Somers and De Batselier present Flemish demands

After 13 June a ‘Forum’ will be set up in which Francophones and Flemings will continue to discuss the state reform. Bart Somers and Norbert De Batselier, the Minister-President of the Government of Flanders and the President of the Flemish Parliament, have prepared a ‘realistic version’ of the package of demands that the Flemish parties could take, united as a front, to the talks with the Francophones. In the Somers-De Batselier memorandum, proposals are made for the regionalisation of the traffic regulations, the railways, inland navigation and parts of the economy, employment (regional collective labour agreements) and tax matters (additional regional income tax). The proposals also advocate the implementation authority for the family allowance and medical care to be transferred to the regions, but the financing to be kept federal. Somers and De Batselier are making the proposal in their own name. According to De Standaard, their aim is twofold: to see to it that Flanders can go into these negotiations in a strong position and at the same time prevent the opposition (CD&V-N-VA and the Vlaams Blok) from drumming the purple parties further into the corner in the election battle with their radical Flemish demands. Eric Van Rompuy, parliamentary party leader of the CD&V in the Flemish Parliament, dismissed the proposal as an unreliable electoral manoeuvre (FF).

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 28 MAY

After the regional elections of 13 June, there will in any case be community negotiations. ‘If the Flemish parties, majority and opposition alike, form a front in those talks, they will gain more than if they row about them among themselves. What’s more, we have to be realistic: if we ask for everything, we’ll come away with nothing. We have to go to these talks with a realistic package of demands which goes as far as possible for us, but does not rattle the Francophones too much’, reasoned Somers and De Batselier. So, realistic demands it is to be. ‘We hope that the Flemish parties, and also the democratic opposition, subscribe to this and that they will stop the fruitless upping of the community stakes. If every party attempts to present itself as more Flemish than the other, we will all make a great deal of noise, but will achieve nothing’, said Somers and De Batselier. Their parties, VLD and SPA, will benefit from this. Now they have to subscribe to the Flemish demand in the Flemish Parliament to have the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency split, but their federal MPs must subsequently torpedo that demand in order to keep the federal government in office. The opposition can then mercilessly pitch into them.

INTRODUCTION

Christian Democrats and the ‘purple’ parties are approaching each other to turn the Flemish elections into federal elections. De Morgen (25 May) called it shadow fighting. CD&V chairman Yves Leterme and his Flemish-National alliance partner N-VA are of course displaying the greatest respect for the autonomous Flemish level. Nonetheless they feel that if Prime Minister Verhofstadt’s VLD loses the Flemish elections, the Premier himself would be best advised to stand down from the federal government. SPA chairman Steve Stevaert feels that it is therefore clear that there is a federal stake involved in the Flemish elections for all parties, including the CD&V-N-VA alliance. Therefore he is repeating his plea for the Flemish and federal elections to be held simultaneously. The CD&V-N-VA alliance’s demand that the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency be split before the new Government of Flanders is formed has provided the VLD with ammunition. They are warning that with the CD&V-N-VA in power, the country would stay ungovernable for months. The reactions of the Socialist figureheads on the other side of the linguistic divide, Piquet (candidate Minister-President of the Brussels Region) and Van Cauwenberghe (Minister-President of the Wallon Government) to the Flemish Alliance’s firm demand, have also fuelled the prospect that the VLD would be tempted to present itself as more Flemish than the other, we will all make a great deal of noise, but will achieve nothing’, said Somers and De Batselier. So, realistic demands it is to be. ‘We hope that the Flemish parties, and also the democratic opposition, subscribe to this and that they will stop the fruitless upping of the community stakes. If every party attempts to present itself as more Flemish than the other, we will all make a great deal of noise, but will achieve nothing’, said Somers and De Batselier. Their parties, VLD and SPA, will benefit from this. Now they have to subscribe to the Flemish demand in the Flemish Parliament to have the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency split, but their federal MPs must subsequently torpedo that demand in order to keep the federal government in office. The opposition can then mercilessly pitch into them.

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Verhofstadt heads ranking for presidency of EC

The respectable British weekly *The Economist* tipping Prime Minister Verhofstadt and his Luxembourg counterpart Jean-Claude Juncker as the leading candidates for the presidency of the European Commission made front-page news in *Het Laatste Nieuws* (22 May). The high ranking (five to one) is down to the support of Chirac and Schröder. Additional plus points are his knowledge of languages, his youthfulness and his energetic air, according to *The Economist*. Disadvantages are the fact that he is ‘abused’ in his own country, that the British care little for him, and that he is ‘a lightweight’. In the same ranking the candidate heading the CD&V list Jean-Luc Dehaene is in ninth place, at 25 to 1. But as he is a ‘man of the past’ he stands little chance. According to *The Independent*, Verhofstadt can now reportedly also count on the support of Tony Blair, although Blair’s spokesman refused to confirm this. After all, the United Kingdom is no longer able to pronounce a veto, as it did ten years ago against Jean-Luc Dehaene. But Verhofstadt remains unacceptable for Gert-Jan Pöttering (in the *Financial Times*, Germany), president of the largest parliamentary group in the European Parliament, the EPP (FF).

Dehaene turns down debate with Verhofstadt

The candidate heading the CD&V-NVA list for the European elections, Jean-Luc Dehaene, entered the election campaign with a visit to the Flemish steel company Sidmar. After a stay abroad he had briefly reappeared last Sunday in the stands at the Belgian Cup Final, which was won by his Club Brugge. At Sidmar he answered journalists’ questions in his recognisable, coarse nonsensical tone. To the question as to whether he was now finally starting his campaign, he replied that he had been working at European level for the last four years, and that if the journalists had failed to notice this, that was their problem. He pointedly rejected any debate with his arch-rival Verhofstadt: ‘I refuse to debate with a bogus candidate, and certainly not on anything other than Europe. Verhofstadt is leaning over backwards to become Commission President and in the meantime he is involved in an election [the regional election, ed.] which is none of his business’.

The next day Verhofstadt reacted in a strikingly polite tone: ‘I have always held Dehaene in great esteem. That is why I appointed him Vice-Chairman of the European Convention. I have never attacked my predecessor, because I now know what a difficult job being Prime Minister is. I do not want to take part in a mudslinging contest that was apparently started yesterday’ (*De Standaard*, 27 May).

The CD&V says it is not guilty of mudslinging at all, but is only using political arguments, since according to the party Verhofstadt will never take up a seat in the European Parliament and the federal policy should not come up for debate in the Flemish and European campaigns.

Proposal for simultaneous elections gain ground

In a conspicuous interview in *De Tijd* (22 May) SP.A chairman Steve Stevaert once again argued in favour of having federal and regional elections held simultaneously. He feels that the current organisation with regional elections barely a year after the federal elections causes confusion rather than clarity among voters as to Flemish and Belgian level. He is suggesting that the elections be held simultaneously again and that candidates appear on a single list. That would make it simpler to distinguish the two government levels and to enable the difference between Flemish and federal politicians to emerge. To guarantee the simultaneous nature of the elections, federal Belgium should introduce a legislature parliament, after the fashion of Flanders, he says. But at federal level the political establishment has to bear in mind that a paralysing and insoluble conflict between Flemish and French speaking communities could arise. In such a crisis situation, he sees interim federal elections as a solution: ‘Therefore I want to incorporate the possibility of interim elections at federal level, to get out of the impasse. But those elections may under no circumstances replace the simultaneous elections.’

Dirk Van Mechelen, Flemish Budget Minister, also wants a new electoral reform, but he is suggesting having the regional elections coincide with the municipal elections (*Knack*, 26 May). According to Van Mechelen, voters grumble at having to go and vote again within a year. Without reform there is a risk of that being repeated, since Flemish voters will have to vote at least six times in the next ten years: federal elections in 2007 and 2011, regional and European elections in 2009 and 2014, and municipal and provincial elections in 2006 and 2012.
VLD sees political chaos in Flemish Alliance's plans

**The VLD saw its chance to paint a doom-laden picture of political chaos if the Flemish alliance of CD&V and N-VA came to power.**

Given that Prime Minister Verhofstadt is turning the regional elections of 13 June into a test for the federal government, he should stand down if he loses those elections, reasons CD&V party chairman Yves Leterme. On the VRT’s political programme De Zevende Dag, SP.A chairman Steve Stevaert publicly asked him if he was planning ‘to break into the federal government’ if his party were to win the elections. No, he didn’t want that, he wanted to respect the results of last year’s federal elections, he answered. So as far as he was concerned there should not be any fresh federal elections after 13 June. But if his party enters the Government of Flanders, he wants it also to enter the federal government, he added a few hours later at the conference of his alliance partner N-VA. He reckons that Verhofstadt should then pack up and go, for both Roman Catholic-red and Roman Catholic-blue have a majority in the House. A few weeks ago Leterme promised his Flemish-National electoral partner that he would not form a Government of Flanders as long as the constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde was not split. The French-speaking parties are threatening with demands such as an extension of the Brussels Region and the attachment of the Flemish municipality of Voeren. The VLD did not hesitate yesterday to put the spotlight on Leterme’s comments. ‘I really don’t understand any of it’, said party chairman Dirk Sterckx. ‘First he doesn’t want to ‘break in’. Then he says: ‘I’m not breaking in, as long as the door is opened first’. Yeah, of course!’ Sterckx is also of the view that the CD&V will have no place in the federal government after 13 June in any case. Now that the VLD is doing so badly in the polls, the Liberals appear to be preparing for a sit-in at Rue de la Loi 16. ‘These are just Flemish elections, aren’t they?’

As long as the elections do not coincide, every formation of a government has to follow its own logic. The federal government was formed last year. Why are they prepared for a sit-in, just as I have been saying previously again, just as I have been saying last year’s federal elections, he answered. So as far as he was concerned there should not be any fresh federal elections after 13 June. But if his party enters the Government of Flanders, he wants it also to enter the federal government, he added a few hours later at the conference of his alliance partner N-VA. He reckons that Verhofstadt should then pack up and go, for both Roman Catholic-red and Roman Catholic-blue have a majority in the House. A few weeks ago Leterme promised his Flemish-National electoral partner that he would not form a Government of Flanders as long as the constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde was not split. The French-speaking parties are threatening with demands such as an extension of the Brussels Region and the attachment of the Flemish municipality of Voeren. The VLD did not hesitate yesterday to put the spotlight on Leterme’s comments. ‘I really don’t understand any of it’, said party chairman Dirk Sterckx. ‘First he doesn’t want to ‘break in’. Then he says: ‘I’m not breaking in, as long as the door is opened first’. Yeah, of course!’ Sterckx is also of the view that the CD&V will have no place in the federal government after 13 June in any case. Now that the VLD is doing so badly in the polls, the Liberals appear to be preparing for a sit-in at Rue de la Loi 16. ‘These are just Flemish elections, aren’t they?’

As long as the elections do not coincide, every formation of a government has to follow its own logic. The federal government was formed last year. Why should that have to happen again after 13 June, in the wake of Flemish elections? The Liberals now above all want to create the image that an electoral victory for CD&V would make the country ‘ungovernable’. ‘First Leterme says there will be no Government of Flanders, as long as the constituency of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde is not split’, says Sterckx. ‘That would plunge Flanders into months of uncertainty. And now he is extending that uncertainty to the federal level: here, too, there must also apparently be months of chaos. Is that what CD&V means by good policy?’ It was Steve Stevaert who set the whole debate rolling on Sunday morning by asking Leterme if he was planning to break into the federal government. Yesterday the SP.A chairman did not really feel like getting involved in the politicking again. This is the last thing I shall be saying on the matter: ‘I am pleased that Leterme retracted on Sunday evening what he had said on Sunday morning’, said Stevaert. ‘Now there is clarity. Everyone now knows that the Flemish elections are also about the federal government. Even Yves Leterme, who has always been opposed to simultaneous elections, is now linking everything to everything. Let everyone therefore be consistent, and let’s have all the elections held simultaneously again, just as I have been saying for years’.

**RUUD GOOSSENS • DE MORGEN • 25 MAY**

It is not really easy to follow the shadow fighting that has been going on over the last few days in the Rue de la Loi. CD&V chairman Yves Leterme does actually want to break into the federal government, but is refusing to say so in clear words, given that there are only Flemish elections on the agenda. The VLD is throwing its federal Prime Minister into the fray, but is stressing that these Flemish elections have nothing to do with the Verhoftadt government. According to Steve Stevaert, only one conclusion can be drawn: ‘Simply have all elections held at the same time again’.

Another voice was heard from the Flemish alliance’s corner, when N-VA chairman Geert Bourgeois said that a new federal government without elections was ‘unlikely’. The VLD did not hesitate yesterday to put the spotlight on Leterme’s comments. ‘I really don’t understand any of it’, said party chairman Dirk Sterckx. ‘First he doesn’t want to ‘break in’. Then he says: ‘I’m not breaking in, as long as the door is opened first’. Yeah, of course!’ Sterckx is also of the view that the CD&V will have no place in the federal government after 13 June in any case. Now that the VLD is doing so badly in the polls, the Liberals appear to be preparing for a sit-in at Rue de la Loi 16. ‘These are just Flemish elections, aren’t they?’
ACW gives full support to CD&V/N-VA

What the First of May is to the socialist workers’ movement, Resurrum Novarum is for the Christian workers’ movement. In line with annual tradition, this occurs on Ascension Day, which this year fell on 20 May. The ACW insists on its independence, but in the middle of the election campaign it appears that its links with the CD&V are closer than ever - certainly now that the CD&V chairman Yves Leterme comes from the union’s own ranks. Jan Renders, Chairman of the ACW movement and Luc Cortebeeck, Chairman of the Christian union ACV, sharply criticised the purple coalition’s policy in their respective speeches. They expressed a forceful veto of the CD&V/ACW mandatory Yves Leterme criticism for his ‘free-of-charge’ policy. CD&V/ACW chairman Steve Stevaert a lashing in employment, housing, education that money should go into investments cost reductions. The ACW feels that the Lambermont agreement, into wage come that Flanders has obtained from Liberals’ plans to convert the extra in- come that. They expressed a forceful veto of the CD&V/ACW mandatory Yves Leterme criticised the fact that the SPA had gone along with the tax amnesty. However, CD&V and ACW are not in agreement on everything. Unlike the ACW, CD&V feels that a wage cost reduction is necessary to safeguard the competitive position of the country’s companies. The ACW has remained loyal to the Christian-Democrats during their journey through the wilderness. Jan Renders & Co. could not doubt have had a greater impact on policy over the last few years had they more eagerly taken up the Greens’ advances or answered the call of Steve Stevaert and his colleagues. At times the temptation must have been great - certainly after CD&V formed an alliance with N-VA, which led to a risk of the Christian-Democrats filling the right-wing/conservative hole in the electoral market. Partly due to pressure from the ACW, this has not occurred. Anyone consulting the alliance’s electoral manifesto cannot fail to see that employment, housing and welfare, the ACW’s priorities, are very much in evidence. For the ACW, it is now a matter of hoping that the Christian-Democrats do not mess things up in the final stretch to the election victory. The polls are so favourable for the Flemish alliance that the flush of victory has already taken hold. The Christian Democrats’ behaviour is reflecting greater confidence in victory by the day. Ministerial portfolios are already being requested and distributed. A little ‘more respect’ for the voter would not go amiss - even if only because the prizes are handed out at the finishing line, there is nothing that voters like less than arrogance, and politicians who are too big for their boots might yet be taught a lesson or two at the last moment.

www.cdenv.be
www.acw.be

Vlaams Blok and the crime in its own ranks

‘Less crime, more Flanders’, one of the Blok’s election slogans, has taken on a very cynical undertone

Tough luck for the Vlaams Blok. A local councillor for the party from a village in the Waasland (De Klinge, Sint-Gillis-Waas) went completely berserk after he had been thrown out of a pub by the landlord following accusations of drugs use. Bent on revenge, the brute drove off on a motorbike and came back a little later with a pistol, which he emptied into the crowd that had formed in front of the pub. The balance: one dead and three wounded. Only some time earlier another Blok local councillor had been picked up for dealing in drugs in another town. In a house search 1,000 XTC pills, half a kilogram of speed and a revolver were confiscated. Party chairman Frank Vanhecke announced that he would henceforth be having party members subject to a more thorough screening before they are able to run as candidates on a Vlaams Blok list. But barely a few days later De Morgen [27 May] reported, in a headline story, that Rob Verreycken, a candidate on the Antwerp list and head of the party’s legal department, had beaten up his ex-wife in the street. De Morgen feels that ‘Less crime, more Flanders’, one of the Blok’s election slogans, has taken on a very cynical undertone. The Blok wants to become socially acceptable, and is seeking strategies enabling it to be counted as an acceptable right-wing party. But putting on a made-to-measure suit is not enough for that. The Blok’s leaders can do their best, but the second- and third-rank figures are still demonstrating in no uncertain terms what kind of people thrive in its subsoil.

Opinion

YVES DESMET - DE MORGEN - 22 MAY

The Blok’s defence consists in the assertion that you always have a couple of rotten apples in the basket. That may be so, but in the Blok’s case it is beginning to look like a very malodorous pile of fruit. We are now up to seven Blok elected representatives that have been sentenced or are being prosecuted for racism, assault and battery, indecent assault on minors, fraud, arson, burglary, drug trafficking and murder. Less crime, more Flanders… of course. The Blok’s leaders can do their best, but the second- and third-rank figures are still demonstrating in no uncertain terms what kind of people thrive in its subsoil.

Opinion

STEFAN HUYSENTRUYT - DE TIJD - 21 MAY

The days when the Christian workers’ movement openly gave advice on how to vote are long gone, but the criticism of the purple coalition a few weeks before the European and regional elections can hardly be interpreted as anything other than a hefty helping hand for the ‘positive alternative’ embodied by the friendly Christian Democrats. The ACW has remained loyal to the Christian-Democrats during their journey through the wilderness. Jan Renders & Co. could not doubt have had a greater impact on policy over the last few years had they more eagerly taken up the Greens’ advances or answered the call of Steve Stevaert and his colleagues. At times the temptation must have been great - certainly after CD&V formed an alliance with N-VA, which led to a risk of the Christian-Democrats filling the right-wing/conservative hole in the electoral market. Partly due to pressure from the ACW, this has not occurred. Anyone consulting the alliance’s electoral manifesto cannot fail to see that employment, housing and welfare, the ACW’s priorities, are very much in evidence. For the ACW, it is now a matter of hoping that the Christian-Democrats do not mess things up in the final stretch to the election victory. The polls are so favourable for the Flemish alliance that the flush of victory has already taken hold. The Christian Democrats’ behaviour is reflecting greater confidence in victory by the day. Ministerial portfolios are already being requested and distributed. A little ‘more respect’ for the voter would not go amiss - even if only because the prizes are handed out at the finishing line, there is nothing that voters like less than arrogance, and politicians who are too big for their boots might yet be taught a lesson or two at the last moment.

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The social elections in the Belgian companies produced few surprises. The predicted breakthrough of the liberal trade union ACLVB has not materialised, and the Socialist trade union ABVV was not punished for the conflict between chairperson Mia De Vits and a number of Walloon union bosses, which eventually led to the former’s departure to the European political arena. The Christian ACW remains intact as the largest trade union and even records a slight gain in the economic sectors at the expense of the ABVV. An opposite movement occurs in the non-profit sector, traditionally a stronghold of the ACW. Here the Socialist union records a gain. The Liberal trade union ACLVB was unable to convert the small gain in votes into a gain in seats. In general the result gives the impression of fairly stable voting behaviour at least a good deal more stable than in parliamentary elections (FF).

Johan Rasking • De Standaard • 22 May

Was the ballot therefore an indicator for nothing? No, say the trade union leaders in chorus: the great stability in the results conceals a very substantial development in the number of companies and trade union candidates that took part. In many companies elections were held for the first time or the company composition was fundamentally altered after the elections of 2000. And one third of all candidates were running for the first time. The elections lend their action in the companies legitimacy.

The ACV’s dominant position in the non-profit sector is striking, with almost 70% of the votes and even almost 75% of the seats. In Flanders the Christian union’s percentage even exceeds 80%. There has been talk of a monopoly. And yet it is clear that the ACV cannot build any more profit margins here, except for a little in Wallonia. In Flanders and Brussels there is a clear loss of votes and mandates.

The ABVV, which is making respectable progress in Flemish and Brussels non-profit organisations, is taking advantage of this, but the Socialist union is still very much in the minority, with a share of barely 20 to 24%. For the ACLVB, despite the slight gain, it is still a question of soldiering on in the non-profit sector, with less than 4% of the seats to be distributed. The election result is not only to be read by sector, but also deserves to be viewed from a regional perspective. The trends are anything but the same for the three regions in the country. In Flanders the ACV books a gain in economic sectors, but on the contrary a somewhat larger loss in the non-profit sector. Together that gives 57.7% of all Flemish votes for the works councils (a gain of almost 1%) and 62.2% of the mandates (a very slight loss). For the Christian union, the Flemish region remains the strongest home market. For the ABVV Flanders remains the region with the lowest scores, with just over 31% of the votes and just under 30% of the mandates. A striking feature in the Socialist union’s Flemish result is the contrast between the loss of Flemish votes (by one percentage point) and the slight gain in seats (less than 0.5 of a percentage point). The ACLVB continues to tread water in Flanders, with less than 10% of the votes and 6% of the seats. The Liberal union is proportionally stronger in Brussels than in Flanders. (Table p. 3)

www.acw.be
www.abvv.be

ECONOMY AND WORK

Banks

24 free cash withdrawals

Freya Vanden Bossche (Consumer Affairs, SP.A) and Fientje Moerman (Economic Affairs, VLD) have reached a provisional agreement with the Belgian banks.

Bart Moerman • Het Nieuwsblad • 26 May

Everyone is entitled to 24 free cash withdrawals, in other words two a month. According to the banks’ statistics, the average customer withdrew money 22 times in 2002. According to the agreement the number of free withdrawals should be just above the average’, said minister Vanden Bossche, who at the same time stipulated that the visually impaired and the physically handicapped can go to the counter free of charge the same number of times. ‘They cannot use cash dispensers. No bank can refuse them the free counter transaction’. In the mean-

Focus on Flanders • 22 May - 28 May 2004 • Number 20
The umpteenth record year of De Lijn

The fact that barely 28% of the operating costs is covered by the company's own revenues, elicits remarkably little protest

The past year was again a record year for the Flemish public transport company De Lijn. Flemings made some 362 million bus or tram journeys, 14% up on the previous year. In its thirteen years, the company has seen the number of passengers increase almost uninterruptedly. The average Flemish user is also very satisfied with the service offered by De Lijn. That should come as no surprise, for half of those who use De Lijn travel free or virtually free. After the free travel for pensioners, the Buzzy Pazz travel pass for young people under 25 is now also proving a success. But Flemings who do not use De Lijn also seem to view it in a largely positive light. This was revealed by research into confidence in the public institutions. The fact that barely 28% of the operating costs (last year the Flemish government coughed up some EUR 500 million for De Lijn) is covered by the company's own revenues from the sale of tickets and travel passes, elicits remarkably little protest. Quite the reverse, more and more municipalities are participating in the third-party pay system, whereby they assume a part of the costs of the citizens' transport. In the meantime De Lijn is also negotiating with employers, another third-party payer that could pay for a part of its personnel's transport costs. The continued expansion has meant that over the years De Lijn has turned into a major employer as well. The company started out with 4,600 employees in 1991, and now has 9,000, if you also count the little transport companies that operate on behalf of De Lijn (FF).

Opinion

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 26 MAY

The expansion of De Lijn is based on a policy largely trumpeted by the Socialists, but endorsed by a broad consensus in the Flemish Parliament: the basic transport decree. The aim of this in the medium term is to guarantee that every Fleming has access to public transport within a reasonable distance from his home. Perhaps this is a visionary decree which will see Flanders leading the rest of Europe in twenty years' time: fewer cars and traffic jams, and yet greater ease of getting round. That aim is far from having been achieved, it is true. There are people who have very good access to public transport and there are those who pay just as much every year in taxes but have nothing to do with it. Just try travelling from a corner of Limburg to the coast and back in a day. You can't. Or trying commuting from a medium-sized town to an industrial estate in the suburbs of a large city.

But if all those who are paying but receiving nothing can be appeased just a little longer, in ten years we just might have a decent public transport network. Then a mass switch-over from the car to public transport might be feasible and it will turn out that the policy was indeed visionary. In the meantime the success of De Lijn is based not so much on that, but on the fact that many can travel free or almost free of charge. And this is where questions can be raised. Is it good for a service to be offered free of charge at all? Is it environmentally responsible to act as though no environmental costs are associated with 'public travel'? Is it good to make public transport so dependent on the government? If that government quits the next day, the fairy tale will be over. The same also applies if the European authorities were to say that the bus and tram market is to be liberalised, like the rail market. Therefore it is surprising that there is scarcely any political debate about De Lijn and that EUR 500 million, which amounts to EUR 80 per Fleming per year. There is also hardly anything on the subject in the Flemish election programmes.

WWW.DELIJN.BE

Omega Pharma buys Pfizer medicines for 135 million €

The listed Flemish pharmaceuticals company Omega Pharma is buying 60 European over-the-counter (OTC) products from the American pharmaceutical group Pfizer. These are skin and hair care products (Claire Fisher), lice treatments (Lycea) and products against sunburn. Omega Pharma paid EUR 135 million for the products, which together represent an annual turnover of EUR 80 million. On the over-the-counter medicines market that is a very reasonable price, says the managing director of Omega Pharma, Marc Coucke. The acquisition means that Omega Pharma will be active in eight additional European countries. In each of these new countries the pharmaceuticals group will be setting up a sales office, except in Italy. There Omega Pharma is taking over an as yet unnamed OTC company (acquisition price: EUR 15 million) (FF).

DE TIJD • 27 MAY

Thanks to the acquisition of 10% (60 brand names) of Pfizer’s European OTC portfolio, as was announced on Wednesday, Omega Pharma becomes, in its own words, the first pan-European OTC group. In one fell swoop the group increases the number of countries where it is active from nine to 17. ‘In most of the new countries the Pfizer brands already enjoy good brand awareness. Some products are even market leaders. That is an ideal basis on which to develop our network’, says Coucke. Coucke expects the new brands to contribute in excess of EUR 20 million to the operating cashflow by 2006. The acquisition of the Pfizer brands prompted Omega Pharma yesterday to raise its turnover forecasts for the third time this year. It presented its forecasts for the first time after the good results for 2003 had been reported. Last month it did so again after the acquisition of Wartner Europe, a producer of products for the treatment of warts. At that point Omega Pharma was basing itself on an annual turnover for 2004 of EUR 820 million. ‘We are on course for a turnover of one billion euros in 2005’, says Coucke. ‘If we take a broad interpretation of the concept of OTC, Omega Pharma is the fifth largest player in Europe’.
Belgian artists still receive little in royalties

The future of Belgian authors and composers looks bleak. They only receive 1.4% of the royalties collected in Belgium.

The Belgian authors' association Sabam recently signed a European contract with the largest record company in the world, Universal Music. Sabam will be collecting the rights on so-called mechanical reproduction (the recording of a musical work on recording media such as CDs, DVDs and videos) for Universal Music in Europe over the next three years. The contract involves an annual turnover of EUR 100 million, which sees Sabam almost doubling its turnover ([EUR 126 million in 1999]. That was later diluted to 25%. But Sabam's continuing losses meant that Kinepolis felt obliged to write off its shareholding in the German group. Kinepolis started looking for a buyer, but did not find one. Aside from Kinepolis, the German film producer Senator (25%) and former founder Joachim Flebbe (34%) were shareholders in the group. The other 16% was listed on the stock exchange (FF).

In 2003 the figure was EUR 16.8 million, whereas the year before Sabam had paid EUR 19.5 million to the entitled authors, composers and publishers. The sums that Belgian authors receive from abroad are stable, with EUR 13.3 million in 2003.

The Belgian song that brought in the largest royalty fees last year in Belgium was 'The World Is Mine', by the group Hooverphonic. The oeuvre of the late singer Jacques Brel received the largest fee from abroad.

Sbam has few good words to say about the agreement reached earlier this year on the lending fee, the fee paid to authors, producers and performers for the lending of their work. 'It is a ridiculously low amount compared with the figure applied in our neighbouring countries', says Jacques Lion, Sabam's general manager (FF).

Last year Sabam distributed EUR 16.8 million for royalties on CDs and other music media, and 86% of this went abroad. 'The local subsidiaries of the large record companies received 54% and the rest went to royalties associations abroad. Only 14% remained in Belgian hands, as compared to 16% in 2002,' says Luc Van Oycke, the financial manager of Sabam. This is the first time that Sabam has revealed these figures. 'It's a bit of a sensitive issue that as a Belgian royalties association, we're actually working for people abroad'. What is more, Belgian authors are receiving a smaller share of a smaller pot.

What Kinepolis plans to do with its watered-down stake is not clear. Gijbels: 'We still have to hold talks about the future. We still have a seat on the CinemaxX board of directors. It is not clear whether we will be keeping or selling our diluted stake. Tele München has indicated that it will not be buying any shares from the other CinemaxX shareholders. We will also have to look at how we include CinemaxX in the books again. We will be consulting the Banking, Finance and Insurance Commission on that. The most important thing is that we are dealing with a debt-free company again.' Tele München still has to receive the approval of the German competition authorities for the acquisition of the majority shareholding in CinemaxX.

WWW.KINEPOLIS.BE

ECONOMY AND CULTURE

Kinepolis has a stake in a debt-free MiramaxX again

The participating interest held by the Belgian cinema group Kinepolis in the largest German cinema group CinemaxX has fallen from 25 to between 11 and 14%. The German media group Tele München is taking over all CinemaxX's debts and converting them into shares, as a result of which it will receive a share of 52 to 55% in CinemaxX. Kinepolis bought a 30% stake in CinemaxX for EUR 112 million in 1999. That was later diluted to 25%, but CinemaxX's continuing losses meant that Kinepolis felt obliged to write off its shareholding in the German group. Kinepolis started looking for a buyer, but did not find one. Aside from Kinepolis, the German film producer Senator (25%) and former founder Joachim Flebbe (34%) were shareholders in the group. The other 16% was listed on the stock exchange (FF).

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Diary

MUSIC, DANCE THEATRE

• 2 June: Night of Romanticism with de-Filharmonie, Koningin Elisabethzaal, Antwerp; info: www.defilharmonie.be
• 2 to 6 June: Once by Rosas, dance; Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be
• 4 June: Frak Pay & Poni, Project 1, Kaaitheaterstudio’s, Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be
• 2 June: Tuxedoonoon, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
• 3 June: Cowboy Junkies Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
• 3 June: Vegetal Beauty, Jazz, Flagey, Brussels; info: www.flagey.be
• 4 June: Delavega, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
• Until 5 June: Arabella by Richard Strauss, director: Francisco Negrin, Flanders Opera House, Antwerp; info: www.vlaamseopera.be
• 2 June: Interview with David Grossman (Israel), Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
• 4 June: Anssi Karttunen and Magnus Lindberg with Return to Faust, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
• 5 June: The Slackers, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
• 6 and 9 June: Concerts with laureates of Queen Elisabeth Competition, De Bijloke, Ghent and PSK, Brussels; info: www.ticketclic.be 02/507.82.00

EXPO

• Until 5 September: Night of Romanticism with de-Filharmonie, Koningin Elisabethzaal, Antwerp; info: www.defilharmonie.be
• Until 3 October: Marcel Breuer, Design & Architecture, exhibition CIVA, Brussels; info: www.civa.be
• Until 22 August and 5 September: SMAK exhibitions: Juan Usle, Open Rooms and Sam Durant with 12 Signs. Transposed and illuminated, Ghent; info: www.smak.be
• Until 1 August: The invention of Landscape, exhibition, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp; info: www.rubens2004.be
• Until 22 August: Flee from the War, historical exhibition, Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres
• Until 30 June: Models by Ludwig Van de Velde, Groeningemuseum, Bruges; info: www.brugge-bel multimedia
• Until 31 July: the Bruegel track: exhibitions on locations in Bruegel’s paintings, Brussels
• Until 5 September: Sam Durant, 12 Signs, SMAK, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03 www.smak.be

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