Karel Vinck stands down at the Belgian Railways

Karel Vinck is standing down as managing director of the Belgian Railways (NMBS). He would normally have remained in the post until the end of 2005. His decision came as a complete surprise to both the government and the NMBS management. Before his departure, Vinck managed to get a number of senior appointments secured. After all, the NMBS now consists of three limited liability companies (NVs). The subsidiary responsible for the railway infrastructure is run by PS member Luc Lallemant. Vinck himself will continue to run the new NMBS, which handles transport, until 31 January. He will be succeeded in this position by Luc Descheemaeker (VLD). In the third NV, the umbrella holding company, Janie Haeck, current principal private secretary to State Enterprises Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SPA) is being tipped as managing director. In two of the three boards of directors, the names of the chairman are also already known: Dominique Offergeld (MR) becomes chairman of the board of directors of the holding company and Edmée de Groeve (PS) secures this position at ‘New NMBS’. Vinck, who had previously been CEO at Eternit, Bekaert and Unicorn, has run the NMBS for two and a half years, and feels that the company has now been put on the right track - even though his cooperation with trade unions and politicians has not always been as smooth as silk (FF).

Opinion

STEFAAN HUYSENTRUYT
DE TIJD • 29 OCTOBER

Vinck had come to get something moving, but that proved to be more difficult than envisaged. Every proposal immediately came up against strike threats and political interference. Halfway through last year Vinck presented his business plan, significantly entitled ‘Move’. According to this plan 10,000 jobs were to be axed at the Railways by 2007. After endless political and union powwows, Vinck secured the agreement that 3,000 jobs would go by the end of 2005, and that at the same time 5,000 people would change jobs at the NMBS. Vinck yesterday saw the appointment of the people he wanted to see appointed, but nonetheless tendered his resignation. Although he did not say so in so many words, he is more than tired of the train of inertia. Vinck reckons that with the new structures he has put the NMBS on the right track and that it is now up to his successors to keep the company on that track. That will not be easy, but they do have a huge incentive. Liberalisation of the European rail market means that it is ‘adapt or die’ for the NMBS.

INTRODUCTION

The tax amnesty is turning into a letdown. Less than three months before the conclusion of the operation on 31 December only 16% of those investors state that they will use the arrangement. For the minister it will be cold comfort that the European Commission has not gone along with the most important complaint: complaint amounts will be transferred to Association of Banks (ABBL). The Association considered it unacceptable that Belgians could anonymously regularise their money via a Belgian bank, but could not do so if they chose to keep their money abroad (in Luxembourg). The European Commission’s criticism was limited to the broadening of a number of criteria governing the reinvestment of their foreign money in immovable property or life insurance.

In the meantime Luxembourg banks are trying to offer an alternative to repatriation of funds by means of financial products not falling under the European Savings Directive, such as type TAK 21 and TAK 23 life insurance with terms that are longer than the tax limitation periods. But some Belgian bank managers, too, cannot suppress the inclination to give their customers a helping hand in evading the EBA, reports Trends (28 October). They advise investors with money to transfer their foreign funds quietly into a Belgian account and to leave them there until the limitation period of five years has come to an end. They assure these investors that this is cheaper and more anonymous, and promise not to say anything to the Unit for the Provision of Financial Information, which they are nonetheless obliged to do. What they fail to add is that anyone discovered with his or her undeclared money after 1 January 2005 risks confiscation of all tax contributions that he or she had evaded in repatriated, bringing total income for the Treasury to EUR 47 billion. Finance Minister Didier Reynders (MR) had expected revenue of no less than EUR 850 million, but has now already adjusted this to EUR 450 million. A tax underdeclared or partly declared money in Luxembourg or elsewhere abroad clearly regard the legal uncertainty surrounding the One-off Exemption Declaration (OPED) to be too great. That was revealed again recently in a survey by the business magazine Cash. In this survey only 16% of those investors state that they will use the arrangement.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
Mayors not to be elected directly in 2006

CD&V is opposed to the direct election of mayors, whilst the VLD is a great advocate and opinions are mixed among the SP.A's ranks.

In the municipal elections of 2006 the mayors will probably not be elected directly. The Flemish Interior Minister Marino Keulen (VLD) is not including the matter in the Local Government Decree which is due to be produced by July 2005 according to the Flemish coalition agreement. The issue was included in the proposal made by his predecessor Van Grembergen (Spirit), but was one of the reasons why the decree could not be voted through in the Flemish Parliament, the discord among the coalition partners being too great. SP.A did not want any more institutional debates just before the elections. Together with other controversial subjects such as the simultaneous holding of Flemish and federal elections and the combination of local and parliamentary mandates, direct election to the post of mayor is being moved to a separate forum on 'the strengthening of democracy'. In the new Flemish coalition the newcomer CD&V is also fiercely opposed to the direct election of mayors, whilst the VLD is a great advocate of the procedure, and whereas opinions are mixed among the SP.A's ranks. The SP.A's Mayor of Antwerp Patrick Janssens, for example, is also in favour. In contrast to the Vlaams Blok, Janssens advocates a direct election in two rounds, with the two candidates with the highest number of votes fighting it out in a head-to-head contest in the second round. In Antwerp that could well lead to a direct duel between him and Vlaams Blok leader Philip Dewinter, although the way things look at the moment, it won't come to that (FF).

BART ECKHOUTH
DE MORGEN • 26 OCTOBER

Keulen is starting consultations on the new local government decree in two weeks, and for this he is calling a conference of mayors and local councillors from the various parties. Keulen wants to have the new local government decree approved in parliament by July 2005 at the latest, so that it can be implemented after the municipal elections of 2006. Keulen does not yet have a draft decree ready, but he is making some initial moves. For example, he wants the mayor no longer automatically also to be chairman of the council. ‘A mayor is too much the defender of policy,’ goes the reasoning. ‘If he then also chairs the council, the opposition may feel crippled. The Prime Minister cannot be the Speaker of the House as well.’ Keulen also wants the alderman for social affairs to become chairman of the Public Centre for Social Welfare, ‘in order to rule out competition’. The direct election to the post of mayor will therefore certainly not be in the local government decree. The VLD is not making a point of it any more either. Patricia Ceysens, VLD parliamentary party leader in the Flemish Parliament, is positive: ‘We continue to be firmly in favour of the idea, but we have put back the timing to 2012. An agreement by 2006 is impossible because too many players have a direct interest in a decision in this direction, or no direction at all. That clouds the debate.’ The position of coalition partner CD&V is proof that there is no immediate chance of agreement on the issue of election to the mayor's office. Parliamentary party leader Ludwig Caluwe: ‘If there's one thing that direct election to the office of mayor leads to, it's less democracy. Too much power is unnecessarily placed in the hands of one local councillor.’

The Vlaams Blok will be tabling its own proposal for a decree in the Flemish Parliament, aimed at having direct election to the office of mayor introduced before 2006. ‘We are prepared to provide an alternative majority. But then the VLD and the advocates among the SP.A must assume their responsibility,’ grins parliamentary party leader Philip Dewinter. Dewinter himself advocates a direct election in one round, ‘but we don’t want to be difficult about that. It’s the principle that counts.’ It is known that Philip Dewinter is hoping to seize his chance via a direct election in Antwerp. Dewinter claims that the issue of direct elections is being postponed because the democratic parties are afraid of the Blok.

BART BRINCKMAN • DE STANDAARD 27 OCTOBER

According to Leterme the crucial point is the unanimity both in the north and in the south as to the parameters used. Therefore a team of two Flemish and two Walloon researchers will be examining the study closely again. The professors should have completed their work within a few months. Walloon Minister-President Jean-Claude Van Cauwenbergh (PS) has no objection against such a study.

But Leterme did not want to wait for the study in order to draw a few political conclusions. The transfer phenomenon has existed for some years. The size of the figures is also known. Leterme is agreeing to account for a part of the flow of funds by means of a different application of the federal legislation in Flanders and Wallonia. This ‘lack of federal loyalty’ manifests itself, for example, in the health insurance system or in the monitoring of job seekers. Therefore they cannot be categorised under solidarity (for example the fact that Wallonia has more unemployed people or - given its industrial past - more victims of occupational diseases). Leterme will also outline the matter in the Institutional Forum currently being organised in the Senate. Moreover, the Flemish Authorities will be starting permanent monitoring of the flows of funds from Flanders to Wallonia in a few months’ time. The Minister-President is not rejecting solidarity. He is stressing, however, that this must be ‘transparent, objective and appropriate’, as requested in the Flemish coalition agreement.
A survey conducted by the research bureau Gfk WWW and commissioned by De Morgen indicates that an average of three out of ten Belgians would not go and vote if voting were no longer compulsory. 73% would still turn out for municipal elections, but only 64% would do so for elections to the European Parliament. The party that would lose out most in such a scenario is the Vlaams Blok. The extreme right-wing party would lose almost half its voters. Locally 56% of its supporters would still vote, whilst 54% and 52% would turn out for regional and federal elections respectively, and only 44% would do so for European elections. At the other extreme, Groen! voters indicate that they are the most disciplined, with 98% of them claiming that they would continue to vote. In second place come the Christian-Democrat voters (84% in local elections, 82% and 80% in regional and federal elections), closely followed by the Socialists (SP.A-Spirit, 79% locally and 80% and 75% in regional and federal elections). It is striking that the Liberal VLD, the great advocate of compulsory voting being abolished, only retains 73% of its voters for local elections and 72% and 68% respectively for regional and federal elections. The survey asked Belgians about other aspects of the electoral legislation. This revealed a large majority in favour of the direct election of mayors and an even larger majority in favour of regional and federal elections being held simultaneously (FF).

**BART EECHKOUT**

**DE MORGEN • 27 OCTOBER**

The remarkable results of the survey further fuel the debate on compulsory voting. VLD chairman Bart Somers is aware that doing away with compulsory voting would not necessarily do his party any good, but nonetheless remains a staunch supporter of the idea: ‘This is about a democratic principle, not party strategy. The VLD wants to be rid of this archaic system, which, as it now appears, generates a large number of anti-political votes,’ says Somers. ‘The fact that my party also loses out proves the relativity of the arguments. Clearly it is not only - or even primarily - the less well-educated and underprivileged who would stay at home.’ However, SPA chairman Steve Stevaert remains an equally staunch supporter of compulsory voting, and - yes - also ‘on the basis of a democratic conviction’. Stevaert wants ‘at all costs to avoid us ending up in American-type situations, where there is more discussion about voter registration than about what is at stake in the elections.’ The survey yielded up other politically relevant results. For example, it revealed a large majority of Belgians in favour of mayors being chosen by direct election. Just this week it became clear that the direct election of mayors will certainly not be introduced in 2006, because there is no political majority to carry the motion in the Flemish Parliament. That majority does exist among the population at large. In Flanders 71% of people want a direct election for the office of mayor. An even larger majority wants the federal and regional elections to be held simultaneously again as quickly as possible. In the whole of Belgium this idea is supported by 78% of those questioned, but in Flanders the support is even more overwhelming, with 85% of interviewees expressing the wish to see simultaneous elections.

**WWW.DEMORGEN.BE**

**WWW.GFK.BE**

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**The cordon sanitaire is up for discussion, Coveliers says**

**FF EDITOR**

Hugo Coveliers, the VLD senator from Antwerp and candidate chairman of his party, feels that his party must compete for the voters’ favour in the 2006 municipal elections with a more liberal and more right-wing programme. The party must immediately explain that it will be willing to enter government after the elections together with any other party that accepts the VLD programme and whose programme is acceptable to the VLD, according to Coveliers, who was quoted in De Standaard [27 October]. In Het Laatste Nieuws [27 October] Coveliers does not rule out cooperation with the Vlaams Blok if the Blok adopts a slightly more democratic and liberal profile. He believes that the city does not have to have a left-wing mayor by definition. Coveliers is of the view that the current Antwerp VLD parliamentary party leader Ludo Van Campenhout behaves too much like mayor Patrick Janssens’ [SP.A-Spirit] lackey. Filip Dewinter, Antwerp’s Vlaams Blok heavyweight, wants a large right-wing list, on which he is also inviting members of the N-VA, CD&V and VLD. His aim is to win 40% of the votes with the list - enough for an absolute majority. In De Morgen [27 October] Coveliers insinuates that for the time being he will not be going along with the request to run as a candidate on this list.

**WWW.COVELIERS.BE**

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**ELECTIONS**

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**SOURCE:** DE MORGEN
De Gucht gets the go-ahead for Congolese army reform

**De Gucht wants to present a detailed plan to the Council of EU Foreign Affairs Ministers on 2 November**

In the parliamentary committee meeting of 21 October, Federal Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht (VLD) did not retract any of the less than diplomatic comments he had made about the Congolese leaders. He gave graphic descriptions of Congolese corruption, and called for international supervision of the country. A diplomatic incident was briefly in the offing when the Congolese ambassador was withdrawn and the Congolese Information Minister accused De Gucht of racism and nostalgia for the colonial era. But this made little impression on De Gucht. Belgium is the only country stumping up money for the reconstruction of the country (EUR 200 million) and now it appears that the current situation of the country (EUR 200 million) is faring so badly, according to a report in De Standaard (25 October). After thirteen years’ uninterrupted decline, the hyperinflation and currency depreciation were brought to a halt after the introduction of a macro-economic stabilisation programme, in which the help was enlisted of Alfons Verplaetse, former governor of the National Bank of Belgium. The Congolese government of National Unity was congratulated on the results achieved and Congo received a credit instalment of USD 40 million to be used in a new three-year programme. In its half-yearly World Economic Outlook the IMF says that it forecasts economic growth this year of 6.3%, and that it expects to see inflation brought down to 5% (in 2000 it stood at 511%).

### The Regional Elections Results, if the Compulsory Vote were Abolished

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**IMF is more positive about Congo than De Gucht**

**FF EDITOR**

In contrast to the Belgian Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) does not think that the Congolese economy is faring so badly, according to a report in De Standaard (25 October). After thirteen years’ uninterrupted decline, the hyperinflation and currency depreciation were brought to a halt after the introduction of a macro-economic stabilisation programme, in which the help was enlisted of Alfons Verplaetse, former governor of the National Bank of Belgium. The Congolese government of National Unity was congratulated on the results achieved and Congo received a credit instalment of USD 40 million to be used in a new three-year programme. In its half-yearly World Economic Outlook the IMF says that it forecasts economic growth this year of 6.3%, and that it expects to see inflation brought down to 5% (in 2000 it stood at 511%).
Health insurance derailed

The health insurance system risks going off the budgetary rails this year and the basis assumptions used in the preparation of the federal budget for 2005 are incorrect. These are some of the findings of a report by the Budget Control Commission of the State Institute for Illness and Disablement Insurance (Riziv), which was published on 22 October. Earlier the Flemish Education and Employment Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) had already pointed to the dramatic state of affairs in the health insurance system. The report now appears to prove him right. In the first half of 2004 the Riziv’s spending was as much as 11.1% higher than in the same period last year. In other words, there is the risk of a budget shortfall. In the budgetary control the initial budgeted increase of 5.97% (4.5% + inflation) was already increased to 7.99%, and now an additional 3% comes on top of that. If this trend is not reversed, it will mean that the space of one year the treasury is spending off the budgetary rails this year and the basis assumptions used in the preparation of the federal budget for 2005 are incorrect. These are some of the findings of a report by the Budget Control Commission of the State Institute for Illness and Disablement Insurance (Riziv), which was published on 22 October. Earlier the Flemish Education and Employment Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) had already pointed to the dramatic state of affairs in the health insurance system. The report now appears to prove him right. In the first half of 2004 the Riziv’s spending was as much as 11.1% higher than in the same period last year. In other words, there is the risk of a budget shortfall. In the budgetary control the initial budgeted increase of 5.97% (4.5% + inflation) was already increased to 7.99%, and now an additional 3% comes on top of that. If this trend is not reversed, it will mean that in the space of one year the treasury is costing EUR 1,800 million more than last year, according to De Morgen (23 October). On 9 November, Social Affairs Minister Rudy Demotte (PS) will be beginning talks on the subject with all parties concerned (health providers and health insurance funds). Within three weeks he wants to work out the proposals for savings that are needed. Among other things, Demotte wants a different hospital financing system in which admissions and operations for the same syndrome are reimbursed for the same amount in all hospitals. A study by the Inter-mutual insurance fund Agency (IMA) also points out that in Brussels and Walloon hospitals patients between the ages of 16 and 49 undergo pre-operative medical tests such as X-rays, electrocardiograms and clinical biology much more readily - tests that are unnecessary according to international recommendations. The top 24 hospitals that have these kinds of tests carried out are all in Wallonia and Brussels, whilst the 35 hospitals where the most economical approach is adopted to such tests are all in Flanders, reports De Standaard (27 October).

Opinion

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD 23 OCTOBER

Elio Di Rupo says that he is not against ‘the transfers’ disappearing. He is referring only to the distortions in healthcare, which he does want to get rid of, as long as it doesn’t happen too fast. But he forgets that the total transfer of funds from north to south in Belgium has in the meantime risen to a structural flow of funds of EUR 6.6 billion every year. That is a huge amount. He is also mistaken when he advises Flemings and Walloons not to expend so much energy on community issues. It is correct that thirty years ago too much attention was paid to community problems, with the result that attention was diverted from the socio-economic and financial problems. But it is incorrect to conclude that this is the case now. Experience has shown that failure to achieve a greater degree of socio-economic autonomy for the federated states results in the entire country slithering further backwards. The federated states are so disparate from a socio-economic point of view that only a differentiated socio-economic policy can keep them healthy, or make them healthy. All the international advisory bodies recommend this, too. The third mistake comes when he says that one federated state (he means Flanders) cannot force the whole country to move in a particular direction. It may be that this is the assessment in Wallonia, but in Flanders the view is completely different. There the feeling is that the other federated state is preventing the country from developing in the right direction. For example, Flanders is not allowed to take a whole host of necessary measures in the field of labour legislation and in the funding of the social security system because Wallonia and the PS do not want them. Di Rupo fails to understand that. And if he doesn’t understand that, there is little chance for the Belgium he speaks out for.

Elio Di Rupo’s three mistakes

According to the Standaard, Di Rupo is a rational and pragmatic defender of interests

PS chairman Elio Di Rupo fears that community discussions in Belgium call for too much energy. Weeks of negotiations between senior politicians are required to solve any problem that arises between the communities in this country, he says in an interview in De Standaard (23 October). This means they cannot spend enough time to financial and socio-economic problems, which has for instance led to the hefty public debt. Yet the most powerful man in Wallonia shows a conspicuous readiness for consultation with the Flemings. Just about everything is open for discussion, except for social security and healthcare. Those cannot be touched, says Di Rupo. The PS chairman is well aware that he is demonised in Flanders. Vlaams Blok leader Philip Dewinter, for example, quoted in the family magazine ‘De Dag Algemeen’, says that Di Rupo’s aim is to become Prime Minister. He is threatening a ‘Flemish revolution’ if that happens. Di Rupo shows himself to be more level-headed and recalls that the current PS is no longer the PS of ten years ago, and that the current PS ministers are no longer the irresponsible big spenders of yesteryear. De Standaard also feels that Di Rupo is not the devil incarnate, as he is depicted in Flanders. According to the paper, he is a rational and pragmatic defender of interests. Anyone wanting to understand Belgian politics should listen to what he has to say, rather than what his political opponents recount about his so-called underlying motives, says the paper. And yet in his interview, he makes three mistakes, De Standaard believes (FF).
Bourgeois wants more supervision of and less advertising on VRT

_Flemish Media Minister Geert Bourgeois (N-VA) has submitted his long-awaited policy memorandum to the Flemish Parliament. In it he argues in favour of a public inquiry on the programmes, role and duties of the VRT. Viewers and listeners should thus have their say in deciding on the future of the public broadcasting corporation. In 2006 the management agreement between the VRT and the Flemish Government expires. From that year advertising on the VRT will be curbed. Every year the broadcasting company will have to abide by a maximum amount in terms of advertising revenue. Limits will also be placed on programme sponsorship [FF]._

**DE STANDAARD • 26 OCTOBER**

Bourgeois wants to conduct his inquiry via the Flemish Media Council (Vlaamse Mediaraad), which includes representatives not only of the broadcasting companies and publishers, but also of the cable companies, Test-Achats and the Family Association (Gezinsbond). Their complaints should lead to a kind of White Paper of what viewers and listeners expect of the public broadcasting corporation. Bourgeois hopes to be able to gain a better insight by means of a broad social survey.

The White Paper will serve as raw material for a parliamentary debate on the future of the VRT. The current management agreement between the VRT and the Flemish Government, which comes to an end at the end of 2006, is left untouched. Thereafter advertising on the VRT will be curbed. The public broadcaster will not be allowed to exceed a maximum amount in revenue from commercials. The possibility of repaying excess money earned is being done away with and programmes may no longer be sponsored. On television only events, such as European Championship football, may be sponsored. Bourgeois will keep a very close eye on the VRT’s advertising acquisition, and the commercial broadcasters will also be subject to sharper scrutiny. The minister is considering setting up a new supervisory authority: the Flemish Regulator for the Media (VRM).

Bourgeois will see whether the commercial radio stations Q-Music and 4FM have kept the promises they made when they obtained their broadcasting permits. From now on he wants to give all commercial initiatives every opportunity, without discrimination. Bourgeois also wants to make it possible for at least one VRT and one RTBF radio station to be heard from the coast to the Ardennes, and possibly throughout the Benelux, using the new digital technology. On the public broadcasting network, the news and informative programmes should gradually all be subtitled for the hard of hearing.

[www.vlaanderen.be](http://www.vlaanderen.be)

VRT shows excellent performances but will be subject to greater supervision

**FF EDITORIAL TEAM**

During the hearing of the Flemish Parliament’s Media Committee on 26 October, Tony Mary, managing director of the VRT and Guy Peeters, chairman of the board of directors, came to present the company’s results for 2003. These were excellent, for the public broadcasting corporation had met all the performance criteria laid down in the management agreement. The reach of the VRT television news and radio news, the reach of the children’s programmes and the share of Flemish television production were all amply surpassed. Mary was congratulated by the parliamentary parties. Mary used the opportunity also to outline the challenges facing the public broadcasting corporation. In the federal elections, the radio, television and Internet services worked together, an inter-medium collaboration that also occurred during the Queen Elisabeth competition and the celebration of 50 years of television. Mary said that the VRT wanted to go further down this path of cross-media cross-fertilisation. The next project is called ‘Ketnetkick’, the first multimedia application in Flanders for children watching the young persons’ channel Ketnet, which will enable them to communicate interactively between their PC and the television via a CD-Rom interface. However, the various political groups in the committee did urge for greater financial transparency in the public broadcasting corporation. The next day they were echoed by Minister Bourgeois, who came to unveil his media policy in the Flemish Parliament. Bourgeois advocates stricter limits for advertising income and greater power for the board of directors.

In addition, Belgacom and the VRT cannot bid together for the television rights for the Belgian football competition without the approval of the Flemish Government, as they intend to do. The initiative had been announced in _De Tijd_ some weeks ago by Belgacom’s Managing Director Didier Bellens. It puts Belgacom rival Telenet in a delicate position. Telenet subsidiary Canal+ holds those rights at the moment and Telenet’s shareholders include the Flemish municipalities, the Flanders Investment Company and the ‘mixed’ (public- and private-sector) inter-municipal companies.

[www.vlaanderen.be](http://www.vlaanderen.be)
[www.telenet.be](http://www.telenet.be)
[www.belgacom.be](http://www.belgacom.be)
The book fair and the drama of the book market

85% of the turnover has to come from 15% of the titles and that is the drama: the market is unable to cope with so many books.

Over fourteen days, from 29 October, the Antwerp Book Fair will be showcasing a new crop of books - 70,000 in all, including around 20,000 new Dutch titles. Things are rosy in the book business, if you look at it from the publishers’ side. With 15,640 titles, the members of the Flemish Association of Publishers (VUV) recorded an 8.7% increase in total sales in 2003. Of these titles, 7,511 were original Dutch works.

Publishers are publishing more and more books, in the hope that there’s a best seller in amongst them somewhere, says André Van Halewijck, chairman of the organisation behind the book fair, Boek.be, in De Standaard. He reminds us that 85% of the turnover has to come from 15% of the titles and that is the drama: the market is unable to cope with so many books. It leads to overproduction and a limited circulation time for new books; if things go well, new books remain on the shelves for three or four months. The consequences are a hindrance for the book trade. The average bookstore has a stock worth EUR 150,000. No more than 30% of this is in favour of a system of public subsidies. Culture Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit) has its shrinking turnover on the CD market with books. And the Dutch ‘het Kruidvat’ chain of stores even publishes books itself. Bookstores are disappearing, but new ones are appearing, too. Most newcomers are looking for a niche in the market, with the result that we are seeing new bookstores specialising in cartoons, esotericism, non-fiction, fine literature or tourism. Children’s bookshops also offer picture postcards or the better toys. Bookstores are trying to position themselves as customer-friendly cultural meeting points. Professional knowledge, stock and services are their strong points.

The fact that there is no fixed price for books puts pressure on the profit margins of small bookstores. The normal discount that a bookstore can insist on receiving from a publisher is 40%. Chains such as Standaard Boekhandel can enforce other requirements, and even stipulate a right of return. Supermarkets sell at record low prices, offering shoppers hefty discounts, but this only applies to cookbooks, thrillers or the Harry Potter series. The bookseller could also do with that share of the cake. He needs the profit margin on successful titles and popular genres in order to invest. Bookstores wrestle for two weeks in the retail trade having to invest. Bookstores wrestle for two weeks in the retail trade to cope with so many books. They have to weigh up whether they should jump on the snowballing bandwagon of cookbooks by Flemish Celebrities (BV’s) and cookbooks based on television programmes, or whether they should go for breadth and offer a selection.

Every year the largest temporary bookshop in Flanders receives around 180,000 visitors prepared to dig into their wallets. The Book Fair has to rely on the impulse buy.

The Booksellers’ Association is not letting itself be taken for a ride. It acts as a watchdog. According to the Book Fair’s rules and regulations, it is only titles that have already been kept waiting for two weeks in the retail trade that can also appear on the stands. Less repressive measures have also been devised. This year visitors to the fair will receive a EUR 2.5 voucher to be redeemed on purchases at their local bookstore after 11 November. A nice gift. Should the better bookstores, as the weakest link in the system, receive public aid in order to stay afloat? Every year more and more people are saying they should. Equally predictable is the objection: won’t it be the big guys that benefit most from the subsidies?

Culture Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit) is in favour of a system of public subsidies. This we know from the speech he made at the 1999 Book Fair - one of his first appearances as minister. But how would this be organised? He has already taken initiatives to stimulate the reading culture, which directly or indirectly involve the bookstores.

Flanders has 240 recognised bookstores. More than a third belong to the Standaard Boekhandels group. Some thirty smaller independent bookstores are grouped together in Co-Libro. In recent years there have been plenty of competitors. The number of sales outlets ‘outside the trade’ has increased. Piles of books serve as a decoy to get customers into department store chains such as Carrefour and Makro. The Free Record Shop is trying to offset its shrinking turnover on the CD market with books. And the Dutch ‘het Kruidvat’ chain of stores even publishes books itself. Bookstores are disappearing, but new ones are appearing, too. Most newcomers are looking for a niche in the market, with the result that we are seeing new bookstores specialising in cartoons, esotericism, non-fiction, fine literature or tourism. Children’s bookshops also offer picture postcards or the better toys. Bookstores are trying to position themselves as customer-friendly cultural meeting points. Professional knowledge, stock and services are their strong points.

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www.boek.be
www.vuv.be
**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE**

- **Until 16 January:** Turkish Festival, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- **29 October to 6 November:** *Music in Mind*, Festival of Imaginative Music with Ursula Rucker, Clogs, Jorane, Ben Christophers, The Album Leaf, Mercury Rev, Biosphere, Diamant and others, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **3 November:** Southside Johny @ The Asbury Jukes, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- **3 November:** Sidi Goma (Gujiartist, India); Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
- **4 and 5 November:** Private Collection@Time will show, dance (Norway); info: www.kaaitheater.be
- **4 November:** Tomatito, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be www.audijazz.be
- **4 November:** and Thidrin, Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
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- **4, 5 and 6 November:** Private Collection@Time will show, dance (Norway); info: www.kaaitheater.be
- **4 November:** Tomatito, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be www.audijazz.be
- **4 and 5 November:** Ozark Henry, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- **5 and 6 November:** Earl Zinger, Botanique, Brussels; info: 02/218.37.32 and De Kreun, Kortrijk; info: 056/37.06.44
- **5 November:** Oxalys with BergKlang, Richard Strauss, Korngold, Webern, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **6 November:** Dave Brubeck/ 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
- **10 November:** Christian Zacharias [piano] with Chopin and Liszt, Bozar, Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be
- **10 November:** Freiburger Barockorchester and Collegium Vocale conducted by Sigiswald Kuijken, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- **10 November:** Arto Lindsay, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- **10 to 13 November:** Mozart, concert aria’s, un moto di gioia, Rossai, dance, De Munt, Brussels; info: www.demunt.be
- **10 November:** Josh Ritter and Rufus Wainwright, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- **10 November:** Nahawa Doumbia (Mali) Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
- **10 November:** Beethoven Academie, Flemish Radio Choir conducted by Toma Kaljuste with Anou Komsi (soprano), compositions by Eller, Hendrickx and Tüür, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- **10 November:** Akram Khan Company with Ma, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be
- **11 November:** Joanna Winson/ Toby Burke, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: 09/267.24.24
- **11 and 13 November:** Sergent Garcia, De Kreun, Aalbeke and Roma, Antwerp; info: 056/37.06.44 and 03/355.04.90 www.audijazz.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

**Focus on Flanders** provides a weekly overview of articles from the Flemish press and appears in English, French and German. This newsletter is published by Uitgeverij Lannoo nv, Kasteelstraat 97, 8700 Tielt and can also be obtained by e-mail.

**Until 16 January:** Exhibition: Mothers, goddesses and sultanes from prehistory until the end of the Ottoman empire, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be

**Until 28 November:** Luc Deleu’s TOP Office – Values, Muhka, Antwerp; info: www.muhka.be

**13 October to 16 January:** Kareel Appel, exhibition, Rudi Fuchs on a journey through the art of the low countries, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be

**Until 19 december:** Alphaville’s, exhibition by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster (Fr); De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be

**Until 16 January:** Pacale Martheine Tayou, African art, Smak, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03 www.smak.be

**Until 28 November:** Joseph Germain Dutilis, Silversmith of King William I, Silver Museum Sterckshof; info: www.zilver.museum.be

**Until 28 November:** Massimo Vitalo and Clark Clarysse, FMMK, Ostend; info: 059/50.81.18 www.pmmk.be

**Until 7 November:** Verner Panton (DK), Phantasy Landscape, Visiona 2, Designexpo, CC Scharpoord, Knokke-Heist; info: www.knokke-heist.be

**Until 23 October:** 19th Biennale Interieur 04, interior and design fair, Kortrijk XPO, www.interieur.be

**Until 4 May:** Richard Lange, war witness, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres; info: www.inflandersfields.be

**Until 9 January:** John Mc Cracken, exhibition, SMAK, Ghent; info: www.smak.be

**Until 28 February:** Muarten Van Severen, exhibition, Design Museum, Ghent; info: http://design.museum.gent.be

**Until 31 December:** De man versiert, t, diamond jewels for men, Diamond Museum, Antwerp; info: www.diamantmuseum.be

**Until 30 January:** Malign Muses, when Fashion turns back, Fashion Museum [MOMU], Antwerp; info: www.momu.be

**Until 13 March:** The Heart, exhibition, Museum Dr Guislain, Ghent; info: www.museumdrguislain.be

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**CULTURE**

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**Printing:** Drukkerij Lannoo nv, Tielt

**Responsible editor:** Luc Demeester, Mark

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

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