial differences. Yves Leterme is linked to the Christian labour movement far more so than Balkenende. An austerity programme or a policy of deportation of asylum seekers, as is currently being pushed through in the Netherlands, would be unacceptable for the ACW.

3. Social democracy in the Netherlands did not begin with Wouter Bos. It may not have been a disaster, but the legacy of twelve years of social-democratic rule (first with the Christian-Democrats and then eight years with the Liberals) comes pretty close. Pim Fortuyn garnered his electoral success thanks to the fierce criticism of Wim Kok’s ‘purple’ policy.

4. Not everything has got worse in the Netherlands. If a free bus trip to the Netherlands is indeed organised, it would be a crime not to mention the plus points of which our northern neighbours can boast. And in some areas, the Netherlands is still doing better, as S.P.A Minister Frank Vandenbroucke recently pointed out in a lecture at the University of Amsterdam. Not only is the level of employment a good deal higher than in Belgium, but the Netherlands also has fewer poor people than Belgium - something that Vandenbroucke demonstrated on the basis of an extremely interesting table. The public debt is also considerably lower in the Netherlands.

5. Start thinking about the period after 13 June. We’re not saying this, either, it is something that was recently written by the two Socialist heavyweights Johan Vande Lanotte and Frank Vandenbroucke. ‘Belgium plc is a tanker and if we continue on our present course, we’ll hit the rocks’, Frank Vandenbroucke was also recently quoted as saying, in an interview. Here Vande Lanotte and Vandenbroucke are thinking of the reduction of the public debt, the reform of the labour market, the adjustment of health care to the ageing of the population, and the affordability of pensions. As soon as the trade union and regional elections are out of the way, some painful measures might be on the agenda here, too.

WWW.SP.BE

Dehaene leads CD&V-NVA-list

It is now official. Jean-Luc Dehaene will be heading the CD&V-NVA alliance’s list of candidates for the elections to the European Parliament on 13 June. A keen battle is promised with Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD), who heads the VLD’s European list. In a letter to the residents of Vilvoorde, of which he is mayor, Dehaene explains why he is heading the European list. He also says that he wants to combine his position as mayor with his European mandate, and adds that it is also his intention to give his party, CD&V, a helping hand in breaking the Liberal/Socialist majority. However Dehaene dismisses talk of him being the favourite to succeed Romano Prodi as Chairman of the European Commission as ‘little-tattle’ (FF).

BART EECKHOUT
DE MORGEN • 21 FEBRUARY

For Guy Verhofstadt, who as leading candidate on the VLD’s list will in all probability be Dehaene’s direct opponent, the former prime minister’s long-awaited comeback must have a rather bitter taste. After all, it was Verhofstadt himself who, against the wishes of his own party, re-launched his predecessor’s career at European level, initially in the Council of Wise Men involved in the preparation of the Laken summit in December 2001. Then Dehaene was given the chairmanship of the European Convention, where he took part in drawing up the European Constitution. As a favour in return, Dehaene adopted a fairly moderate attitude towards Verhofstadt’s (international) policy. This all changed when, as mayor of a municipality in the outskirts of Brussels, Dehaene began to make a name for himself on the issue of aircraft noise. He recently gave Verhofstadt a firm clout about the ears. The former premier cannot tolerate his successor wanting to appear on the list of candidates for the elections to the European Parliament, but not wanting to take up a seat in the European Parliament. ‘Bogus candidates only fuel anti-political sentiment’. Yesterday a competitive Dehaene again advised his rival Verhofstadt to ‘sleep on the decision a little more. Berlusconi is the only other prime minister who also appears on a list of candidates for the elections to the European Parliament.’

WWW.CDENV.BE
CD&V-N-VA seeks place on the electoral market

The urge to form alliances is an inevitable consequence of the introduction of the electoral threshold of 5%. With the exception of Groen!, small parties such as N-VA and Vivant have opted to join an alliance. This has resulted in Flanders now being divided into four main blocks: a left-wing progressive block (SP.A-Spirit) and an extreme right-wing block (Vlaams Blok), and between them a liberal block and a ‘right-wing conservative’ block (N-VA-CD&V). The latter is the label that the Liberals, Greens and Socialists have used to denote the alliance of Flemish Nationalists and Christian-Democrats. By doing so, the VLD claims to be the only ‘progressive party of the centre’, whereas the Greens and SPA hope to win votes from the Christian labour movement. However, CD&V chairman Leterme does not agree with the pigeonhole that his political opponents have pushed him into. Aside from the allocating of labels, the most important question remains whether the alliance can fill the evident gap in the electoral market between the Blok and the parties of the centre (FF).

Opinion

STEFAN HUYSENTRUYT • DE TIJD • 23 FEBRUARY

‘The VLD has just lived through ten stirring days,’ said Sterckx. He said that the party had allowed itself to be distracted from the dual objective of government policy: to cut taxes and safeguard social security. ‘We must therefore turn over a new leaf.’ Sterckx said he had accepted the request to lead the VLD ‘soft-hearted and with a great many butterflies in my stomach’, partly because he received a vote of confidence from First Minister Verhofstadt. He said he would ensure that the coalition agreement was properly implemented in close consultation with Verhofstadt, Vice-Premier Patrick Dewael, Minister-Pres- ident Bart Somers and all Liberal minis- ters. Sterckx will lead the coming election campaign with all the talent the VLD has at its disposal. He said he would continue to count on the experience and knowledge of Karel De Gucht, ‘whom we really and truly need’. He said he believed that the milit- itants had been shattered by tensions in the party and finally called on VLD members to also turn over a new leaf, because ‘Liberal unity creates Liberal power’.

Rediscover Rubens in Antwerp

NOT SINCE 1977 HAS SUCH A LARGE-SCALE RUBENS COMMEMORATIVE EVENT BEEN STAGED IN ANTWERP

While a retrospective of 163 works by Peter Paul Rubens opens on 6 March in Lille’s Palais des Beaux-Arts as part of the French city’s Cultural Capital 2004 programme, Antwerp, the painter’s city of birth, is also keeping its end up. Simultaneously the programme ‘Rediscover Rubens 2004’ will be get- ting under way there, with three major Rubens exhibitions, Rubens guided walks and Rubens projects in the monu- mental churches. ‘Rediscover Rubens 2004’ aims to highlight the permanent range of Rubens works on display in Antwerp, as well as to make Rubens contemporary and stress the all-round artist that he was. Incidentally, not since 1977 has such a large-scale Rubens commemorative event been staged in Antwerp (FF).

SASKIA VEREEENEGHE • DE TIJD • 26 FEBRUARY

The programme of Antwerp’s monumental churches is called ‘Rubens, anything but unworly’. The four church- es each cover one theme. The Sint-Carolus Borromeuskerk shows Rubens as project manager. He is the progressive architect, decorator and painter in this baroque Antwerp church. In the Sint-Pauluskerk, Rubens presents himself as a painter who takes up his position alongside his colleagues without putting on airs.

The theme in the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal is ‘Icon of Antwerp’. The church is symbolic of Antwerp and here hang two of Rubens’ icons: The Raising of the Cross and The Descent from the Cross. Finally, the Sint-Jacobskerk shows Rubens as a family man. This is the church where he married for the second time, where five of his children were baptised, and where Rubens is buried. In addition to these themes, there will also be talks in the churches on the meaning of Rubens today, and concerts and recitals.

Three new guided walks in Antwerp with a Rubens theme will set out to discover the city of Rubens’ day and focus on the link between then and now: ‘Rubens Open Door’ follows the thread of Rubens’ life and thus unravels the painter’s closely interwoven relationship with Antwerp. The walk leads from the ‘Rubenshuis’ to the trendy fashion district. ‘Rubens Deep in Reverie’ looks at Rubens’ attitude to the church, whilst ‘Looking at Rubens’ in the KMSKA (Museum of fine Arts) focuses more on aspects of form, techn- nique and imagery, and shows how lat- ter artists viewed Rubens.

WWW.RUBENS2004.BE
**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE THEATRE**

- **2 March**: Sun Ra Arkestra conducted by Marshall Allen, jazz, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: www.vooruit.be
- **2 to 5 March**: Koan Augustinisten/ Bâche, dance, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: 09/267.28.28 www.vooruit.be
- **3 March**: Koumpania Xalkias (Greece) concert, Zuidershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuidershuis.be
- **3, 6 and 10 March**: Concert version of Il pirata by Vincenzo Bellini, conducted by Ivan Törsz, Bijloke, Ghent and Koningin Elisabethzaal, Antwerp; info: www.vlaamseopera.be
- **5 March**: Quartet Cedron (Argentina) concert, Zuidershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuidershuis.be
- **5 March**: Symphonic Orchestra of Flanders conducted by David Angus, with violin concerto by Prokoviev, CM von Weber and A. Dvorak, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **5 and 7 March**: National Orchestra of Belgium conducted by Mikko Franck with Bartok and Mussorgski, PSK, Brussels; info: www.bazar.be; 02/507.82.00 and Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be; info: 09/070/22.33.02
- **6 March**: Jools Holland and his rhythm'n blues orchestra, Handelsbeurs, Gent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- **6 March**: Münchner Kammerspiele with Othello directed by Luk Perceval, Het Toneelhuis, Antwerp (in German); info: www.vlaamseopera.be
- **6 March**: Recital Bernarda Fink with Roger Vignoles (piano) De Munt, Brussels; info: www.demunt.be
- **6 to 12 March**: Mask dance by Do- gon (Mali) and Bobo, Zuidershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuidershuis.be
- **6 March**: The Ex, an Ethiopian Music Night, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: www.vooruit.be
- **7 March**: Geri Allen, a tribute to Mal Waldron, jazz, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: www.vooruit.be
- **9 March**: Stravinsky Happening with defilharmonie conducted by Daniele Callegari, Quatuor Daniel, I Solisti del Vento, Michel Berger (piano), Rex Lawson and D. Hall, Isabelle van Keulen, Michael Collins and Kathrin Stott, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- **11 March**: 7 Arts’ Kabana by Janacek; director: Robert Carsen, Flanders Opera; info: www.vlaamseopera.be 070/22.02.02
- **8 March**: Arrested development, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- **9 March**: Hermes Ensemble and Koen Kessels with John Cage, B. Van Camp and L. Breyers; De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- **9 March**: Juanes (Col.), AB, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
- **10 March**: Living colour, AB, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
- **10 to 13 March**: Cluster #2 Goodbye Stranger with photo exhibition: odd fishes composed by Mudas Dekker, Union Suspecte (dance performance); De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- **10 March**: Salita Ni Seydou (Burchoka), dance, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- **11 March**: Spiegel String Quartet with a portrait of Jörg Widmann, Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be
- **12 March**: Alim Qasimov (Azerbaijan), Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be
- **12 March**: Ricercar Consort and Philippe Pierlot, Conjuratio with Weckmann and Bach, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- **16 March**: Peter Grimes by Benjamin Britten, opera, conductor: Kazushi Ono, director: Willy Decker, De Munt, Brussels; info: www.demunt.be
- **17 March**: 25 Years of Art and History, Jubelpark, Brussels; info www.vlaamsparlement.be
- **9 February**: Once upon a time, Belgian art in the nineties, MUHKA, Antwerp; info: www.muhka.be
- **9 March**: Stalking Hiéronymus with works by Hans Van de Velde, Anselm Kiefer and AR Penck, FMMK, Ostend; info: www.pmmk.be
- **27 February to 16 May**: Marie Van Warmerdam, video installations, SMAR, Ghent; info: www.smak.be
- **27 February to 16 May**: Une saison en enfer, exhibition on symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, PSK, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be; 02/507.82.00
- **18 February - 27 February**: Number 8 FLANDERS Focus on Flanders provides a weekly overview of articles from the Flemish press and appears in English, French and German. This newsletter is produced by Uitgeverij Lannoo nv, Kasteelstraat 97, 8700 Tielt and can also be obtained by e-mail.

**FOCUS ON FLANDERS**

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**EXPO**

- **Until 29 February**: Genovanversaes-pencevischen, exhibition about fashion, Antwerp and Genova; info: 03/470.27.70 www.momu.be
- **Until 29 February**: Vietnam, Art and culture from prehistorian times to today, exhibition, Royal Museum of Art and History, Jubelpark, Brussels; info: www.kmkg-mrah.be
- **Until 10 March**: Icons of Flemish Design, Lokettenzaal, Flemish Parliament, Brussels; info: www.vlaamsparlement.be
- **Until 30 May**: Human, all too human, photo exhibition on psychiatry, Museum Dr. Guislain, Ghent; info: www.museumdrguislain.be
- **Until 31 March**: Undercover. The Prinzhorn Collection. The collection was abused by the Nazi’s to build the exhibition ‘Degraded Art’, exhibition, Museum Dr. Guislain, Ghent; info: www.museumdrguislain.be
- **Until 25 April**: The art of the Islam exhibition, Museum of the Cinquantenaire, Parque du Cinquantenaire, Brussels
- **Until 9 May**: Fernand Knopff, retrospective exhibition, KMSK, Brussels
- **Until 21 March**: Dream extensions with Mariko Moro, Jane & Louise Wilson, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, Georgina Starr, SMAK, Ghent; info: www.smak.be
- **Until 29 February**: Once upon a time, Belgian art in the nineties, MUHKA, Antwerp; info: www.muhka.be
- **Until 29 February**: Stalking Hiéronymus with works by Hans Van de Velde, Anselm Kiefer and AR Penck, FMMK, Ostend; info: www.pmmk.be
- **Until 23 March**: Henry Lacoste, Art Deco, exhibition Museum for Architecture, Elsene (Brussels)
- **Until 29 February**: 100 years, 100 objects, Design Museum, Ghent
- **Until 14 February**: L’Eau et les Rêves, exhibition with Israeli and Palestinian artists, Witte Zaal, Ghent; info: 09/225.42.90
- **13 February to 4 April**: B-Architects, exhibition De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248/28/28 www.desingel.be
- **Until 23 May**: Marijke Van Warmerdam, video installations, SMAR, Ghent; info: www.smak.be
- **27 February to 16 May**: Une saison en enfer, exhibition on symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, PSK, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be; 02/507.82.00
- **27 February to 16 May**: On symbolism, photography and painting in the 19th century, PSK, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be; 02/507.82.00

**Translation: Eurologos**

**Printing: Druckerij Lannoo nv, Tielt**

**Responsible editor:**

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**Subscription rate by post and e-mail:** 220 euro

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