DHL to scale down, but Zaventem region able to cope with the shock

The Federal, Flemish and Brussels Governments are unanimously placing the blame for the failed negotiations on the expansion of the courier firm DHL on the company itself. According to the governments, the company did not stick to the agreements on the planned use of the noisy MD-11 aircraft. In the Chamber debate on the DHL débâcle several hours later, however, Premier Verhofstadt (VLD) was unable to suppress a jibe at the governments of the regional governments. The Premier made no attempt to hide his disappointment. There was an awkward moment when CD&V Parliamentary Party Leader Pieter De Crem reminded him of his comments of a month ago, in which he enthusiastically stated that as far as he was concerned a reduction scenario would never be an option. For its part, the management of DHL is claiming that at no time did the governments put forward a common standpoint and is laying the blame with the politicians. DHL’s trade unions are doing likewise. They are currently not prepared to negotiate on redundancies with the management, although from 2008 the cutbacks will unavoidably cost 1,500 to 1,700 jobs. They are refusing to abandon the growth scenario. On 21 October the whole day was lost to strikes. Meanwhile, local politicians such as Hans Bonte (SP.A) and Francis Vermeiren (VLD) are trying to mitigate the impact of the job losses at DHL. De Standaard paints an optimistic picture of the future for the region around the airport (FF).

JOHAN RASKING • DE STANDAARD • 22 OCTOBER

Zaventem airport is responsible for 19,900 direct jobs. According to a moderate growth scenario, this direct employment could rise to 25,000 to 30,000 by 2020. The airport also acts like a magnet for businesses. Transport and distribution companies, but also the services sector (ICT) and offices of major international companies that have relocated from Brussels city centre to the outskirts with the proximity of the airport as an extra argument. In total, 60,000 jobs in the region are linked to the airport.

The region has also demonstrated that it has the economic capacity to cope with business closures. One-and-a-half years after the bankruptcy of Sabena, only 900 of the 4,000 Flemish former workers have still not found another job. Of the 3,000 workers who lost their job in 1997 when Renault-Visvoorde closed, only 100 were still without work two years later. The losses at DHL are smaller and less sudden, and there is time between now and 2008 to introduce support measures.

INTRODUCTION

Last year, according to calculations by the Flemish Administration for Budgeting, Accounting and Financial Management (Abafim), 6.6 billion flowed from Flanders to Wallonia and Brussels. That is an all-time record. The study confirms a study from last year carried out by KBC bank, which calculated that in 2002 5.4 billion flowed from Flanders to Wallonia, or 3.6% of the primary income (before taxes and redistribution) of Flemish households. Former Minister-President Bart Somers (VLD) saw the study as a way of putting strength to the federalisation of federal powers. The study also confirms what the Flemish-national parties, the N-VA and Veurne, attributed to the federalVV in the last election campaign. 6.6 billion boils down to 1,100 euros per Fleming each year, calculates the brand new Vlaamse Bond Bart De Wever in Het Nieuwsblad (21 October). And then the study does not take account of the greater contribution of Flanders to paying off the government’s debt. According to De Wever, this then gives us 11.3 billion, or 2,000 euros per Fleming each year. Admittedly the share of social security (56.6%) in the transfer of funds is on the wane due to the faster ageing of the population in Flanders, but nevertheless it will only be possible to redress the transfer of funds if there is more economic growth and less unemployment in Brussels and Wallonia, the study claims. The N-VA Chairman ventures a comparison with Germany, ‘which fell into a crisis following the reunification with East Germany’. Well then, the Flemings hand over proportionally more funds to Francophone Belgium than the West Germans do to East Germany, he says. De Wever wants a Flemish social security in addition to a Francophone one and determine solidarity by means of objective criteria afterwards. The current situation, with Wallonia sluggishly tackling its high unemployment and continuing to invest in civil employment, cannot go on, he believes, since Flanders ends up footing the bill. According to him, such a form of solidarity is nothing more than the ‘organised skimming off of Flemish welfare’. He is advising the Francophones to give some real thought to the current state structure and hopes that the figures will encourage them to adopt a rather more unassuming stance at the coming negotiations on the splitting of Brussels-Halle-Visvoorde that are on the agenda. In Knack (19 October) the Brussels Minister-President Piqué (PS) disputes the transfer to Brussels. The Flemings are conventionally forgetting that Brussels employs tens of thousands of Flemings and Walloons who pay no taxes there and that Flanders benefits hugely from the international reputation of Brussels, he claims. Piqué is therefore firmly convinced that it is much more a question of the transfer of funds from Brussels to Flanders. In a double interview with his Flemish colleague Leterman (CD&V) in Het Nieuwsblad (22 October) the Walloon Minister-President Van Cauwenbergh (PS) attributes the transfers not to extravagant expenditure in his region, but to a lack of revenue. Faced with the survey by this same paper on attitudes towards Flemish expenditure among the population (second part, 31), he and Leterman agree that a majority of the population wants to retain Belgium, but that Flemings and Francophones interpret Belgium quite differently. As they themselves do too, although they remain remarkably polite.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
DHL-reduction scenario seems inevitable

If DHL does not increase its efforts to limit noise emissions it cannot expand in Zaventem. That in a nutshell is the content of a letter sent by the Flemish, Brussels and Federal Governments on 19 October to the courier firm whose sorting centre is in Zaventem. Several hours before DHL had held a press conference at which the company claimed it could not make any concessions. After 2011 DHL wants to make sixteen night flights with the MD11, a relatively noisy aircraft (CQ11), which the company says cannot be replaced before 2018. The government continues to maintain that it had originally been agreed that there would only be four flights with the MD11, not only before 2011, but also after. It is also demanding that the aircraft be replaced by a less noisy type from 2011. With this stalemate the growth scenario for a European main hub, involving the creation of 1,400 new jobs, appeared further off than ever (FF).

STEVEN SAMYN EN TOM YSEBAERT • DE STANDAARD • 20 OCTOBER

At its press conference DHL had stressed the necessity of the MD11 and the impossibility of finding a replacement aircraft by the date proposed by the government. ‘We cannot develop our main hub in Zaventem under the conditions imposed by the government. Consequently we will have to dismantle activities as of 2007,’ said Martin Sodergard, head of DHL’s European network. How many jobs that would cost he was not prepared to say. The growth scenario had provided 1,400 extra jobs directly, and possibly as many again indirectly. Lode Verschingel [LBC trade union] felt it was not a good sign that company and governments were hedging their bets. Since DHL’s plans were made public at the end of last year, politicians have tried to combine a growth scenario with a restriction on noise levels. Today the only option left appears to be to limit the social impact of the reduction scenario as much as possible. Or as Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme put it: ‘Save what can be saved.’ He admitted that Zaventem had all the trump cards to attract new investors if required. www.biac.be
www.dhl.be

Curtain falls, staff shaken, hangover for government

At a works council late in the evening of 20 October the trade unions were told by DHL in Zaventem that the courier firm’s new European hub would not be in Zaventem, but in Leipzig or Vatry in France. The firm’s response to the written request of the Brussels, Flemish and federal Governments to limit noise pollution caused by continental night flights from 2011 was negative across the board. The DHL site in Zaventem will therefore be scaled down to a regional hub. From 2008 this will go hand in hand with the loss of up to 1,700 jobs, apparently made up of 1,350 jobs at DHL Aviation and 335 at EAT [European Air Transport], DHL’s airline. According to the trade unions, the procedure for the ‘Renault Act’ also comes into effect on Friday. This contains a series of procedures that must be followed when a company restructures. Trade unions and workers were deeply shaken. Workers immediately downed tools. Meanwhile, several commentators are already assessing the political damage (FF).

Opinion

BART STORTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 21 OCTOBER

One can only wonder at the unending zeal with which, spurred on by Verhofstadt, attempts were made to make the impossible a reality. But the consequences of that excessive voluntarism are severe. The main fear of politicians was that the public would not appreciate the loss of jobs. It was therefore best not to be left holding the baby. Too late did they realise that the loss of credibility of the political decision-making process would ultimately prove to be a greater setback. As was again to be expected and predicted, the Federal, Flemish and Brussels Governments were finally able to agree on a formula that places the responsibility firmly with the company itself. It would only really have been a problem if DHL had agreed at the eleventh hour to restrict the number of flights with the disputed MD11. Then the bickering between Flanders and Brussels on the spreading of night flights would have flared up again. If DHL now draws the only remaining conclusion and begins its reduction scenario, that will fortunately no longer be necessary. To everyone’s great relief.

An inordinate amount of political energy was spent on the wrong fight. Obviously it was worth the trouble to examine whether it really was impossible to keep hold of an international logistics firm the size of DHL. Obviously this had to be investigated thoroughly. But that work had been completed a long time ago. It was pointless drawing out the end-game so interminably long.
Belgium doesn’t need to, but could easily break up, says Fleming

The big question in the event of a partition is: what would happen to Brussels after the end of Belgium?

Belgium will soon be 175 years old. Are Flemings only Belgian when the Red Devils play football or when a Belgian prince gets married, if they export chocolates or beer or eat chips? Or does the feeling of being Belgian run deeper? The answer is a subtle one, according to a survey for Het Nieuwsblad/Het Volk/Vers l’Avenir carried out by the research agency INRA. The vast majority of Flemings want to keep Belgium. 84%, to be precise. The ‘Belgium Bursts’ supporters are a small minority (12%). The Walloons are even more firmly attached to Belgium: 92% believe it must remain. And yet more than half of Flemings (55%) believe that if Belgium were to split, Flanders could easily manage economically, culturally and politically without Wallonia. The Walloons (43%) are less convinced that their region could survive alone economically. The big question in the event of a partition is: what would happen to Brussels after the end of Belgium? Both Flemings and Walloons lay claim to the capital. Just as striking is the low popularity of the monarchy in Flanders: only 55% want a monarchy following the split. In Wallonia this figure is 73%. That such a partition will eventually happen is a fear expressed by 27% of Walloons. Only 23% of Flemings believe that. The survey appeared in Het Nieuwsblad and Het Volk on 19 October, the day on which discussions began in the Forum of the Regions and the Federal Government on possible further steps in state reform and just when sensitive community dossiers such as the splitting of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde and the expansion of DHL are hanging over the Federal Government like a sword of Damocles (FF).

Opinion

MATTHIAS DANNEELS • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 19 OCTOBER

Flanders and Wallonia are gradually becoming diametrically opposed. If the transfer, use and transparent management of the billions of funds in social security and the activation of the labour market are taken into consideration, that even becomes clear. The splitting of minds is a fact. We have – to quote SPA Chairman Steve Steevaert – become two countries in one kingdom.

But in our view it is going too far to deduce too eagerly and over-hastily from the conclusion that there is not currently social and political majority support for a separatist adventure that Old Belgium Ltd deserves restoring.

Transfer of funds to Wallonia and Brussels amounts to 6.6 billion

In 2003, the transfer of funds via federal taxes and social security from Flanders to Wallonia and Brussels amounted to 6.6 billion euros. This is the finding of a study produced by the Flemish administration Abifim for the Flemish Government. The study was commissioned at the time by Flemish Minister-President Bart Somers (VLD). The results have been available to the Flemish Government since July, but according to Het Nieuwsblad are only now being made public, because N-VA chairman Bart De Wever wants to raise the matter in the Flemish Parliament (FF).

Since the 1960s there has been a steady flow of funds from Flanders to Wallonia and since the 1990s to Brussels too. This takes place via the Federal Government’s budget (in 2003 1.52 billion euros), the funding of the communities and regions (1.32 billion euros) and social security (3.74 billion euros), all together good for 6.6 billion. That is more than the KBC Research Agency, which arrived at a figure of 5.4 billion euros for 2002. Furthermore, according to the Flemish administration the flow of funds in the same direction will continue to grow - in 2020 to as much as 8.78 billion euros - unless employment levels suddenly rise dramatically in Brussels and Wallonia. The figures do not take account of government debt and interest charges, although these also cause a redistribution between regions. ‘I’ve made this calculation, and came up with an additional transfer of 4.7 billion euros, which brings the total flow of funds from Flanders to the Francophones to 11.3 billion euros,’ says De Wever. ‘That is almost 2,000 euros per Fleming every year.’
Vandenbroucke wants CD&V in federal government

Vandenbroucke makes an appeal to push through the necessary socio-economic reforms in an open letter that appeared in Flemish newspapers on 19 October.

According to Flemish Minister for Education and Employment, Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A), all the democratic parties in all this country's governments must work together to push through the necessary socio-economic and administrative reforms. Vandenbroucke makes this appeal in an open letter that appeared in Flemish newspapers on 19 October. It is the follow-up to an open letter he wrote in January 2004 with his federal colleague and fellow party member Johan Vande Lanotte. At the time both ministers insisted in this so-called 'pivotal memo' that after the regional elections in June budgetary surpluses be created to keep the pension burden affordable and a large-scale reform of the labour market, social security and pensions be begun. Vandenbroucke notices now the federal and Flemish budgets have been drawn up that no surpluses were created. He does, however, note that the Federal Government is passing on the Federal Government's social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security.

Vandenbroucke makes an appeal to push through the necessary socio-economic reforms in an open letter that appeared in Flemish newspapers on 19 October. It is the follow-up to an open letter he wrote in January 2004 with his federal colleague and fellow party member Johan Vande Lanotte. At the time both ministers insisted in this so-called 'pivotal memo' that after the regional elections in June budgetary surpluses be created to keep the pension burden affordable and a large-scale reform of the labour market, social security and pensions be begun. Vandenbroucke notices now the federal and Flemish budgets have been drawn up that no surpluses were created. He does, however, note that the Federal Government is passing on the Federal Government's social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security with the pay of the members of the Flemish Civil Service to federal social security.

According to Vandenbroucke, a 'lack of consultation' and differences of opinion between the various governments are standing in the way of the reforms. And so he wants the Christian Democrats to also join the Federal Government. 'If parties are constantly locking horns with each other it is impossible to take decisions, let alone give direction to society.' A classic tripartite is the recommended alternative: 'Collective leadership, through co-operation between various strong personalities from different parties, is the only thing that can save us from social, economic and democratic disaster.' With this approach Vandenbroucke has placed a new time-bomb under the fragile unity within the Verhofstaden government. Most of those involved were surprised by the initiative yesterday and were unwilling to react. Both Premier Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) and SP.A Chairman Steve Stevaert confined themselves to 'no comment'.

While the Purples are therefore doing everything in their power to avoid the population becoming frightened and, as in Germany and the Netherlands, taking to the streets, Vandenbroucke is choosing the other route all alone. He is saying: don't deceive people. Give them the feeling that the right measures are being taken and they will recover their faith in politics. Waste any more time and you will condemn yourself to a draconian policy à la Schröder and Balkenende. And then you really will have a problem. This Frank Vandenbroucke is behaving like a meta-politician, someone who places himself above the hustle and bustle and warns where others stay silent. In government circles, and in particular within the PS, this will be pointed to as final proof that the man is characterised by an unimaginable arrogance. Someone with whom it is impossible to work. The Frank problem. In Flanders as well as in his party, Vandenbroucke has support for the content of his position. But he has decided that clarity is now required, regardless of the consequences. It's make or break time. He is placing his own party, and primarily his chairman, Steve Stevaert, before a terrible dilemma. Supporting him will lead to serious difficulties in the federal coalition. Abandoning him will be manna from heaven for the opposition.

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<th>DHL in Zaventem</th>
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<td><strong>DHL Aviation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Employers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Workers</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Aviation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>European Air Transport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Number of Nightflights</strong></td>
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De Gucht voices doubt about Congolese leaders

In Congo he had met few politicians who had made a convincing impression on him and could make a significant contribution to the development of the country, he said

Employers and opposition parties reacted with enthusiasm to the open letter from Minister Vandenbroucke. CD&V Chairman Vandeven claimed that the minister’s one-man maneuvre and the major about-turn he made the next day still did him more harm than good. De Gucht reacted with enthusiasm to the employers and opposition parties about the open letter from Minister Vandenbroucke. CD&V Chairman Vandevenzus agreed with the content analysis of the letter, but did not feel called to help the Federal Government out. Within Vandenbroucke’s own party, the SPA, where more than in any other party the rule applies that differences of opinion are talked through internally within the party, the silence was initially deafening. In the absence of Party Chairman Stevaert, who is in Cuba, only eminence grise Louis Tobback ventured to comment (De Morgen, 20 October). Even if Vandenbroucke is right, it is still tactically incomprehensible to force an expansion of the Federal Government with such an approach, he says. Vandenbroucke himself, who the next day felt he had been placed in political isolation, was quick to clarify or explain a number of comments in his open letter. He denies, for example, that he criticised the SPA’s ministers in the Federal Government, Johan Vande Lanotte and Freya Vanden Bossche. And according to his own interpretation he did not literally say that the CD&V should be part of the Federal Government. There should, however, be a viable method for consultation. De Morgen claims that the minister’s one-man maneuvre and the major about-turn he made the next day still did him more harm than good.

Opinion

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 20 OCTOBER

People who share the sincere conviction of Vandenbroucke - and there are plenty of them within the political sphere - are now disappointed because the man did not have the courage to stand by his conviction. Among government partners and in his own party Vandenbroucke, even after his pirouette, will continue to be mistrusted and shunned.

De Gucht: about Congolese leaders

Last week Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht (VLD) began a tour of Central Africa. In Kinsjasa he had a meeting with President Kabila and Vice-President Bemba, and in Kigali he met Rwanda’s President Kagame. In Kigali he took first stock of the situation. This proved to be extremely negative for the political leadership of the Congo. He had met few politicians there who had made a convincing impression on him and could make a significant contribution to the development of the country, he said. According to De Gucht, Rwanda is better governed than the Congo. When these comments reached President Kabila, he immediately sent an emissary to Bukavu in the east of the Congo near the Rwandan border, which De Gucht had now reached. This emissary let it be known that such comments would not promote good bilateral relations. The Congo is also holding it against Belgium for having long sided with Rwanda. They see De Gucht’s criticism of their political leaders as confirmation of that suspicion, claims De Tijd (18 October). Karel De Gucht said himself he did not want to side with anyone in the conflict, but let it be known he believes diplomacy will not be enough in this case. He wants the Congolese leaders to be aware of the need to bring peace to the country, govern it effectively and tackle corruption. Nevertheless, he wants to continue the Africa policy delineated by his predecessor, Louis Michel. The Congo is in a transitional phase en route to democracy and must receive as much assistance as possible, he feels (FF).

WIM VANDE VELDEN/GWEN DE CLERCK - DE TIJD - 19 OCTOBER

There is considerable criticism of the Rwandan regime both in the Congo and in Belgium. The Congo and the world of Belgian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have long suspected the Belgian Government all too often having shut its eyes to lapses and abuses of human rights by the Rwandan regime. All eyes were therefore on the position adopted by Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht, after his meeting with Paul Kagame. As is his wont, De Gucht took up a clear position. ‘We have to give credit to Rwanda and the regime,’ he said. ‘There is order, a leader and little corruption,’ he added. He also did not deny that there were problems with human rights, but pointed out that Rwanda was one of the few countries in the region that are at least trying to introduce efficient government. ‘By African standards, the government here is efficient, which is not the case in the neighbouring countries,’ said De Gucht. ‘In a lawless regime you can’t even talk of human rights. Political and economic stability is the first condition necessary to be able to implement human rights.’ The Federal Secretary of Ecolo, Isabelle Durant, calls the comments of the Foreign Affairs Minister ‘inappropriate and disastrous’. According to her, the comments mark ‘the end of Belgian support for the process of transition’ and represent a break with Belgian policy, which up to now was in favour of a regional approach. The spokesman for Premier Verhofsstadt warns against over-hasty conclusions: ‘De Gucht is merely making the Congolese leaders aware of their responsibility. This isn’t about a change in policy, merely a difference in style between De Gucht and his predecessor.’
Sound management needs legislation

The VLD Senators Patrick Vankrunkelsven and Luc Willems promptly tabled a bill whereby listed companies and public enterprises would be obliged to make public their directors’ remuneration

J an Coene, CEO of Picanol, who resigned last week when more and more information emerged on the exorbitant payments he raked in from the West Flanders loom manufacturer, also resigned as chairman of telecoms operator Belgacom on 15 October. Immediately after the announcement that the government had accepted Coene’s resignation, the Federal Minister for Public Companies Vande Lanotte announced that the government had already found a successor: Theo Dilissen, boss of the software company Real Software. Dilissen has to stand aside at Real Software now the American Gores Technology Group has become the majority shareholder.

The unusual payments received by Jan Coene - the solicitors Deminor, which is defending the interests of the minority shareholders, speaks of 5 to 6 million euros a year for three years - have caused the question of the complete transparency of directors to rear its head again. The VLD Senators Patrick Vankrunkelsven and Luc Willems promptly tabled a bill whereby listed companies and public enterprises would be obliged to make public their directors’ remuneration. It is a reworked version of the bill piloted through the Senate by Senators Van Quickenborne and De Grauwe in 2003, but which perished in the Chamber in the run-up to the elections. The new bill has the full support of the government and Premier Verhofstadt. Meanwhile a committee chaired by Fortis Chairman Maurice Lippens is working on a draft code of sound management, a self-regulating code for business, you could say, but which appears with the Picanol scandal to offer few guarantees of sound management, claim a number of specialists in De Standaard (FF).

JOHAN RASKING • DE STANDAARD • 19 OCTOBER

The Lernout & Hauspie affair had far-reaching consequences in Belgium for the way in which the external auditor could operate. The Jan Coene case promises above all to have an impact on sound management at corporate level. ‘It illustrates that self-regulation does not work. The governing bodies have failed, despite all the committees such as the audit committee and the remuneration committee being in place. Self-regulation is bankrupt,’ says corporate lawyer Christian Van Buggenhout. ‘We saw the same thing with the Ahold affair in the Netherlands.’

The damage caused by situations such as the payment of Picanol’s CEO is enormous, says Van Buggenhout. ‘How can you restructure a company and demand effort if the management enriches itself in this way? Workers have to be able to trust the capability and honesty of their employers.’

Professor Michel De Samblanx from the University of Antwerp does not believe in self-regulation either. ‘A company must be managed from the point of view of the company’s interests. A healthy corporate policy is based on the integrity of the company. The rest, such as transparency and the fair treatment of all stakeholders, follows from this.’ De Samblanx believes the basic rules should be enshrined in a legal text.

‘A code alone will have no effect. We have to have a second corporate governance act that focuses on the director,’ says one specialist. In particular, the definition of what an independent director is must be tightened up. ‘There is a clear networking problem. Everyone knows everyone else and they protect each other. Many people in such a network have problems being independent.’

With the Lippens code Belgian business wanted to avoid transparency concerning bosses’ payments. ‘It’s perfectly clear that this information must be provided. People must have information on salaries and bonuses. Then they can see if these are in line with the company’s interests.’

Sloppy drugs act must be rewritten, Court of Arbitration says

FF EDITORIAL TEAM

The Court of Arbitration has scrapped the controversial Article 16 from the Drugs Act of 3 May 2003. According to that article, adults in possession of cannabis are liable to criminal prosecution, but the police do not need to book the person if they are not a problem-user or are not a nuisance. That came down to a policy of tolerance for the use of cannabis by adults. Both problematic use and being a nuisance are worded much too vaguely, nor is there any clarity regarding the amount of cannabis a user may have on them, the Court believed.

The repeal of this article has made the Act totally unusable, forcing Public Prosecutor’s Offices and police to have recourse to a ministerial guideline from 1998. This states that limited cannabis use by adults is a punishable offence, but merits the lowest priority of prosecution. A wording that allows an extremely elastic interpretation by the magistrate or police officer.

Together with her colleague in Public Health, Rudy Demotte (PS), Justice Minister Onkelinx (PS) is now drafting an amendment to the Act, which will respect the spirit of the Act of 2003. This means that where cannabis use by adults is concerned, the emphasis will be not on repression but providing help.

WWW.VAD.BE
Who will stop the media war?

The Managing Director of the VRT, Tony Mary sees the chapter of the coalition agreement as a serious threat. He is warning against political interference in the day-to-day running of the company.

A great many Flemish MPs in the CD&V and VLD are extremely annoyed at the lack of transparency in the public broadcasting company, the VRT. The VRT operates with taxpayers’ money, and Parliament is therefore entitled to know what is being done with it, claims, for example, Flemish MP Carl De Caluwé (CD&V). Also, according to VLD MP Margriet Hermans (VLD), the VRT’s management has too much freedom and neither the Board of Directors nor Parliament is able to curb Director of Television Aimée Van Hecke’s zeal to convert the VRT into a commercial broadcaster. Erik Van Rompuy (CD&V, Flemish Parliament), once himself Flemish Media Minister, in turn feels that the Board of Directors should be able to see the contracts that the management enters into with production companies, the sponsorship and advertising canvassing and technological initiatives. And finally there are also complaints about the ‘left-wing news service’ of the public broadcaster in several party headquarters (the VLD, but in particular the CD&V). These demands were more or less reflected in the Media chapter of the recent Flemish coalition agreement, which calls for greater financial transparency, stricter observance of the ceilings for radio advertising on the VRT and a restriction on TV sponsoring. These provisions must be implemented in the new management agreement between the government and the broadcasting company. Meanwhile the commercial broadcasters, in particular the Flemish Media Company (Vlaamse Media Maatschappij, VMMa) covering competitor VTM, see it as a step in the right direction. The Managing Director of the VRT, Tony Mary, clearly does not. He is hitting back and sees the chapter of the coalition agreement as a serious threat. He is warning against political interference in the day-to-day running of the company and has declared the pax media between public and commercial broadcasters dead. Since the public broadcaster launched its ‘temporary sports broadcaster’ Sporza this summer to face the overload of Sports programmes (Olympic Games and European Championship football), there is even talk of an open media war (FF).

ANN PEUTEMAN • KNACK • 20 OCTOBER •

With the Sporza affair Mary has once again got under the political world’s and his competitors’ skin. Although the Board of Directors unanimously approved the setting up of a temporary sports broadcaster in the spring, it didn’t do so whole-heartedly. ‘We had no choice,’ says one board member. ‘They had bought so many sports rights that they were not able to show all these broadcasts without jeopardising the objectives of Ketnet (the youth broadcaster) and Canvas (network for the so-called added-value viewer, ed.).’ The VMMa raised a hue and cry and even filed a complaint with the European Commission because of irregular government support. In the meantime the Flemish Government has received a list of 49 questions from Europe which the VRT’s lawyers are in the middle of answering in complete security.

At the end of the summer the row around Sporza did not fizzle out with the broadcaster itself. In the midst of the holiday period, General Director of Television Aimé Van Hecke pointed out that most Flemings would be happy to keep Sporza. There were angry reactions from MPs, board members and also from the new Media Minister Ceert Bourgeois (N-VA), who had barely had the chance to look through the media statutes.

Meanwhile, the more Tony Mary dreams of weekly magazines, merchandising and above all of the great digital future, the further up the wall he drives his commercial competitors. Last week the Private Broadcasting Federation (Private Omroep Federatie, POF) produced a far-reaching set of demands for the Media Minister: not only are they calling for an advertising-free VRT by 2009, they also want the annual allocation increase for the VRT to be abolished. VT4 has since distanced itself from the document, but the VMMa wants to go even further. ‘The public broadcaster’s allocation should be based on the resources of private family broadcasters,’ says Managing Director Christian Van Thillo. ‘At present the VRT spends more each year than the whole Persgroep (TV- and radiostations, magazines and newspapers, ed.) together, while the public broadcasting company is managed like a company on the open market. Their total budget is certainly 100 to 150 million euros too high. The coalition agreement merely puts an end to the most serious excesses.’ Only Minister Bourgeois is keeping silent. Nothing short of a deus-ex-machina intervention is expected of him. How he intends mitigating the media war will shortly be evident from his first policy statement. ‘We shall be giving this to Parliament first, as is only right,’ he is saying.

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WWW.VTM.BE

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<th>USE OF CANNABIS AMONG FLEMISH YOUTH (%)</th>
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<td>USE LAST YEAR</td>
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SOURCE: ASSOCIATION FOR ALCOHOL AND DRUG PROBLEMS (VAD)
**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE**

- Until 31 October: Opera: Aida by Giuseppe Verdi, director: Robert Wilson; De Munt, Brussels; info: www.demunt.be
- Until 16 January: Turkish Festival, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- 27 October: Jan Michiels (piano) with Dvorak, Janacek and Ligeti; Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- 24 and 31 October: Anima Eterna and Jos Van Immerseel with Brahms; Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be and Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- 26 October: Hagen Quartett with Kurtag, Ravel and Shostackovich, Big Aula Maria Theresia, Leuven; info: www.festival.be
- 26 October: Brice Leroux and vzw Continua; Gravitations-quadro, dance, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- 27 October: La Petite Bande conducted by Sigiswald Kuijken, with cantatas by JS Bach, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- 28 October: The Thursdays, experimental music; danse performance with Simone Aughteronley, Hilmar Jenison ø Skuli Sverisson, Tino Sehgal, Jim Black & Simone Aughterlony, Hilmar Jensson & Sigiswald Kuijken, Barockorchester La Stagione, conducted by Michael Schneider, with Mozart and Haydn, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- 29 October: Royal Ballet of Cambodia, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- 29 October: Barockorchester La Stagione Frankfurt conducted by Michael Schneider, with Mozart and Haydn, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- 29 October: Beethoven Academie conducted by Thomas Albert with Symphonies by Haydn and Mozart, Conservatory, Kortrijk; info: www.festival.be
- 29 October: Avril, Botanique, Brussels; info: 02/218.37.32 www.audijazz.be
- 30 October: Macao, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: 09/265.91.65 www.handelsbeurs.be
- 30 October: Univers Zero, Théâtre 140, Brussels; info: 02/507.82.00 www.audijazz.be
- 30 October: Octuor Quintet, Sounds Jazzclub, Brussels; info: 02/512.92.50 www.audijazz.be
- 25 to 27 October: Pierre Boulez and the London Symphony Orchestra with Stravin-sky and Boulez, Henry Leboeuf Hall, Bozar, info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00
- 27 October: Junior Marvin and the mad Professor, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- 28 October to 4 November: Forgeries, Love and other Matters, Meg Stuart, Benoit Lachambre music: Hahn Rowe, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be www.damagedgoods.be
- 29 October: Flemish Radio Orchestra conducted by Enrique Barrios with Canto General by Mikis Theodorakis, Soprano: Maria Farandouri, Bijloke, Ghent
- 29 October to 6 November: Music in Mind, Festival of Imaginative Music with Ursula Rucker, Clogs, Jorane, Ben Christophers, The Album Leaf, Meyer Rev, Biosphere, Diefenbach and others, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- 30 October: Macao, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- 30 and 31 October and 3 November: Andreas Steiter(piano) with Daniel Sepec(violin) and Guilen Queiras (Cello)with van Beethoven, Schubert and Hummel, Conservatory, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be 02/507.82.00 and Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be, De Singel Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- 3 November: Southside Johny ø The Asbury Jukes, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- 3 November: Sidi Goma (Guerrat, India); Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
- 4, 5 and 6 November: Private Collection ø Time will show, dance, Norwary; info: www.kaaitheater.be

**EXPO**

- Until 27 February: Tattoo-Tattoo, exhibition, Royal Museum for Art and History, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/741.72.11 or www.kmkg.be
- Until 16 January: Exhibition: Mothers, goddesses and sultanes from prehistory until the end of the Ottoman empire, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- 28 November: Luc Deleu ø TOP Office – Values, Muhka, Antwerp; info: www.muhka.be
- 13 October to 16 January: Karel Appel, exhibition, Rudi Fuchs on a journey through the art of the low countries, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- 19 December: Alphavilles!, exhibition by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster (Fr); De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- 28 November: Massimo Vitalo and Clark Clarryse, PMMK, Ostend, info: 059/50.81.18 www.pmmk.be
- Until 7 November: Verner Panton (DK), Phantasy Landscape, Visiona 2, Designex-po, CC Scharpood, Knokke-Heist; info: www.knokke-heist.be www.vitra.com
- Until 23 October: 19th Biennale Internationale 04, interior and design fair, Kortrijk XPO, www.interieur.be

**FOCUS ON FLANDERS**

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**CULTURE**

- 4 November: Tomatito, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be www.audijazz.be info: 02/507.82.00
- 4 and 5 November: Ozark Henry, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- 5 and 6 November: Earl Zinger, Botanique, Brussels; 02/218.37.32 and De Kreun, Kortrijk; info: 056/37.06.44
- 6 November: Dave Brabeck/Jeff Neve Trio feat. Paolo Fresu, De Warande Turnhout, info: 014/41.69.91
- 6 November: Full Cycle Night, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24

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