All Antwerp aldermen acquitted, bar one

The judicial inquiry into the improper use of Visa credit cards by the former Antwerp bench of aldermen has turned into a damp squib, with the charges against all but one of the aldermen being dismissed. The city’s unclear rules meant that it was impossible for the judicial authorities to ascertain which costs were specific to the office and which were not, even when the expenses concerned a dinner jacket, perfume or a handbag. In the case of the alderman for sport and cohabitation Chantal Pauwels (Groen!), the inquiry did find a double entry for one and same meal costing EUR 125. Pauwels is therefore now being prosecuted for forgery, use of false documents and misappropriation of funds. However, Pauwels claims that she can prove her innocence, and thus continues to be backed by mayor Janssens (SP.A). This brings to an end the Visa credit card affair which last March led to the resignation of the then bench of aldermen (FF).

GWEN DECLERCK • DE TIJD • 26 MARCH

The public prosecutor’s office has handed over the aldermen’s files to the provincial governor Camille Paulus. He could still bring disciplinary proceedings, but the governor is not planning to do that. ‘I have implicitly pronounced on the matter by approving the city of Antwerp’s accounts for the year 2001. The Visa expenses were stated in those accounts. I did not want to stir up the Visa affair again, but I have asked the city administration to draw up a clear set of rules on the issue. That has indeed been done, in consultation, so I see no reason to institute disciplinary proceedings against the Antwerp aldermen now,’ says Paulus.

At the public prosecutor’s office there had nevertheless been considerable willingness to get to the bottom of things. ‘The problem is that we could find no proof of criminal offences,’ said Dominique Reyniers of the Antwerp public prosecutor’s office. ‘The key question was whether the aldermen’s expenses could be regarded as ‘costs specific to the office’, but penal law does not give any definition of that concept. Last year there was also no clear set of rules governing the aldermen. Now there is. So the public prosecutor’s office limited itself to cases in which it could prove fraudulent intent. This was possible in only one case.’

INTRODUCTION

On 26 March the handicapped persons’ sector is once again campaigning against the Flemish Government’s welfare policy. To anticipate the criticism, Minister-President Bart Somers (VLD) and Welfare Minister Adelheid Byttebier (Groen!) made a special point of again highlighting the efforts made under five years of Flemish welfare policy, in an interview published in De Morgen (24 March). They reckoned that budget growth of 31% and 26,000 to 32,000 new jobs counted for something. But the interview looked more like a counter-attack. The ministers are of the view that the handicapped persons’ sector, and more especially the Flemish Handicapped Persons’ Fund, largely has itself to blame for the fact that the sector thinks it has to go and stand at the wailing wall because they can no longer pay their staff, or because the waiting lists for those requesting care are rapidly lengthening (up from 1,900 to 5,600 in three years). In the same breath Somers expressed the suspicion that the waiting lists were probably peopled by categories that do not actually belong there, such as people on minimum-wage benefit labelled ‘mentally handicapped’ by their OCMW (Public Social Welfare Centre) or children with character disorders. The Minister-President therefore announced that he wanted to screen the lists and, whilst he was at it, again attacked the health insurance funds which decide in committees on the allocation of wheelchairs, for example, and a little later earn money from that, and are therefore actually sitting as judge in their own cause. The interview unleashed a wave of protest in the sector, which received the support of the press. The ministers should wait for the results of studies rather than making random hypothetical declarations (De Standaard, 25 March) or playing political games (Het Nieuwsblad). De Morgen saw in Somers’ outburst the frustration of policy makers who do not understand why they are not crowned with laurel wreaths for the enormous financial efforts they have made, and declared Somers’ attack on the health insurance funds to be a typical Liberal reaction of mistrust towards the centre-field. In the Flemish Parliament Minister Byttebier hastened to deny that there were indications of abuse. Somers lamented having let himself be carried along in the political game of the CD&V opposition, which is disseminating the image that the government is leaving the handicapped out in the cold.

Meanwhile the sector has its own – at first sight convincing – explanations for the marked lengthening of waiting lists. Fewer and fewer of those needing care can call on their family, progress in medical science means that more and more people with serious defects or aberrations are kept alive and will live longer, and the possibilities of diagnosis are becoming more refined, which for example explains the increase in the number of cases of autism (De Standaard, 26 March).

Frank Vandeveeye | editor in chief
KYOTO MEASURES AND THE TRAFFIC FINES

Harrassment lifted out from traffic act and climate plan approved

However, Anciaux was ‘cautiously positive’ about the effect that the traffic law was having on driving behaviour

At the Raversijde summit the media and the opposition drew considerable attention to the scaling down of a number of hefty fines in the new Traffic Act, which has only been in force since 1 March. Huge fines for cyclists cycling without a rear light and for cars parking half on the pavement or driving without the vehicle’s documents on board seemed to amount to harassment, according to the oft-heard criticism. This was accepted in a frank admission by Transport Minister Bert Anciaux (SP.A). From 22 March, however, Anciaux was ‘cautiously positive’ about the effect that the law was having on driving behaviour, observing that the number of road accidents appeared to be falling. By September 2005 there will be a thorough evaluation in accordance with a wide set of parameters. A series of new measures should increase road safety. For example, the 30-km/h zone around schools will be increased road safety. For example, the 30-km/h zone around schools will be introduced for disabled persons, and the victims of industrial accidents and occupational diseases. In 2006 the operation will be repeated for all people who have been receiving a replacement income since 1998 and 1999, and in 2007 again for people who have been in the system since 2000 and 2001. Those drawing minimum-wage benefit will receive an increase of 4% in this period of office. The increase does not apply to unemployed persons.

SOCIAL POLICY AND MOBILITY

Raversijde: benefit payments rise and are linked to level of wealth

All the social measures together will cost the Treasury some EUR 287 million a year from 2007 onwards

For the Federal Government, the ‘super’ council of ministers’ meeting at the weekend in Raversijde (near Ostend) was once again a high day - from a media point of view, too, since the camera teams were again jostling for position. On Sunday evening Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD), flanked by four Socialist ministers, revealed the most important new decisions that had been taken. He announced higher social security benefits for certain groups entitled to benefit and stated that from 2006 the social partners would be holding permanent consultations to make the benefits overall wealth linked. There was also a series of measures aimed at better reconciling work and family life, such as the extension of the parental leave and care leave (the right to give assistance to a family member who is invalid or infirm). With these measures the council of ministers appeared to answer the broad hint of the unions. The day before, 20,000 trade unionists had descended on Ostend to take part in a demonstration demanding - yes, that’s right - a greater wealth linking of benefits. Looking back, Verhofstadt expressed his satisfaction with the result of the summit. An agreement was reached on the 45 points on the agenda. Overall the Ostend summit, which was hosted by Deputy Prime Minister Vande Lanotte (SP.A), was considered as the summit at which the Socialists could score points. A few weeks ago the Liberals were able to do just that at the Gembloers summit. All the social measures together will cost the Treasury some EUR 287 million a year from 2007 onwards (FF).

BART BRINCKMAN • DE STANDAARD • 22 MARCH

For the Purple coalition, the adage ‘work, work, work’ is sacred. And yet the government wants to show itself to be caring. The overall wealth linking of a replacement income (pensions/social aid/disability) is a problem. Anyone having to live on this kind of income in Belgium becomes poorer by degrees. These types of income only follow the cost of living index. With the exception of pensions, they do not keep pace with overall wealth. Social organisations have been calling for benefits to catch up for years now. For budgetary reasons, governments have not acceded to this, or where they have, only to a very small degree. ‘The adjustments are not spectacular, but they are costing a great deal of money’, said Employment Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A). From 2007 the government wants to have all replacement incomes linked to overall wealth. To this end a request has been made for a substantiated opinion from the Central Board of Trade and Industry and the National Labour Board. It is their job to determine a coefficient for each system (pensions, disabled persons, the handicapped and the unemployed), which can be used to make the adjustment. These talks will be held ‘as and when the inter-professional negotiations for wage earners take place’.

In the meantime the government has already carried through a minor compensatory measure for people who have been living on benefit the longest (eight years and more). It was previously decided that people who had retired in 1996 or earlier would receive 2% extra. Next year that will also be the case for those who retired in 1997. A similar measure will be introduced for disabled persons, and the victims of industrial accidents and occupational diseases. In 2006 the operation will be repeated for all people who have been receiving a replacement income since 1998 and 1999, and in 2007 again for people who have been in the system since 2000 and 2001. Those drawing minimum-wage benefit will receive an increase of 4% in this period of office. The increase does not apply to unemployed persons.

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At the beginning of March the federal government and the regional governments reached an agreement for the reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases by 7.5% by 2012, in the framework of the Kyoto agreement. The Federal Government is taking care of half of the efforts, and is doing so by means of a federal climate plan. The Mol and Wirs power stations will be converted from coal to biomass by 2009. From 1 January 2005 there will be tax breaks for non-polluting cars, benefits that could amount to as much as EUR 4,000. For cars emitting between 105 and 115 grams of CO2 per kilometre, there will be a tax reduction of 3% on the purchase price, subject to a maximum of EUR 750. For cars emitting less than 105 grams of CO2, there will be a reduction of 15% on the purchase price, subject to a maximum of EUR 4,000. In addition, the tax deduction for energy-saving investments in building and conversion work will be raised from 15 to 40% from 1 January 2005.

With the Raversijde summit, it is mainly the SP.A ministers Vandebroucke, Vande Lanotte, Vanden Bossche and Vanden Brempt who were showcasing their accomplishments. A few weeks before the meeting of the super council of ministers, at Raversijde, it emerged that minister Freya Van den Bossche and state secretary Kathleen Van Brempt, naturally adored as ‘SPA babies’, have nonetheless been up to the task. With Kyoto and parental leave, each of them has scored a political victory, for themselves as well.

In the Rue de la Loi, the sabres are singing in whispers. Both Freya Van den Bossche, federal Environment Minister, and Kathleen Van Brempt, state secretary for welfare at the workplace, know a thing or two about that. Van den Bossche began her job as minister, with which she was unexpectedly landed, very hesitantly. Her first policy measures as environment minister in the ozone summer were not really talked about very much, and in the government almost nothing was heard of her. Van den Bossche: ‘The breakthrough in the Kyoto talks with the regions was almost nothing was heard of the minister Freya Van den Bossche and state secretary Kathleen Van Brempt, naturally adored as ‘SPA babies’, have nonetheless been up to the task. With Kyoto and parental leave, each of them has scored a political victory, for themselves as well.

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Another benefit: thanks to the discreet negotiations, both Van den Bossche and Van Brempt obtained the not insignificant support of the centre-field concerned. Van den Bossche has the critical support of the centre-field concerned. Van den Bossche has the critical support of the centre-field concerned. Van den Bossche has the critical support of the centre-field concerned. Van den Bossche has the critical support of the centre-field concerned. Van den Bossche has the critical support of the centre-field concerned. Van den Bossche has the critical support of the centre-field concerned.
Spirit wants a solidarity pact with Wallonia

Spirit wants to negotiate with Wallonia on a solidarity pact. This seems to be the most important message to have come out of the SP.A partner’s programme conference. Such a solidarity pact should favour a system comparable with the one on which the German regions (Länder) base the determination of their mutual solidarity. The new pact should replace the solidarity transfers that are now inherent in the federally distributed social security system, in Van Weert’s opinion. Then there can finally be talks on a further state reform (FF).

ISABEL ALBERS • DE STANDAARD • 15 MARCH

‘Walloon friends, let’s conclude a solidarity pact’. So saying, chairperson Els Van Weert closed her party’s conference on Saturday with more than a wink at party colleague and former Lijster Pilgrimage chairman Lionel Vandenbergh (who once exclaimed: ‘Walloon friends, let’s separate’). A solidarity pact? Van Weert is referring to a similar agreement in Germany. ‘It’s based on objective parameters such as the number of unemployed persons and people who are ill. Then you can agree on a system whereby a region can count on guaranteed solidarity if its Gross Regional Product falls below a particular level in relation to the other region.’ At the moment the solidarity between Flanders and Wallonia is ingrained in the social security system. Therefore Wallonia also remains reluctant about talks on the defederalisation of health care and family allowance. Spirit hopes that a solidarity pact will remove that reluctance and initiate a debate on the state reform. It was striking how Els Van Weert closed the conference, which up until that point had said little about the ‘Flemish business’, with the state reform. ‘This is crucial for the Flemish project. We want to secure additional levers’. Spirit is thinking of the rent legislation, traffic laws, and economic and employment levers. The subdivision of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency should also take place. Prior to this, the 200 people in attendance had established the party’s priorities for the coming year. These include education, culture, creative economics and urban policy.

POLITICS AND ECONOMY

VLD mandates launch ‘readers’ letters campaign

The Flemish Liberals are going through hard times. Therefore they are doing literally everything they can to turn the tide. Vote-catchers such as Annemie Neyts and Jean-Marie Dedecker, who had originally announced that they did not want to take part in the regional elections, are now candidates on the VLD list for Brussels and West Flanders, respectively, at the specific request of the party’s leaders. Not only does the party have the opinion polls against it; the press is also not willing enough to give the party’s resurrection a helping hand, according to a staff member in the department of state secretary for administrative simplification Van Quickenborne. Together with MP Bart Tommelein, he used an e-mail campaign to call on Liberal grass roots supporters to bombard Flemish newspapers with letters highlighting the achievements of the VLD’s ministers. The news was published on the front page of De Standaard on 19 March. A little later Van Quickenborne distanced himself from the letter campaign, but Bart Tommelein, former spokesman for Patrick Dewael, continued to defend the initiative. In its edition of 20 March De Standaard points out that it is mainly the Vlaams Blok that has the patent on this kind of organised letter campaigns targeting newspapers. Political experts Van Aelst and Thevissen, quoted in the same edition, said that the initiative indicated the panic and feeling of powerlessness prevailing in the party.

WWW.VLD.BE

Windmills supply the energy of the future

At the Raversijde summit, the government made windmills at sea the major pillar of its Kyoto policy. The company C-Power, a consortium comprising the dredging company Dredging International, Inter electra, SIF (a subsidiary of Electricité de France) and Ecotech Finance/Socof (Wallon Region) recently secured the last permits for the building of 60 windmills. The whole project is to cost EUR 500 million and should save some 450,000 tons of CO2 emissions every year. For the guaranteed off-take of its ‘green’ energy, C-Power is relying on the ‘green’ electric power certificates. With these certificates suppliers must prove that 6% of their electric power supply is ‘green’ by 2010. But C-Power’s General Manager Filip Martens is afraid of unfair competition from the major supplier Electrabel and its subsidiary and electricity network manager Elia. For that matter, Electrabel did not receive government approval for its own windmill project (FF).

LUC HUYSMANS/ERIC POMPEN • TRENDS • 25 MARCH

Martens: ‘Our project doesn’t cost the taxpayer anything. At the moment ‘green’ power is still 3.1% more expensive. That amounts to one pizza per family. But if you count the external costs as well (damage to the environment), windmills are very competitive with traditional sources of energy, provided the government lays down clear rules and everyone abides by the free market’. However, C-Power remains alert to the possibility of unfair competition. Martens: ‘A lot depends on the price and conditions that the electricity network manager Elia will ask of us for the transmission of electricity. Two months ago this subsidiary of Electrabel was still speaking out vehemently against windmills in Belgium’s coastal waters. According to Elia, such projects cost at least EUR 10 to 15 million for the strengthening of the network on the coast in West Flanders’. Electrabel has also lodged a complaint with the Council of State aimed at having the ‘green’ energy obligation annulled.

WWW.C-POWER.BE
Belgacom must become more efficient

Now that Belgacom is a listed company, there will no doubt be greater pressure on the company to present good figures and become more efficient. Both Belgacom’s Chairman Jan Coene and Managing Director Didier Bellens stress that the sales efforts must be boosted. After the two previous restructuring operations that saw 10,000 employees leave the company, Belgens does not deny all possibility of there being a third operation in the pipeline. But he says that there are no plans for any lay-offs.

BERT BROENS • DE TIJD • 23 MARCH

Bellens, who already hinted that a new intervention could not be ruled out, said yesterday that ‘there are no plans to lay off staff’. This is not the case among executive staff, either, he says. Observers feel that Belgens can do little other than announce that there are no plans. After all, there is a top-level conference of management and trade unions under way, on employment in the company. This should lead to the personnel requirements being fleshed out.

According to Bellens, the purpose of the examination of the personnel requirements is to ‘look into whether the figure of 17,500 people currently employed at Belgacom and Proximus is the right number’. The study will also examine ‘whether we should have more people in sales and perhaps fewer in administration’. Jan Coene, chairman of the Belgacom board of directors, is already convinced that this is so. ‘We must try to get more people in the market. We have shown with Proximus that we can set up a strongly customer-oriented company, and we should follow that example with the entire group. Naturally we also want to have operational excellence internally as well. Ongoing improvement is necessary in order to stay in the top flight.’

Belgacom flotation proves to be a succes

The flotation of the telecoms operator Belgacom was a great success on the first day of its listing on 22 March. In the morning of Monday 22 March it was soon clear that there was a huge interest. The demand exceeded the supply more than three times over, among both institutional and private investors. More than 143,000 private investors subscribed. At half past nine Public Enterprises Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) was able symbolically to list the opening price on the boards of the Brussels stock exchange. At the initial quotation the price was EUR 24.5, but a little later the share began to climb and closed on EUR 25.67, 4.78% higher than the flotation price. With a trading volume of almost EUR 602 million Belgacom was the most traded share in Europe on 22 March. Meanwhile the other European markets almost all closed with heavy losses on the day, as a result of the terrorist attacks of 11 March and the assassination of the Hamas leader Sheik Yassin. Analysts and merchant bankers attributed the attractiveness of the Belgacom share to its high dividend yield.

EWALD PIRONET • DE TIJD • 23 MARCH

Most analysts reckon that the Belgacom share was floated at an attractive price. ‘The selling parties obviously wanted to sell at as high a price as possible, but the government wanted to bring the share to the market at a lower price in order to make Belgacom a successful flotation,’ said Marc Engels, head of the study department at Puilaeuco. ‘The parties that are selling their Belgacom stock are in any case securing a good capital gain.’ A banker from within the syndicate countered the opinion that the consortium was selling Belgacom too cheaply. ‘You always have to leave some money on the table for the investor. He should receive a reward for all the trouble he has gone to in analysing the company and for the risk he is taking. Belgacom also has a management team that has not yet proven itself in a stock market environment.’

It was commented in London that the trading volume was not exceptionally high. Only 1.5% of the shares brought to the market were sold over the counter on the first day. Usually that figure is between 25 and 50%. That points to the fact that Belgacom has loyal investors from the outset, who want to hold onto the shares.

Belgacom is taking advantage of its image as a dull company that pays out a high dividend yield. It was precisely this image that was emphasised in recent weeks in the presentations to investors. The Belgacom share stands at seventh position in the Bel20 and 40th position in the Euronext100.

NAME

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SOURCE: DELTA LLOYD BELGIË

WWW.BELGACOM.BE
Flemish pig farmers are facing dark times. More than one in three farmers are being forced to stop the repayment of their loans. Flemish pig farms suffered an average loss of EUR 22,000 last year, according to agricultural expert Luc Busschaert. Pig farms with sows suffered losses of up to EUR 37,000. Pig breeders are used to ups and downs as a result of the fluctuating price of pork, but the downturn has never been so acute, says Farmers’ Union Chairman Roger Saenen. Competition from abroad is extremely keen and is sending prices plummeting. In particular exports to Korea are suffering from the price of the dollar and competition from Brazil. The Association of Pig Farmers also points an accusing finger at the government, because it is reportedly making the processing of manure prohibitive. Many pig farmers see pig farms switching to outwork as the only solution (FF).

KAREN TOREN NIELSEN • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 23 MARCH

The entire Flemish pig sector is reeling under the severe crisis of the last few years. And yet it is the farms with sows, which provide the piglets, that are receiving most blows. ‘Sow farms are the worst affected because the price of piglets is plummeting. That is partly on account of the feed manufacturers,’ says Saenen. ‘The free market determines the price of pork and that is currently abnormally low. But some affected parties, such as the feed manufacturers (who also run farms for porkers, ed.) try to reduce their loss by paying an extremely low price for the piglets’. The Farmers’ Union points a finger at the cheaper export countries. ‘We can’t compete with them. The strict legislation means we can never offer the prices that, say, Brazil applies’. André Bracke, chairman of the Association of Pig Farmers, mentions another reason for the crisis. ‘The government is asking us to invest in manure processing, but it doesn’t give any guarantees as to the expansion of the farms. Manure processing is only affordable if the farm can write this down over a large number of animals.’

Hedwig Kerckhove (Farmers’ Union): ‘The animal feed supplier (80% of the costs for the pig sector, ed.) is quick to note the payment arrears. A mutual arrangement between the pig farmer and the supplier often ends up with a noiseless switch from self-employed status to hired labour. In these cases, the pig farmer can continue to work on his farm but the animals become the property of the animal feed supplier’.

WWW.BOERENBOND.BE

Almanij posts 30% growth in profit

FF EDITOR

Almanij, the parent holding company of the banking and insurance companies KBC and KB Lux, the investment company Gevaert and the insurance company Alafin, recorded 30.6% more profit than in 2002. Of the EUR 937 million in net profit, EUR 685 million comes from banking activities, EUR 187 million from insurance activities, and EUR 88 million from the investment holding company Gevaert, whose largest shareholding is in the image development company Agfa Gevaert. However, the substantial growth in net profit is to a large degree also the result of extraordinary results and lower taxes. Earnings from ordinary operations fell by 1.2% to EUR 1.86 billion. The Almanij group recorded a turnover of EUR 7.476 billion in 2003.

WWW.ALMANIJ.BE

Cinema group Kinepolis makes profit again

FF EDITOR

After three successive years of losses, the Flemish cinema group Kinepolis finally made a profit again in 2003, despite an 11% drop in visitor numbers. In total, Kinepolis received 24.2 million visitors in all its complexes in Belgium, France, Spain, Poland and Switzerland, compared with 27.3 million in 2002. But the figures are distorted somewhat by the sale of some 31 cinemas in Belgium, and in particular in Italy. If these are not included in the calculation, the fall in visitors amounts to only 6.5%. If we also take account of these sales of cinemas, the group’s turnover fell by 2.3% to EUR 191.4 million and the gross profit by 1% to EUR 42.3 million. In net terms, this gives a profit of EUR 2.7 million. This is the first time since 1999 that the group has recorded a profit, and investors saw this rewarded by a 4.8% rise in the share price - taking the share to its highest level since 2001. The high price provided the Flanders Regional Investment Company with an excellent opportunity to sell its remaining block of Kinepolis shares (De Tijd, 20 March). For a 9.85% shareholding, the venture capital group received EUR 13.78 million, representing a capital gain of EUR 5.5 million.

WWW.KINEPOLIS.BE

WWW.GIMV.BE
Redundancies in psychiatric institutions

Some 100 jobs were lost this week in the psychiatric institutions of Ghent and Beernem (West Flanders). The institutions are run by the order of the Brothers of Love and have some 750 and 500 members of staff, respectively. These are two renowned centres: the Dr Guislain psychiatric hospital in Ghent and the Sint-Amandus psychiatric centre in Beernem. In Beernem, at least, the redundancies for the time being only affect the logistical staff, whilst in Ghent it is the carers that are hit by the layoffs. Government under-funding is reportedly the direct cause of the layoffs. The government pays not only too little, but also too late, says De Standaard. Thus in 2003 the Dr Guislain hospital received EUR 2 million too little for the services that it is obliged by the government to provide. But the government’s accumulated payment arrears amounts to much more than that, namely EUR 8 million, with the result that the institution has been forced to borrow from the banks. Thirdly, the government is always too late in updating its subsidies to the hospitals (FF).

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 24 MARCH

These are three governmental errors that affect all hospitals. For psychiatric hospitals, in particular, something else is added to the equation. At the beginning of the 1990s, the limited funding of the psychiatric sector led to institutions dealing with their patients fairly ‘passively’. There was little money for treatment, so ‘preservation’ was the order of the day. Many patients remained there longer than was medically necessary.

The then Social Affairs Minister, Philippe Busquin (PS) began to shake that tree. There was movement (‘reconversion’) in the sector. For long-term patients who needed care rather than intensive treatment, or who could even live independently to a degree, psychiatric care homes (‘PVTs’) and forms of sheltered housing were introduced, which are considerably cheaper than psychiatric hospitals. It was also the intention to have the remaining patients treated in a more active manner, and for more specialised work to be carried out. The hospital beds would become more expensive. The new, cheaper forms were soon ready, and the government saved money with these. The improvement in care for the other patients was slowed down, and only really got under way under the last government. The funding for this also got going, but when the tap really had to be turned on, in 2004, the funding came to a stop. The new government did not have any extra money available in its 2004 budget for the reforms that the previous one had set in train.

Perhaps in 2005, people are now saying. As a result of all this the two hospitals have stumbled: they set up new departments for the most serious cases, at the government’s express request, and hoped that the government would provide them with the money - but it hasn’t.

WWW.GUISLAIN.BE

Flemish museums set up Flemish Art Collection

The museums for Fine Arts in Antwerp and Ghent and the Groeningemuseum in Bruges will be gearing their activities to each other

ERIC RINCKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 25 MARCH

Fifty thousand collection pieces, including seven thousand paintings and drawings, and an intrinsic value equal to that of the Louvre in Paris or London’s National Gallery - this was how Flemish Culture Minister Van Grembergen (Spirit) described the joint venture between the three Flemish art-history museums yesterday. A user-friendly website [www.vlaamsekunstcollectie.be] is designed to support the joint promotion. The site offers information on the three museums, and on the exhibitions currently running and scheduled activities, and also contains an image bank. Eventually the image bank will be expanded and will show all of the three museums’ art possessions, but for the time being only a fraction of the collections can be viewed. The Flemish Art Collection has received a subsidy of EUR 300,000 from the Flemish Community for the various projects. After approval of the heritage decree, it will be possible for the co-operation to be structurally subsidised.

In the meantime a joint museum security policy has been developed, exhibitions are being geared to each other, and museum staff regularly exchange expertise. But the museums want more, always with the optimisation of staff and resources in mind. In the framework of the joint activities for the public, they also want to set up common educational projects and merchandising.

One of the most notable ambitions is a joint purchasing fund. The idea here is not to bring together the museums’ existing funds, but to create a new purchasing fund, as a result of which the Flemish Art Collection could become an important player on the international art market. The organisers also want to establish a common restoration and conservation policy.

There is also the prospect of an Office for Art-Historical Documentation being set up. The idea is for this to grow into a reference centre with an international image, in which the Groeningemuseum concentrates on the Flemish Primitives, Antwerp takes care of...
Flemish Baroque in co-operation with the existing Rubenianum and Ghent documents 19th and 20th century art. Although there will be intensive co-operation, the three museums will continue to retain their own specific identity and profile. The lending of works will be possible, but a genuine exchange of works of art in order to make the museums more specialised is not immediately on the agenda. The three museums will be organising the first major joint exhibition project, together with BOZAR, in the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, in 2005. The subject will be the origin and development of the public art collections in Flanders.

www.vlaamsenkunstcollectie.be

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