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300 temporary jobs
to go at Opel Antwerp

General Motors’ restructuring plan has not spared the Opel Antwerp plant, where the contracts of 300 of the 560 temporary workers are not going to be extended. And yet the Antwerp plant gets off relatively lightly, seeing as GM is axing 12,000 jobs throughout Europe. The worst affected are the Opel plants at Bochum and Rüsselsheim in Germany, where 8,000 of the 17,400 jobs are to go, whilst 500 people are also to be laid off at the Saab factory in Trollhaettan (Sweden) and 600 at the Opel plant at Zaragoza (Spain). Of GM’s nine factories in Europe, the Antwerp Opel plant is feeling the brunt of the restructuring the least, because it has become one of the GM group’s most efficient European plants thanks to austerity measures previously carried out. However, the plant’s capacity is being reduced from 265,000 to 245,00 cars per year. Opel Antwerp currently has a workforce of 5,400 employees (FF).

FRANK DEREYMAEKER • HET LAATSTE NIEUWS • 15 OCTOBER

GM will be saving EUR 500 million every year from 2006 as a result of the restructuring, GM has not made a profit in the last four years, according to Fritz Henderson, GM’s CEO in Europe. On the contrary, it has suffered a loss of USD 3 billion. So all Opel plants have to make sacrifices, including Opel Belgium. ‘It’s an unfortunate business,’ says Luc Van Grinsven of the ACV-Metaal trade union: ‘The previous restructuring programme (Olympia) only came to an end at the end of June, and now we’re having to make sacrifices again. Don’t forget that in 1988 Opel Belgium still had 12,000 employees, and now we’re down to 5,100.’ His colleague, Eddy De Decker, is not happy either. ‘Three hundred layoffs doesn’t sound like much, but it’s still painful. The factory is one of the most productive Opel plants, and we’re already as flexible as we can possibly get. What will happen when the market picks up again?’ Despite the planned layoffs, the Opel management also sees positive elements. Spokesman Van Riel: ‘The whole investment programme based on the Opel Astra is confirmed. That means that in addition to the Astra 5-door and estate, the 3-door and convertible will also be rolling off the production line in Antwerp from 2005 onwards.’

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INTRODUCTION

Last week federal Interior Minister Patrick Dewael drew attention to himself with a number of outspoken comments about fundamentalist customs in Belgium’s Muslim community. Muslims must accept the separation of Church and State if they live here, he stressed. Forced marriages and the custom of not allowing women to leave the house (women are unable to follow integration courses) are practices that bear witness to a culture that is not equal to ours. He thereby promptly put the back up a number of Muslim organisations, and the Muslims, too, for that matter. In the debate on the Prime Minister’s policy statement, PS parliamentarian and leader of the Party for Freedom Dewael was not just speaking for himself, for that matter. At the weekend his interim party chairman Bart Somers appeared on theVRT discussion programme De Zevenende Dag (the Seventh Day) to explain the Liberal party’s standpoint on the multicultural society, and did so again in an interview in De Morgen (11 October). According to Somers, the government should bring an end to its minorities policy in this field. This has been a complete failure, because it is based on a misunderstood cultural relativism, he feels. All abuses in the immigrant community, such as marriages of convenience, forced marriages, misuse of family reunification, subordination of young immigrant girls and illegal residence are swept under the carpet because they have to yield to the collective problem: discrimination of immigrants. Nothing has been achieved in the way of integration, since immigrants have shut themselves up in their associations and structures, and have refused to integrate, with the excuse that they have been ‘victims of discrimination’. In the event of community problems between locals and immigrants, the odd predicament has been put to immigrants themselves are protected as a minority. Is the VLD aligning itself with the Vlaams Blok, according to Somers. Flemings are tired of bearing the blame for everything that goes wrong in the immigrant community, whilst the immigrants themselves are protected as a minority. Is the VLD aligning itself with the Vlaams Blok with this standpoint? Absolutely not, says Somers. The Blok is appealing the blame between each other and demands that immigrants assimilate into Flemish mono-cultural society (‘adapt or clear off’). In contrast to this, he sums up the VLD’s line with the slogan ‘No-one excluded from the community and no-one confined in their own culture’. As mayor of Mechelen, a city in the ‘black belt’ around Antwerp, Somers knows what he is talking about. Somers and his party are speaking in plain terms and has already received a pat on the back from De Morgen (12 October) for doing so. The newspaper is inviting the Christian Democrats, Socialists and Greens to do the same.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief

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Federal budget is balanced, but shows little inspiration

For the sixth time in a row, the federal government of Socialists and Liberals is presenting a balanced budget. That is undoubtedly the best news that Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) was able to report in his ‘State of the Union’ address. The Flemish press reckons that this is quite a performance, compared with the budget deficits reported in neighbouring countries. But with a public debt amounting to 95.8% of GDP in 2005, this country has no other choice. Otherwise, austerity set the tone of the Premier’s statement. There was little left of the inspired memorandum that Verhofstadt had produced in August. All ministers together have had to cancel EUR 650 million in planned expenditure. The Justice and Interior Ministers safeguarded their budget growth of 4.1%, amounting to EUR 214 million, which they had been promised in the coalition agreement. The NMBS (national railway company) also sees its allocation grow by EUR 177 million, and next year the government will take over the railway company’s debt burden (EUR 7.4 billion). The Prime Minister was not able to report any further progress on the two key issues that have dominated political discourse in recent weeks - DHL and Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde. The statement reveals that jobs remain this government’s top priority. The government is presenting employers and employees with no fewer than 30 measures aimed at increasing the proportion of people in active employment, particularly among older workers. The hole in the social security system will be plugged with higher excise duties on tobacco, stricter environmental taxes on packaging and employers’ contributions on company cars.

After a particularly difficult return after the summer holiday period, with the DHL and Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde issues, Prime Minister Verhofstadt yesterday took hold of the reins again. This he did with a remarkable measure, a call for more responsibility on the part of all politicians. ‘Not every day is an election day, yet since 13 June we have sometimes felt as though that has indeed been the case. What we have seen over the last few weeks has not made for a pretty spectacle. Let us put a stop to this ongoing election fever.’ For the sixth time in a row the ‘purple’ government is presenting a balanced budget – without any great savings, and without any extra scope for policymaking. All departments have made efforts to limit primary spending [without interest charges]. Implementation of a number of measures that had previously been decided, such as increased tax deductions for restaurant visits, is being spread. ‘We do not need a blind purging policy that smoothes the economy’, says the Premier. ‘Neither, however, do we need an expansive budgetary policy that boosts economic activity in the short term, but in the long term only leads to increasing debts and new shortfalls’. There suddenly appears to be an end in sight to the crisis issues of the last few weeks. The government is waiting for a reply from DHL on the proposed expansion scenario. And as for Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, ‘in the next few days’ it will be inviting the regions to work out an arrangement, outside the forum that will start next Tuesday. Above all else, the Verhofstadt II cabinet wants to concentrate on job creation, and in this context the Premier announced a package of thirty measures aimed at boosting employment levels. Retirement age is being left unchanged, but the early retirement system is to be made stricter. Employers will have to make greater efforts, in the field of training and outplacement, to guarantee employees a suitable career, spread over time.

Opinion

At a time when budgets with structural surpluses have to be presented in the light of the ageing of the population, the ‘purple’ coalition says it is satisfied with a shaky balanced budget. Yet the excuse of the adverse economic climate no longer holds water. Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) and Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A) had hinted at the beginning of the year that, partly on account of the better-than-expected economic outlook, 2004 was due to be a ‘pivotal’ year for socio-economic issues. The mega council of ministers meetings at the end of the last term of office would give the Verhofstadt II government a fresh lease of life. Nine months later, the cabinet is still busy implementing the measures agreed on then, and is even having to spread these further over time. The pivot has shrunk, and is in fact rather wobbly.

Bart Eeckhout/Liesbeth Van Impe • De Morgen • 13 October

Social security

The government is basing itself on a balanced social security system. More and more use is being made of alterna-

tive financing to reduce labour costs. Next year alternative financing will amount to EUR 9 billion. Employers’ contributions on company cars will be extended to include all company cars and will henceforth be calculated according to environmental pollution. That should bring in an extra EUR 155 million. Extra duties on drinks packaging will account for EUR 130 million. The minimum price for cigarettes will also result in increased excise revenues. The fight against social security fraud should yield EUR 45 million. Service cheques will become EUR 0.5 more expensive. Health care can cost EUR 17,289 billion next year. EUR 208.8 million is being saved.

www.belgium.be
Federal government sells outstanding tax liabilities

The balanced budget is not only down to the cancellation of EUR 650 million on the ministers’ wish lists, but also to a very inventive measure under which banks and institutional investors can ‘buy’ outstanding tax liabilities. The tax office has been struggling for years with a collection backlog, which now amounts to some EUR 28 billion (De Tijd, 13 October). Tax liabilities that are difficult to recover or are overdue currently total around EUR 13 billion. Budget Minister Vande Lanotte (SP.A) and Finance Minister Reynders (MR) now want to make a start on an operation involving some EUR 300 million. The government acts a bank or an institutional investor to pre-finance the bulk of that amount (EUR 260 million) as a private partner, and to provide a further EUR 40 million in computer capacity and other forms of support. If this results in the tax authorities recovering more debts, a part of the revenue will go to the private partner. According to Vande Lanotte, such operations are already successfully being applied in other countries (Portugal). The trade unions reacted indignantly to the plan (De Tijd, 14 October) and criticise Minister Reynders (MR) for not having recruited the staff needed to enable the collection administration to operate more efficiently.

Flemish budget is strict, but not painful for citizens

The Flemish Government has used the trimming knife in the preparation of its budget for 2005 and has at the same time tinkered with the expenditure side of its budget for 2004. However, it has done so extremely prudently. The man in the street has been spared, but its own departments have not. The most conspicuous austerity measures are taken in the Government’s own administration, and in the Flemish Public Institutions. Here a wage freeze is to be implemented until the end of next year and further savings to the tune of EUR 12 million will be made on operating costs. The other savings are of a minor order, but are not really painful, since they mostly relate to plans that are being deferred. For example, the government is freezing the number of class hours in secondary education, which inevitably leads to larger classes in the case of higher student numbers. It is deferring the distribution of service cheques for creche facilities, saving on bonuses to encourage people to take up part-time work, and buying EUR 8.5 million fewer forests than planned. These and other small savings will result in EUR 200 million fewer expenses in 2005 on a budget surplus of EUR 602 million, with which Flanders fulfils the agreements that it made with the Federal Government and the other regions for the reduction of the federal public debt.

Income for the current year 2004 is put at EUR 18.821 billion, EUR 900 million more than in the original budget. The expenditure credits are raised from EUR 17.910 to 18.155 billion. In its economic forecast the government is very cautious. It is assuming economic growth of 2% in 2004 and 2005, whilst the Planning Office bases itself on 2.2% and 2.4% respectively. It is putting the revenue from that difference into a provision for cyclical movements (FF).

Regional taxes, in particular registration fees and gift tax, are bringing in more than expected in 2004. The government is also receiving money from a number of one-off operations: the still to be effected once-only sale of its stake in the Flemish Water Company (EUR 120 million), the sale of the Arcelor shares held by Staal Vlaanderen NV (EUR 165.8 million) and the sale and rent-back of a number of buildings (EUR 195 million).

The government saw itself forced to increase some expenditure items, especially for the disabled persons sector, which receives EUR 42.6 million more. There is also extra money for innovation, payment of the overdue bicycle allowance in education, special youth support and the cleaning up of old military sites.

The budget for this year has a surplus of EUR 664.8 million. After consolidation in accordance with the European budget rules (ESR), there is a surplus of EUR 388.178 million.

The Leterme government puts its costs for next year (2005) at EUR 19.033 billion. EUR 18.431 billion is being set aside for expenditure. The budget has a surplus of EUR 602 million. According to the ESR rules, the consolidated financing surplus for the whole of the Authorities of Flanders comes out at EUR 287.9 million.

www.vlaanderen.be
26% of Flemish voters change party allegiance in the space of a year

Chairman Verhoeven is calling in frank terms for a wage freeze and the abolition of early retirement and time-credit

WOUTER VERSCHELDEN • DE STANDAARD • 9 OCTOBER

13 June has been recorded as the blackest election Sunday so far. The Vlaams Blok gained 6.6% (or 250,000 voters) and thereby hoisted itself into second place in the party political landscape in Flanders. Only the alliance of Christian Democrats and Flemish Nationalists (CD&V-N-VA) obtained a better result. But from which parties did the extreme right-wing party carry off all those votes? The research institute TNS-Media/Dimarso conducted a survey on that question, polling 2,184 Flemings. The main conclusion is that no fewer than 26% of the Flemish electorate voted for a different party to the one they endorsed in the federal elections barely a year before. All told, that’s some one million voters. The then opposition parties Het Vlaams Blok (313,000) and the CD&V-NVA alliance (245,000) secured more than half of the new votes. The fact that in the end the Blok was the big winner, and not the alliance, can be explained by the fact that the alliance lost almost as many votes as it gained (224,000). Those lost votes went mainly to the Blok and to Groen!, the other formation that made gains in the elections. The Blok itself has loyal voters and lost barely 51,000 to other parties. The federal ‘purple’ government parties VLD/Vivant and SPA-Spirit both lost a third of their voters, respectively 347,000 and 319,000. But the loss for the SPA-Spirit alliance was less sizeable because it also gained 165,000 new votes, half of which [83,000] from government partner VLD.

Groen!, which was fighting for its survival with the campaign ‘Groen is nodig!’ (‘We need Green’), gained 195,000 voters and poached them largely from its main rival on the left, SPA-Spirit (88,000), but also from CD&V-NVA (51,000). The party gained more new voters than the voters it retained, and was thus able to more than double its score to 7.6%.

The Blok gained voters from all over, not only from the centre parties CD&V-NVA (98,000) and VLD-Vivant (87,000), but also from the left-wing alliance SPA-Spirit (83,000). The survey reveals that the immigrant right to vote, the cordon sanitaire placed around the Blok by the other parties and the party’s sentence in the racism trial gave the Blok votes.

However, the largest shift in votes took place between the liberal VLD-Vivant and CD&V-NVA. No fewer than 114,000 VLD voters made this switch.

Current coalition formula not hugely popular

The current coalition is much less to people’s taste among CD&V-N-VA voters than among VLD or SPA voters

A part from outlining the shifts in voting patterns the survey also sounded out coalition preferences in the formation of the Flemish Government. This reveals that the current Flemish five-party coalition of Liberals, Christian-Democrats (with N-VA) and Socialists (with Spirit) does come out on top among those questioned (41%), but that it is much less to people’s taste among CD&V-N-VA voters than among VLD or SPA voters. Another surprising finding is that one third of Flemings do want a coalition including the Vlaams Blok (FF).

WOUTER VERSCHELDEN • DE STANDAARD • 9 OCTOBER

A minority of CD&V-N-VA voters are in favour of this coalition, with only 46% regarding this Flemish Government as being the correct choice. Enthusiasm for the current coalition (in the absence of an alternative, since the VLD and the Vlaams Blok do not have a majority together) is a good deal greater among Liberal voters. No fewer than 77% of VLD voters regard this coalition as the best option. 60% of voters in the SPA-Spirit alliance opt for this coalition.

A good one in five voters would prefer to see a coalition between CD&V-N-VA and the Vlaams Blok. In total 32% of Flemings vote for a coalition including the Blok. This figure includes a large number of Blok voters, since 93% of Vlaams Blok voters want their party to enter the government. Six out of ten Vlaams Blok voters wants a coalition with CD&V-N-VA. It thus appears incorrect to assume that the Blok votes are merely protest votes. One in five CD&V-N-VA voters wants their alliance to enter a government with the Blok.

Enthusiasm for an orange-red-green (christian-democrats/socialists/greens) Olive Tree coalition is especially pable among Groen! voters. 57% of them want a coalition of CD&V/N-VA, SPA-Spirit and Groen! The Green voters are evidently not towing the party line as regards the choice to sit on the opposition benches. In all, seven out of ten Green voters opt for a Green participation in government. This left-wing coalition also has a lot of supporters among SPA-Spirit’s ranks, with 30% wanting such a combination. 25% of CD&V/N-VA voters also see this coalition working.

WWW.DIMARSO.BE
Defusion of split of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde

Pieter De Crem (CD&V) feels that the Flemings should not have to pay any price for the split, given that it merely concerns the implementation of a ruling of the Court of Arbitration.

On Friday federal Deputy Prime Minister Patrick Dewael warned that the splitting of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency could bring down the Federal Government. He feared that if the Flemish parties were to table a bill for the split in the federal parliament this week, as they had agreed between themselves, the Francophones would regard this as a declaration of war and use the alarm bell procedure to have the issue shifted to the government table. In a small room in the House, the Flemish parliamentary party leaders of CD&V, N-VA, VLD, SP.A and Spirit signed the bill, in the presence of the press. Pieter De Crem expressed the hope that the split would be effected before 31 December. Together with the N-VA, he feels that the Flemings should not have to pay any price for the split, given that it merely concerns the implementation of a ruling of the Court of Arbitration which declared the current constituency to be in contravention of the Constitution. Dirk VanderMaelen (SP.A) stressed that the consultative committee of federal and regional governments recognised that, too. In contrast to earlier declarations, they said yesterday that they had nothing against the Flemish representation in Brussels, small room in the House, the Flemish party chairmen on Monday morning, the issue had apparently been diffused. The Flemish proposal, together with a whole series of other proposals, will reportedly follow the standard procedure in the House, which means that time will be gained and the fuse will be removed from the powder keg. In a small room in the House, the Flemish parliamentary party leaders of CD&V, N-VA, VLD, SP.A and Spirit signed the bill, in the presence of the press. Pieter De Crem expressed the hope that the split would be effected before 31 December. Together with the N-VA, he feels that the Flemings should not have to pay any price for the split, given that it merely concerns the implementation of a ruling of the Court of Arbitration which declared the current constituency to be in contravention of the Constitution. Dirk VanderMaelen (SP.A) stressed that the consultative committee of federal and regional governments was the most appropriate place for the negotiations with the Francophones. In the meantime the French-speaking parties also handed in their own proposals, and these are of course diametrically opposed to the Flemish proposal. The bill jointly tabled by the Flemish parties is based on three constituencies: Flemish Brabant (the fusion of Leuven and Halle-Vilvoorde), Walloon Brabant and Brussels. For the Upper House and the European Parliament, Halle-Vilvoorde is added to the Flanders electoral district. In this way votes for a Francophone electoral college in Flanders will be impossible. But French-speaking parties can present their own lists in Flemish Brabant. In order to safeguard Flemish representation in Brussels, grouping between Flemish-Brabant and Brussels electoral lists is possible. In their counter-proposal, the French-speaking Liberals of MR want to combine the constituencies of Flemish Brabant and Walloon Brabant into one large bilingual Brabant constituency. The French-speaking Socialists (PS) propose having the provincial constituencies everywhere replaced by districts again, as in Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde. The French-speaking Christian Democrats of CDH tabled a similar bill (FF).

Opinion

Sound reason has prevailed in the end after all. Now everybody has added a bit of water to the wine. VLD and SP.A-Spirit signed the bill on Monday afternoon. And CD&V/N-VA have promised not to use the splitting of B-H-V for opposition purposes - an attitude that bears witness to political maturity. The Francophones have evidently recognised that, too. In contrast to earlier declarations, they said yesterday that they had nothing against the Flemings submitting a text of their own to the House. A couple of days ago, it was still being said that such an initiative would cause a government crisis. Fine, now the serious work can finally start. We are not naïve and we realise all too well that without the Francophones’ agreement nothing can come of the split before the end of the year. Does that mean that the Flemish parties therefore have to make concessions? That they will have to pay a price for the split? Not at all. No compensation can be demanded for application of the constitution or implementation of a ruling of the Court of Arbitration.
The breeding ground of anti-immigration parties

The Vlaams Blok’s success is easily attributed to its appeal to protest voters, and anti-establishment and anti-political feelings. However, it is difficult to square this theory with the finding in the TNS-Media/Dimarso survey that 93% of Blok voters want the party in government. It is also contradicted by the results of the still unpublished study by the University of Amsterdam on the success of anti-immigration parties in Europe, which was unveiled in De Tijd (9 October).

The study concludes that a number of conditions must be met if an anti-immigration party is to be successful in Europe. The first condition is that the anti-immigration party must be considered as a normal party. Thus the Vlaams Blok is endeavouring to rid itself of its extreme image and hammer away at the message that it adopts majority standpoints in Flanders. The second condition is that there must be a large enough number of voters ranging themselves on the political right. And finally, the party’s success also depends on the competition it encounters from other parties on the right wing of the political spectrum (FF).

WIM VANDEVELDEN • DE TIJD • 9 OCTOBER

The breeding ground for a radical right-wing party is much more fertile in some countries than in others, so it is said. The fact that Flanders is predominantly conservative - Bavaria on the North Sea - is therefore self-evident, but also goes a long way to explaining the electoral success of the Vlaams Blok.

According to the researchers another important aspect is the competitive political environment in which an anti-immigration party finds itself. The degree to which an anti-immigration party can tap into potential voters on the radical right depends on the competition on the right wing. Voters will rather vote for a large right-wing party than for a less influential anti-immigration party, even if ideologically they are closer to the latter. According to the researchers, the CDU/CSU’s strength on the right wing in Germany explains why the radical right-wing Republikaner never got off the ground. On the other hand, Jörg Haider’s FPÖ was able to swell its ranks because the other parties shifted to the centre.

The researchers see the lack of competition on the right wing as the main explanation for the Vlaams Blok’s success. ‘The Vlaams Blok is successful in mobilising its potential in Flanders because it hardly encounters any opposition on its own battlefield. Because the Liberals have shifted towards the centre, and certainly since they entered into a coalition with Socialists and Greens, the whole right wing of the political spectrum in Flanders lies open’. The larger a right-wing radical party becomes, and the more power such a party acquires, the more attractive it becomes to voters.

Flanders depicted in black on nitrogen dioxide map

A map drawn up by researchers from the University of Heidelberg, based on detailed images from the European environmental satellite Envisat, reveals that the Flanders/South Netherlands/Ruhr Region triangle, together with the Po plain in northern Italy, have the largest concentrations of nitrogen dioxide in Europe. Nitrogen dioxide is responsible for pulmonary and respiratory disorders such as asthma and allergy. Together with the northeast of China, these are also the two most polluted regions in the world. The high population density and the emissions caused by vehicle traffic, industry and power stations are the causes. The extremely accurate data comes from the Sciamachy, a spectrometer aboard the Envisat, which detects small optical absorptions in reflected sunlight. The Sciamachy is a project jointly organised by Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, involving atmospheric measurements, on a world scale, of ozone, greenhouse gases and air pollution. The data is analysed at the Belgian Space and Aeronomy Institute, among other sites. The Sciamachy measures so accurately that it even reflects the difference in pollution between big cities and outlying suburbs. The nitrogen dioxide map was recently published in The New Scientist. On it, Flanders is coloured in very dark shades, with lighter shades depicting more rural areas such as West Flanders, Limburg and the Kempen (FF).

PETER DUPONT • DE MORGEN • 14 OCTOBER

Flanders has been aware for some time of its excessively high nitrogen dioxide and ozone levels. The rising number of children and adults with pulmonary and respiratory problems speaks for itself. The Flemish Region wants to bring down the degree of nuisance caused by the high ozone figure by 62% by 2010. The government has also approved an environmental agreement with the electricity sector. The electricity producers will reduce nitrogen dioxide emissions from 25,000 tons to 11,000 tons by 2012. The Federal Government has produced the Federal Ozone Plan 2004-2007. The question is, on the basis of the ESA data, whether even more stringent measures ought to be taken. The major producer of nitrogen dioxide is the car. In the past ‘car-free Sundays’ have shown that the concentration of NO2 falls in spectacular fashion on such days. Last summer the Association for a Better Environment (Bond Beter Leefmilieu) argued in favour of additional environmental measures, such as pay-as-you-drive or the ‘clever’ kilometre levy. And even that won’t really help. Oxone-forming gases travel from America’s eastern seaboard to Europe with the wind. Without an international approach to tackle the problem, we’ll be condemned to coughing and spluttering.

Opinion

TOM COCHEZ • DE MORGEN • 14 OCTOBER

Flanders is a heavily urbanised region with few open spaces. Town centres are tied together by industrial estates and shopping centres, and all the while the omnipotent car holds sway. There therefore remains only one real point on which policy can make a difference. Cars are directly or indirectly the largest source of nitrogen dioxide, ozone, CO2, carbon dioxide and small particles. Cars can become cheaper if necessary, but use of the car should quite simply be made more expensive, if we want to avoid seeing half of Belgium gasping for breath in ten years’ time... 
A journey through the art of the lowlands

To mark the Dutch presidency of the European Union, Bozar (the former Palais des Beaux-Arts) asked the Dutch exhibition designer Rudi Fuchs, former director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, to create a retrospective exhibition focusing on Cobra artist Karel Appel. Since Appel has already exhibited several times at Bozar, Fuchs had to come up with an original approach. This he has done by placing 58 paintings, 25 drawings and a series of totem-like reliefs by Appel alongside some 270 paintings, drawings, engravings and sculptures from Dutch and Flemish artists. The works are not arranged chronologically, but thematically. For his choice of artists, Rudi Fuchs based himself on an imaginary journey (‘On the Road’) through five centuries of Flemish and Dutch art, in which he repeatedly uses an aspect of Appel’s work as a starting point (FF).

Fuchs assembled little groups of works by various artists on the basis of aspects they had in common with Appel. These can be the themes, such as the depiction of clouds or the portrayal of death, but also the use of colour or the way in which the paint is applied. And in doing this, works by such diverse artists as Rubens, Rembrandt, Van Dijck, Ensor and Van Gogh, but also contemporaries of Karel Appel, such as Corneille, Constant, Hugo Claus and Roger Raveel, suddenly have something in common. Constant Permeke and Jean Brusselmans, two artists for whom Appel says he has great admiration, are prominently represented in the exhibition. Fuchs also manages to include the new generation of artists, with established names such as Panamarenko and Luc Thuymans, and young artists such as the Fleming Koen Van den Broek, in his imaginary artistic journey.

Rudi Fuchs: ‘Ten years ago I would never have imagined that my interest in Rubens would be rekindled. It began with drawings I saw in a book: sophisticated studies of intertwined bushes and tangled hedges. Among other things, Karel Appel has taught me new things about Rubens. He pointed me to the expressionistic way of painting and the dynamic in Rubens’ work - something that of course is also very present in Appel’s work. In a contemporary work of art, the tracks left by the creative process often form a deliberately visible part of the finished creation.’ Comparisons are also made on the basis of the use of colour. ‘In classical art, that of Rubens and Rembrandt, a chromatic balance prevailed,’ says Fuchs. ‘After Van Gogh, painters knew that you could manipulate colours and play them off against each other. In Ensor’s mask paintings, the colour resounds. In the case of Roger Raveel, the colour is dour and taciturn. In paintings by Appel, colours amalgamate into balls and solidify into lumps, smooth as butter.’

‘forgetful’ CEO’s at Picanol and Docpharma

The Flemish business community suffers from absent-minded company managers. On 8 October the Banking, Finance and Insurance Commission (CBFA) announced that Leon Van Rompay, CEO at Docpharma, the pharmaceutical group specialising in generic medicines, had not made certain obligatory shareholding notifications. When the company was floated, he controlled in excess of 50% of the voting rights. Further to the termination of shareholder agreements, personal share transactions, capital increases and takeovers, Van Rompay’s personal stake has fallen to 16.72% today. Between the major capital increases, however, Van Rompay bought and sold tens of thousands of shares and made no notification of these transactions in 2003, although he was obliged to report them to the CBFA, the stock exchange and the company. As an excuse, Van Rompay claims he was unaware of these reporting obligations.

On 11 October Jan Coene, general manager at the loom manufacturer Picanol, announced his resignation after a whole to-do about disputed payments that he allegedly received. Patrick Steverlynck, chairman of the board of directors and the man who had recruited Coene, makes a sideways move and becomes interim deputy chairman. Coene reportedly received a sign-up premium in shares of EUR 2.01 million, in converted value, when he started working for the company in 2001. Chairman Steverlynck reportedly forgot to report this to the remuneration committee. Furthermore, Coene insisted on a bonus of 3% of the increase in value of the average of net profit, cash flow and balance sheet value between 2001 and 2003. Because this bonus allegedly turned out to be much higher (EUR 2.7 million) than expected, Coene simply paid back his sign-up premium. A family minority group has already been complaining for some time about the lack of transparency and sound management at Picanol. Coene has previously fallen foul of this group on account of a controversial option plan whereby he gave himself and his management the right to buy 12% of the Picanol shares at a low price in 2005 and 2007. In 2002 Coene also purchased a block of Mercator & Noordstar shares, but failed to report this. The group of family shareholders is having its interests defended by the Deminor firm of lawyers, which is now also demanding the dismissal of company auditor Deloitte & Touche. For the time being Picanol is being run by Luc Van Nevel, a member of the board of directors and former CEO at Samsonite. The cases of both Coene and Van Rompay involve an elementary lack of propriety towards the investors, in the judgement of De Tijd (12 October), which says that it is amazing how ignorant some businessmen can be when it comes to certain money matters.

The Coene affair was followed with more than usual interest at Belgacom, since Coene is also chairman of the board of directors of the telecom operator. On 14 October De Tijd reported that the responsible ministers are in agreement that Jan Coene cannot stay on. The Belgian State is the majority shareholder in Belgacom and appoints the chairman.

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With his staging, Fuchs aims to make the possible similarities between different works of art visible - and succeeds brilliantly in doing so. He has hung the works in such a way that unexpected similarities and intimate details come to light. The exhibition invites the visitor to look afresh every time, and to study the works visually. Painting is allowed again: with this exhibition, the pictorial makes a comeback. To look is always to compare. In Bozar, you can do just that to your heart's content, and that reminds us very much of Cobra.

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