Life expectancy in Flanders is continuing to rise. On average, Flemish women now live to 82, and men to 76. Respectively two and three years older than in 1990. This information comes from the Flemish health indicators from 2001-2002 published by the Flemish Community. The population is also ageing at a rapidly increasing rate. While 22% of Flemings are currently aged over 60, in 2025 that figure will be 31%. The birth rate, on the other hand, continues to drop, and has fallen from 80,000 around 1970 to 60,000 in 2002. However, the rising life expectancy is ensuring that the Flemish population is not shrinking, despite the falling birth rate. That the Fleming is becoming so old does nevertheless have its flip-side. After his 65th birthday he will be in need of care for at least half the years remaining to him. For the Flemish Minister for Health and Welfare, Inge Vervotte (CD&V), this is a convincing argument for continuing to invest in care (FF).

DOMINIQUE MINTEN • DE STANDAARD • 5 NOVEMBER

If policy wants to be able to anticipate on the health of Flemings, it is therefore important to know what the main causes of death are. Traffic, smoking, breast cancer and suicide easily head the list. In 1998, therefore, policy began to target these causes of death. The number of smokers had to drop by 10%, the number of fatal road-traffic accidents by 20%, breast-cancer screening had to be more efficient, and so on.

It is clear that a number of these objectives have not been achieved. Doctor Peter Hooft of the Flemish Health Administration: 'We have not managed to cut back smoking. In 2002 the percentage of smokers was even slightly higher than in 1998. However, in 2002 fewer men died of lung cancer than in 1998, but the reverse trend was observed among women.'

Where the number of suicides is concerned, 2000 was a provisional high point, with 1,174 cases. This gave Flanders the second highest figure in Europe. In 2002, 1,100 Flemings took their own life. Hooft sees a clear link with the economic climate and the number of bankruptcies. 'We generally see an increase in the number of suicides two to three years after a wave of bankruptcies.' Minister Vervotte wants to learn from all this. The only clear progress has been made with fatal road-traffic accidents. In 2002, road-traffic accidents took 20% fewer lives than in 1999.

WWW.WVC.VLAANDEREN.BE/GEZONDHEIDSINDICATOREN

INTRODUCTION

The Americans have left us in no doubt. They want Bush as president, not Kerry. A huge majority of Flemings, just like most other Europeans, would have preferred to see Kerry win. That was made perfectly clear in the Flemish press. De Standaard (2 November) even devoted an entire front page to explaining why Kerry would have made a better president than Bush. Because Kerry wants to co-operate and deliberate with European allies, because for him diplomacy is not a dirty word and because he would be expected to show more respect for international law. For De Standaard, Kerry represents a modern America with an open view of the world, one that does not, for example, see the European Union as a threat to American interests. But with a margin of almost 4 million votes, Bush’s victory was much more convincing than in 2000. That belief is also evident in the Flemish press. The Americans, among whom the fear of international terrorism is rife, have given a clear mandate to their (war) president. Well, not all Americans. For De Morgen (4 November) the elections revealed two Americas, the modern America of the Northeast and the West Coast and the America of the Midwest and the Deep South where patriotism, the belief in a strong leader and religious and conservative values prevail. With the support of this second America Bush can maintain his unilateral, messianic course.

The official reactions of the politicians to Bush’s re-election were somewhat more cautious. Respect is being shown for the choice of the American voter, it is said, and the hope expressed that relations with the US will relax a little. Meanwhile the American Ambassador to the European Union, Rockwell Anthony Schnabel, claims that Bush II will strengthen ties with Europe. According to De Standaard (4 November), little will come of it. Anyone who claims that Bush will pursue a more consensus-oriented course in his second period in office is mistaken. The neo-conservative clique around Bush will not see any reason to change course with this resounding election victory, the paper believes. De Tijd (4 November) also claims that Bush will continue to call on the military supremacy of the US to justify himself. Nevertheless, the paper wonders how long he can maintain this tough approach. Iraq is on the threshold of a massive civil war and even though he puts himself forward as a war president, Bush will certainly not want to end up in a Vietnam scenario. There is just one gleam of hope in all this, says De Morgen (4 November). For the first four years a president fights for re-election, for the next four years for his place in history. It is possible that this will have a mitigating effect on the hawks surrounding Bush.
Jo Vandeurzen wins election for chairmanship of CD&V

Acting Chairman Jo Vandeurzen has won the elections for the chairmanship of the Christian Democratic CD&V. However, with 35% of the votes his main opponent, Pieter De Crem, the current CD&V Parliamentary Party Leader in the Federal Parliament, achieved a satisfying score. Nor does the third candidate, outsider Karel Van Butsel, have anything to be ashamed of with 11% of the 40,001 votes cast. For Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme, meanwhile, the result is a boost. Vandeurzen, who just like himself belongs to the ACW wing of the party, received his explicit support. He now has a trusted partner in the moderate Vandeurzen, who must seek a consensus within the party and embody sound governance on the outside. The eloquent De Crem, who is more flamboyant and less afraid of controversy, can continue in his role as opposition leader in the Federal Chamber (FF).

VLD prepares for tough chairmanship elections

Alongside Bart Somers and Hugo Coveliers, Jean-Marie De Decker is now also competing for the chairmanship of the liberal VLD. De Decker wants to return to pure liberalism. For too long the party has lived under the diktat of the Verhofstadt-Dewael-De Gucht triumvirate and the party line has been diluted by the coalition with the Vlaams Blok. The harsh criticism of the government’s work can also hurt the VLD, more than the ex-spokesman (of Verhofstadt, ed.) who became Minister-President and who now “must” become the VLD’s leader. Ex-MP Jean-Luc Dehaene is now also competing for the chairmanship of the Christian Democrats. He was counting on the vote of the volunteers and militants. The CD&V leadership breathed a sigh of relief yesterday, because the elections for the chairmanship did not lead to the feared rift in the party. Ex-Premier and Euro-MP Jean-Luc Dehaene in particular had warned against this. Yesterday the party closed ranks. ‘You are the natural opposition leader. The CD&V badly needs you,’ said Vandeurzen in his maiden speech to De Crem. ‘I am magnanimous in defeat,’ said De Crem. Vandeurzen sees the modernisation of his party and the preparations for the local and provincial elections of 2006 as his main tasks. Karel Van Butsel’s score shows that we must pay more attention to the volunteers, he said.

BART HAECK • DE TIJD • 30 OCTOBER

One in two CD&V militants took part in the election over the past few days. Of the 40,001 votes, Jo Vandeurzen obtained 53.8%. De Crem, CD&V Parliamentary Party Leader in the Chamber, won 35.3%, Van Butsel 10.9%. Vandeurzen was Party Secretary under the previous Chairman, Yves Leterme. When Leterme began forming a Flemish Government after the elections of 13 June, Vandeurzen succeeded him as chairman on a temporary basis. Vandeurzen lives in Limburg and just like Leterme belongs to the labour wing of the party, the ACW. In the run-up to the elections for the chairmanship the party leadership put Vandeurzen forward as the consensus candidate. However, shortly afterwards Pieter De Crem, CD&V Parliamentary Party Leader in the Chamber, took up the gauntlet. After him, the outsider Karel Van Butsel also put himself forward as a candidate. Van Butsel is Chairman of the Mechelen party branch of the Christian Democrats. He was counting on the vote of the volunteers and militants.

www.cdenv.be

ISABEL ALBERS • DE STANDAARD • 2 NOVEMBER

De Decker’s call for a referendum of members on possible collaboration with the Vlaams Blok did not go down very well with Somers. ‘We’ll be giving the Blok a present,’ says Somers via his spokesman. ‘The elections for a chairman, the party executive and local administrations must be about your own party, not another one.’ A polarised campaign on the Blok could again shatter the internal cohesion Somers is so desperately looking for. There are, however, more party members who do not want to preclude a collaboration with the Blok in advance with an eye on the 2006 local elections. The mayor of Lokeren, Filip Anthuenus, for example. Both De Decker and Coveliers have touched the right chord with some supporters with the argument that the VLD is not right-wing enough. But above all, both senators have it in for the Verhofstadt-De Gucht-Dewael triumvirate, and the ‘vassals’ that depend on them. Their main target here is Somers himself: for them, he is no more than the ex-spokesman (of Verhofstadt, ed.) who became Minister-President and who now “must” become Verhofstadt’s chairman like a Playmobil character. The harsh criticism of the government’s work can also hurt the VLD, still licking its wounds after the election defeat. Even though Somers had more to fear for his score from Rik Daems or Herman De Croo, who are not candidates, the vitriol of Deedcker or Coveliers could be much more damaging to his reputation and his ambition to reforge the gang of quarrellers into a solid block.

www.vld.be
Two-and-a-half years after the murder of politician Pim Fortuyn, the Netherlands is again in shock following the murder of film director Theo Van Gogh (47). A 26-year-old Amsterdam man of Moroccan origin shot the filmmaker before stabbing him several times. Last summer Van Gogh made the highly controversial short film ‘Submission’ together with the VVD MP of Somali origin, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a raw and shocking attack on the suppression of Moslem women. Van Gogh was fascinated by Pim Fortuyn and was working on a film on his great model. In his columns in the daily Metro he raved on about the fundamentalist trends within Islam, according to some offensively so.

Just like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Van Gogh had received death-threats on several occasions, but had always refused bodyguards. Mayor of Amsterdam Job Cohen (PvdA) called for a memorial demonstration ‘with plenty of noise’. Twenty thousand people responded to the call and demonstrated loudly on Amsterdam’s Dam to give notice that freedom of speech cannot be stifled by an individual. His motives are not known. But his senseless murder has placed even more pressure on the approach to Moslem extremism. This debate dominated also the Flemish newspapers on Wednesday, where the murder was front-page news (FF).

Opinion

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 3 NOVEMBER

The Netherlands has become more forbidding. Yesterday the books of condolence on the Internet were already bulging with highly emotional and purely racist invective, in which calls for the entire Moroccan population to be locked up in camps straight away were among the more friendly suggestions. Perhaps understandably, but no more productive for it. Van Gogh was not against a multicultural society, he was just strongly opposed to a movement within Islam that cannot or will not accept a number of universal rights and values. That debate, which is slowly gaining momentum here as well - just read the recent interviews with (VLD Chairman) Bart Somers and (SPA MP) Anissa Temsamani - must be held. So that it becomes clear everywhere that the Islamic world is not a monolithic block of fundamentalist fanatics, so that it also becomes clear to Moslems that not every Belgian wants to pigeonhole them. That debate must be held in the style that suits everyone best. Conciliatory, as a dialogue, but also provocative and challenging. That is one of the pillars on which our society rests. Whoever crosses these boundaries, be they Belgian or foreign, must be dealt with immediately and severely.

JEAN VAN EMPTEN • DE TIJD • 3 NOVEMBER

Since the murder of Fortuyn the genie appears to have been let out of the bottle in the Netherlands. The ever-so famous tolerance has disappeared. And the extremist parties are taking over the argument on social integration in the harshest possible terms. That is a nasty development. The Dutch Premier Balkenende (CDA) is happy to preach about standards and values as some sort of answer to the aggressive analysis of Fortuyn. But that argument does not hold water. The Netherlands is unmistakeably hardening. The murder of Van Gogh was committed by an individual. His motives are not known. But his senseless murder has placed even more pressure on the already tense relations between the Dutch population and the Moroccan Community. The murder merely confirms the cliché about fundamentalist Moslems who are out to destroy the West with their murderous jihad.

Overwhelming majority of Flemish MP’s opt for Kerry

67% of Flemish MPs hoped that John Kerry would win the American elections, while only 14% claimed the world is better off with George W. Bush. Only with the right-wing nationalist Vlaams Blok does Bush have a majority. This according to a poll carried out by De Morgen among Flemish MPs in the Federal Chamber, the Senate and the Flemish Parliament (FF).

KOEN VIDAL • DE MORGEN • 2 NOVEMBER

The SPA is the most pro-Kerry party: 94% of Flemish Socialists favour the Democratic candidate, while no one is pro-Bush. Kerry also does well with the CD&V (86%). The deeply religious Bush scores poorly with the Christian Democrats (5%). With the VLD Kerry also achieves a considerable majority (75%). Ralph Nader, the outsider in the presidential elections, has one-third of the Groen! votes: two of the six Green MPs.

However, most Greens favour Kerry. With the NVA Kerry has a small majority, but a large number remain undecided. Chairman Bart De Wever: ‘Bush is reckless and Kerry a smooth operator. Give me security advisor Condoleezza Rice any day.’ The Vlaams Blok is the only party where Bush is popular. 50% of Blok members would definitively vote for the Texan, a percentage that would be much higher if part of the Parliamentary Party had not boycotted this poll.

WWW.VLAAMSPARLEMENT.BE
WWW.FED-PARL.BE
WWW.SENAAT.BE

focus on flanders • 30 October - 5 November • Number 38
POLITICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

Turbulent political autumn barely affects polls

The Vlaams Blok, the biggest and with the Greens the only opposition party in Flanders, appears not to have gained from the DHL debacle

The first opinion poll after the elections, conducted by TNS Media for De Standaard and the VRT, paints a remarkably stable picture. Following the extremely turbulent political weeks of the second half of September, when the DHL dossier exposed the divisions between the Flemish and Brussels Governments and the impotence of the Federal Government, the voter appears not to be punishing the government parties. On the contrary. The Vlaams Blok, the biggest and with the Greens the only opposition party in Flanders, appears not to have gained from the debacle and is down slightly (23.5%, -0.8). The CD&V-N-VA is consolidating its position as leader (27.6%, +1) and the Liberals (VLD-Vivant, 20.6%, +0.6) and Socialists (SP.A-Spirit, 20.2%, +0.3), who sit in both the Federal and Flemish Governments, keep more or less the same result. The Greens have held onto their 7.3%. The questioned voters were clearly far less worried by the day-to-day political bickering than the media and the politicians themselves. Premier Verhofstadt (VLD), who had to deal with several moral blows when he first had to postpone his policy statement and then realised that nothing would come of the jobs at DHL he himself had promised, continues to enjoy the confidence of 56% of those questioned. This means he is doing rather better than his own Federal Government (45%).

Nor is the average Fleming losing much sleep over that other hot potato, the splitting of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency. Two-thirds believe there is no need for the government to go if the split is not achieved by the end of this year. If there are any shifts visible in this poll, they seem rather to be mirroring the polls of several weeks before the elections. Moreover, they lie entirely within the statistical margin of error and are therefore not significant (FF).

Wages to rise by no more than 5.3% until 2006

According to the employers there is no room for real wage increase

A ccording to the Central Council for Trade and Industry (Centrale Raad voor het Bedrijfsleven, CRB), there is a margin of 5.3% for wage increases for the next two years. That is about the same as the 5.4% that employers and trade unions had agreed in the interprofessional agreement (IPA) for the private sector for 2003 and 2004. But in reality Belgian wages rose by an average of 5.9%, while in the neighbouring countries of France, Germany and the Netherlands that figure was only 4.5%. According to the CRB, that equates to a serious wage handicap. The 5.9% is the sum of index adjustments (2.8%), a real wage increase of 1.4% and a wage drift of 2.2%, due to the more favourable wage agreements that individual employers have made with their employees and scale increases. Of this total (6.4%), 0.5% has to be deducted for a drop in social security contributions for employers. The Federation of Enterprises in Belgium (FEB) believes there is absolutely no room for a real wage increase in the 2005-2006 IPA for which negotiations with trade unions are due to begin next week. In recent years Belgian wage costs have risen by 2% more than amongst our neighbours, which is why according to the employers’ federations the margin must be limited to 3.3%. According to the trade unions, however, there is such room (FF).

According to the employers’ federation the FEB, the CRB’s report shows that wages in Belgium have gone off the rails. ‘The significant difference in wage costs from our neighbours is affecting the competitive position of our businesses. The CRB report concedes that we must apply the brakes,’ says Baudouin Velghe of the FEB. According to Velghe, the excessive wage costs of past years must be deducted from any future wage standard and therefore no wage increases are possible. The trade unions dispute that vehemently. The fact that labour is rather more expensive in Belgium also has its positive effects. To maintain purchasing power, it is vitally important that wages also rise next year, claims the Socialist ABVV. The FEB and Unizo (the self-employed and small businesses) point out that the purchasing power of the Belgians will increase anyway, because a tax cut of 1% has been agreed. Luc Cortebeeck (the Christian trade union the ACW) attributes the high wage cost partly to the high salaries that some business leaders award themselves. Nevertheless, like the FEB he continues to hope for a constructive dialogue.

Opinion

BART STURTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 30 OCTOBER

The damage to confidence in political institutions has clearly not got any worse. The confidence in the person of Federal Premier Guy Verhofstadt appears to have withstood the turbulent weeks of September. With his voluntarism, he scores better than the government as a whole. If things do not go as planned, that will not be his fault so much as that of those who oppose him. That Flanders got a five-party government is less than comfortable for those politicians who form part of it, but it has provided a fair amount of goodwill on the part of the public. The message here is also: now do something with it. The crippling effect on the debate that assumes the opposition monopoly of the Vlaams Blok is therefore unjust. The Blok still has the support of almost one in four Flemings. Bitterness is therefore a lasting phenomenon. But that does not yet mean the country has become ungovernable. Perhaps the population is not yet as unmanageable as it sometimes appears.
Unemployment increases further, job creation is slower

The Belgian and Flemish labour markets are not yet benefiting from the economic recovery. The Institute for National Accounts (Instituut voor de Nationale Rekeningen, INR) calculated that economic growth rose to 2.7% in the third quarter. According to that same INR, in net terms a mere 2,000 additional jobs were created in 2003. Moreover, these are all within the government and subsidised non-profit sectors. In the private sector the number of jobs fell by 8,000, while additional 10,000 jobs were created in the government and the subsidised non-profit sector. For this year the INR expects a mere 2,000 additional jobs were created in 2003. While job creation is slowly gathering momentum, unemployment continues to rise. Across the whole country there were an additional 40,000 unemployed job-seekers last year. In October their number rose by 8.1% compared with October 2003. They now total 611,324. In Flanders the number of unemployed job-seekers rose by 12.2% in October. According to the Flemish Employment Minister, Frank Vandenbergroucke (S.P.A), the sharp increase is mainly due to the inclusion of older job-seekers and employees who were hired via a local employment office (PWA) for occasional jobs. Since 1 October PWA employees have again had to be available for the labour market and therefore re-register as job-seekers. In Flanders, 9.12% of the working population is currently unemployed, in Brussels that figure is 21.5%, and in Wallonia 18.8%. The national level of unemployment, the ratio between the number of job-seekers and the working population, was 13.2%, 1% higher than in October 2003, but remained unchanged compared with last month.

Sabena receivers demand 2 billion euros from Swissair

Receiver Christian Van Buggenhout and his colleagues want to recover the entire liabilities of the bankrupt Belgian airline Sabena from its shareholder Swissair. The set of demands will be lodged with the Court in Zurich in the next few days, reports Knack (3 November). Van Buggenhout has come up with a claim for damages of 2 billion euros. Earlier he had already tried to make a claim for 700 million before a court in Brussels, but the judge declared himself not competent to rule on a compensation claim. However, at the same court Swissair was found guilty of double breach of contract: the Swiss had undertaken to become the majority shareholder in Sabena and had promised a financial injection for their Belgian subsidiary. But both parts of the agreement came to naught. Meanwhile Swissair bled Sabena dry, the receivers claim. The services of Swissair subsidiaries such as Atraxis (ICT) and Gate Gourmet (catering) to Sabena were overly expensive, Swiss WorldCargo took over Sabena’s profitable air freight contracts and subsidiary Flightlease hired out the 34 purchased Airbuses to the Belgian airline at excessive prices. The receivers however have already collected around 300 million euros from the sale of Sabena assets and divisions (FF).

FRANK DEMETS • KNACK • 3 NOVEMBER

On 7 November 2001 Sabena had got rid of its profitable freight division and no longer even had its own ticket sales. The company was entirely dependent on the Airline Management Partnership, the umbrella construction with which Swissair wanted to streamline the marketing and sales of all its partners and subsidiaries. By that stage splitting from Swissair operationally, aviation experts confirm, was no longer possible. ‘On paper the split was never completed, but there was de facto a legal merger,’ concludes Van Buggenhout. ‘Swissair will not therefore get off with an unsecured pitance: the Swiss are liable for the entire liabilities of the bankrupt Sabena’. Perhaps somewhere towards the end of the decade we will find out whether the Swiss judges will follow the reasoning of Van Buggenhout and Co.

Meanwhile the sale of Sabena’s assets is already producing a fair amount of money. Thanks to, among other things, the sale of slots (the periods within which flights must take off). These have passed to SN Brussels Airlines, the new airline that grew out of the ashes of Sabena. After a thorough reorganisation Sabena Handling, the baggage handler, was sold for 34 million euros to the Spanish investment group FCC. The former Sabena Catering was sold in a slimmed-down version to Sky Chefs (Lufthansa). Last month two former Sabena pilots bought the reorganised Sabena Flight Academy (SFA), the former flight school, and a week ago the administrators offloaded two more Airbus 321s for 11 million euros. After two rounds of restructuring, the sale of the engines division and the restructuring of the balance sheet, Sabena Technologies seems attractive to potential buyers. After thirteen months of negotiations a party from within the sector has announced an intention to buy, the receivers say. The sale would have to be completed in the next few weeks. In the whole tale of Sabena’s receivership there are actually only two wrong notes: the now bankrupt charter company Sobelair and the hotels of the Sabena group, for which no satisfactory bid has yet been made.
Mortgages take up more and more of family budget

Banks are reporting that families are taking out bigger and bigger mortgages. In 2000, the average mortgage with the big banks Fortis, KBC, Dexia and ING was 75,000 euros. This year, the average mortgage at ING België and KBC subsidiary Centea is more than 100,000 euros. On average the amount of mortgages has risen by 20 to 40%. This is due to rapidly rising property prices and the low interest rates with which banks have seduced families. But in this same period salaries have risen by only 10 to 20%, which means mortgages account for more and more of the family budget [FF].

DIRK MICHIELSEN • DE TIJD • 3 NOVEMBER

The hike in property prices is obliging families to borrow much more money. According to the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), the average price of houses and building plots rose by 21% between the beginning of 2000 and the end of 2003, and that of apartments by as much as 23%. The upward trend is continuing this year. The large sums families are having to borrow in order to finance their home suggest that many families are saddled with sizeable monthly repayments. The credit centre of the Nationale Bank in any case reports that the average mortgage unpaid by defaulters has risen from 54,611 euros in 2000 to 65,091 euros this year.

The extremely low interest rates are, however, a strong incentive for borrowers. Belgium’s long-term interest rate recently dropped below 4%, the lowest level since June 2003. At the beginning of October the low market rate inspired banks to begin a new fierce commercial battle. Most banks promptly lowered their rates by 40 to 65 base points. In particular, the formula with an annual variable interest rate has enjoyed enormous success. In the first eight months of the year, mortgages provided by banks using this formula represented 68% of all housing loans made, according to figures from the Professional Credit Association (Beroepsvereniging van het Krediet, BVK).

EMMANUEL VANBRUSSEL • DE MORGEN • 2 NOVEMBER

‘Given current interest rate levels, buying a house is attractive both to the tenant who wants to buy his home and to the investor who sees the house purely as an investment,’ says Philippe Janssens of the estate agency Stadim. At the moment demand is particularly high for apartments. Prices have already risen by around 10% this year. This is partly down to the fiscal amnesty, suspects Koen Philippeth of Platform Wonen, an association that works for affordable housing prices. ‘Many people have pumped their black money straight into property. This extra demand is pushing up the price of apartments.’ Those on lower incomes are the victims of the property boom. They either get burdened with huge debts or are forced to abandon the dream of owning their own home. Janssens: ‘You can see it clearly in the apartment market: anyone who is in any way financially able to buy, is doing. The result: you find proportionally more and more less well-off people in the rental market.’

One quarter of Flemings will never buy their own home, according to a study by the University of Antwerp. ‘We’ve seen the problem worsen in recent years. Around 300,000 Flemish families are forced to live in a poor-quality rental accommodation,’ says Philippeth. ‘So the government needs to increase its control of the rental market, think of social housing, social letting or rent subsidies.’

WWW.PLATFORMWONEN.BE
WWW.STADIM.BE

Federal minister Tobback wants Flanders to pay pension contributions

At its budget conclave the Federal Government decided that from next year the communities and regions will have to pay the social contribution (13.07%) on the holiday pay of their civil servants to social security. The Federal Budget Minister, Johan Vande Lanotte [SPA], said last week that it would be logical for the regions to also pay the social contribution on the end-of-year bonus of their civil servants. His colleague in Pensions and fellow party member, Bruno Tobback, now also believes that the Regions and Communities should pay pension contributions. The Regions and communities are free to determine how much their civil servants earn and at what age they can retire, but they pass the pensions bill on to the Federal Government. Tobback refers in an interview in De TiJD (2 November) to the municipalities and semi-governmental institutions, which do pay pension contributions on their staff’s wages. Moreover, the amount of the pension contributions is continuing to fall because the number of statutory (permanent) civil servants is on the decline. In the interview the minister also came out in favour of a second pensions pillar for contractual civil servants. These risk having to make do with a pension that is only half that of their statutory colleagues.

POLL: SHOULD TURKEY BECOME A EU-MEMBER STATE?

SOURCE: DE STANDAARD

focus on FLANDERS • 30 October - 5 November • Number 38
Possibly no fraud at Antwerp social welfare centre

THE MOST OBVIOUS EXPLANATION APPEARS TO BE THAT THE AMOUNT WAS INCORRECTLY ENTERED IN THE ACCOUNTS

22.5 million euros may not have disappeared from the coffers of Antwerp’s OCMW (Public Social Welfare Centre). When OCMW Chairwoman Monica De Coninck lodged a complaint with Antwerp Public Prosecutor’s Office at the end of September because the auditors Ernst & Young had discovered a difference of 22.5 million euros when comparing the OCMW’s accounts with those of the four affiliated hospitals, it looked as if a massive case of fraud had been uncovered. But following an investigation by a working party headed by OCMW Secretary Paul Van Gorp and Receiver Erik Peeters, the most obvious explanation appears to be that the amount was incorrectly entered in the accounts. The receiver of Antwerp OCMW signed the findings of the working party, which concluded that the accounts had not been audited between 1997 and 2001. He himself was responsible for this (FF).

PATRICK LEFELON AND JEROEN VERELST • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 30 OCTOBER

The 22.5 million was most probably not stolen or mis-spent; rather, it was entered in the wrong places in the accounts. Entering the amount correctly will not affect the OCMW’s losses. OCMW Chairwoman Monica De Coninck did, however, open a disciplinary investigation into Receiver Erik Peeters. He will most likely be suspended next week. The receiver shot himself in the foot by signing the working party’s report.

In recent weeks Receiver Erik Peeters pointed out her duties to the Chairwoman. ‘As receiver I’ve tried to set up a budget committee to discuss the financial problems. The power to convene such a committee lies with the chairwoman and the secretary,’ said Peeters at the OCMW council. In so doing, Peeters not only brought the wrath of the chairwoman down on himself, the four hospitals that split from the OCMW last year could not get along with him either. According to Peeters, the hospitals refused him to inspect their accounts, which meant he was unable to explain the disappeared 22.5 million. This makes Receiver Peeters the perfect scapegoat for both De Coninck and the hospitals. For the time being, the question of what the 22.5 million euros was used for remains unanswered. The OCMW council decided to appoint a private agency to carry out a new investigation.

Royalty contracts too wide-ranging in Flanders

CONTRACTS ARE OFTEN UNNECESSARILY RESTRICTIVE

R"oger Blanpain, Professor of Labour Law at the University of Leuven, notes that fewer and fewer of his fellow professors are publishing work. They realise that it involves a mountain of work for which they will earn hardly anything. As Chairman of the Association of Authors in Education and Science (Weva) this is a concern for him. We live in a knowledge society to the conclusion that such contracts are often unnecessarily restrictive (FF).

INGE SCHELSTRAETE • DE STANDAARD • 4 NOVEMBER

The Royalties Act of 30 June 1994 is a major acknowledgement. This Act stipulates that royalties should be awarded exclusively to the author. But between the author and his reader there is necessarily a publisher. The authors are amateurs when it comes to royalty contracts, but are gradually becoming more aware of their value, partly through contacts with American authors, who are legally better protected.

Blanpain notes in particular that many contracts are unnecessarily wide-ranging and vague. There is, for example, the prohibition of publication that is also applied to translations. Or ‘publishing forms’ for example, ‘advising that the work be filmed’, for example, advice that is also applied to translations. Or ‘pricing those royalty rights that are uncorrectly entered in the accounts.”
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 Delessø\'s TOP Office – Values, Muhka, Antwerp, info: www.muhka.be

• Until 30 October - 5 November • Number 38

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