A two-phase easing of the tax burden in Flanders

In 2007 the one million employed Flemings on the minimum wage can expect a EUR 125 income tax rebate, whilst by 2009 this measure will be extended to include all 2.5 million Flemings in employment and be raised to EUR 200. The plan is contained in the policy memorandum drawn up by Flemish Finance and Budget Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD) and will be discussed on 21 January in the Flemish Council of Ministers. The coalition partners SPA and CD&V do not have many problems with Van Mechelen’s plans (which, after all, are contained in the coalition agreement). However, SPA MP Ludo Sannen urged that prudence be exercised. He does not want other priorities, such as education and care of the disabled, to suffer in budgetary terms as a result. Minister-President Letterm (CD&V) gave him reassurances (FF).

WIM VANDE VELDEN • DE TIJD • 14 JANUARY

In an initial phase the Liberal minister is targeting the (one million) people in work on the lowest incomes. In 2007 these people will be awarded a tax cut of EUR 125, and in 2008 this amount will be raised to EUR 150, says Van Mechelen. With this initial phase of the tax cut, the government wants to do something about the notorious unemployment trap. The difference between a benefit income and an income from work is currently often too small. By making that difference larger, people will have more of an incentive to look for a job. In 2009 all people in work could expect a EUR 200 rebate on their personal income tax bill.

At that point the budgetary repercussions also immediately become greater: EUR 500 million (or EUR 200 for the nigh-on 2.5 million Flemings in work).

Speaking on behalf of the Socialist group in the Flemish Parliament, Ludo Sannen called for a degree of prudence. He wants the second phase of the tax cut only to be approved when the Flemish Government has arranged and fixed everything in its long-term plan for this period of office. Flemish Minister-President Yves Letterm immediately reassured the SPA group and said that the draft decree would only be approved definitively when the long-term plan was arranged in full. But as far as the merits of the idea are concerned, the entire government agrees with Van Mechelen’s plans,’ Letterm’s office also declared.

INTRODUCTION

Container ships are getting bigger and bigger and for the largest of them the Westerhede is currently not deep enough. For the Port of Antwerp’s competitiveness, a deepening of the channel to 13.1 m is therefore vitally important. The Port of Antwerp cannot allow itself to waste any more time and hopes that the deepening work can start in 2007. After all, in this period the Deurganck Dock, a completely new dock, wholly intended for container transhipment, will also be opened. But the Westershede flows through the Dutch province of Zeeland and Flanders has to reach an agreement with its Dutch neighbours on all additional aspects of such a deepening.

Romanticism, dreams of a ‘Wadden Sea’ expanding to the North Frisian Islands, a (one million) people in the Netherlands linking the Westerschelde to Flanders. An even greater doom scenario consisted in the Netherlands linking the Westerschelde to another issue which was lying idle – for example connection to the European HST (high-speed train) line, about which federal minister Vande Lanotte has talks with his Dutch colleague Pus next week. All eyes were therefore on Flemish Minister-President Letterm who met the Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende for talks on the matter in The Hague on 20 January. After the meeting both ministers were ‘coolly optimistic’ ( Gazette van Antwerpen, 21 January). Considerable progress had been made. The talks on the financing of the plan were still ongoing and it would be possible for a memorandum of agreement to be signed by the end of February. Within four to five months the ‘Treaty’ should then be a fait accompli. If that schedule is indeed respected, the first spade will be able to hit the ground before 2007.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
Catherine Verfaillie from West Flanders, a world authority in the field of stem cell research, is coming back to the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL). She will be heading an institute to be set up there devoted to stem cell research. Verfaillie is currently head of the renowned stem cell institute at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where she went in 1987 after her specialisation in Internal Medicine at the KUL. Verfaillie is quoted in De Standaard (15 January) as saying that her decision to leave the USA has nothing to do with the campaign waged by President George W. Bush and the conservative Christians against embryo stem cell research and the attempts being made to place limitations on research. Verfaillie wants to carry out research on stem cells from embryos as well as stem cells from the bodies of adults. The latter is ethically less controversial, and it is in this field that Verfaillie is a pioneer. The new lab in Leuven should be operational by the end of 2005 (FF).

Catherine Verfaillie is a world authority in the field of stem cell research.

Verwilghen (VLD) wants to reduce electricity bill

The liberalisation of the energy market in Belgium has not yet led to the cheaper energy or better service that consumers had been expecting. Electricity in itself has indeed become cheaper, but at the same time all kinds of taxes have been calculated into the tariff, so that the effect has been cancelled out. Federal Economic Affairs Minister Marc Verwilghen (VLD) is aware of this and wants to apply three remedies to reduce energy bills. The first is a reduction of the VAT rate from 21% to 6%. Secondly he wants an absolute ban on new energy taxes and the ceiling for energy levies for companies help contribute towards the substantial subsidisation of the windmill park. In addition to starting the debate on a reduction of the VAT rate and the ban on additional duties, the Energy Minister even hopes to be able to curb energy prices in the coming years. He has high expectations for an agreement between Belgium, the Netherlands and France on a genuine unification of the energy market. Verwilghen says that these three countries are close to an agreement in principle to encourage the laying of cross-border high-tension lines. The expectation is that such an agreement will stimulate investments in power stations, which in turn should lead to more competition between energy generators and therefore lower prices.

Verwilghen regards it as symptomatic that when he visits companies he is first questioned about high energy costs, whereas for some years wage costs had been the major obstacle. For that matter the Energy Minister points a finger at himself. All kinds of taxes weigh heavily in the energy bill - certainly in the case of companies. According to Verwilghen there can no longer be any talk of additional taxes. In so saying, he is immediately sending a signal to Budget Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SPA), who is pressing for a more far-reaching subsidisation of the windmill park in the North Sea. According to Verwilghen, that will be too heavy a burden on companies.

He says he wants to avoid the recent government decision establishing a ceiling for energy levies for companies henceforth to cultivate these embryo stem cells in a lab, we would be able to use them as spare parts for the human body, and thus use them to help combat a whole range of diseases. But the fact that these are embryo stem cells - and we are therefore talking about an unborn life - has aroused numerous ethical debates, particularly in the United States. The great merit of Catherine Verfaillie is that she has discovered another way. She has discovered the same kind of cells in the bone marrow of adults. These adult cells could be used to make nerve, liver, pancreas, cartilage and heart muscle cells, which in time could help in the fight against heart attacks, Alzheimer’s Disease, Parkinson’s Disease, rheumatism, diabetes and cancer. This is a meritorious achievement at world level.
A t the first meeting of the inter-ministerial conference, which aims to seek a solution for the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency, it was agreed that a working group would be set up to examine the Court of Arbitration’s ruling. That ruling states that voters in the province of Flemish Brabant are the victims of discrimination, because their province does not form a constituency. As we know, Flemings and Francophones have different solutions for this problem. The Flemings want the constituency to be split, whilst the Francophones want an extension of the Brussels Capital Region with a few Flemish municipalities where there is a resident Francophone majority or a return to the old division into electoral districts. All federal majority parties (PS, MR, SPA and VLD) but also the parties holding office in the regional governments (CD&V, N-VA, CDH and Ecolo), are partaking in the conference, which is being chaired by ministers Vande Lanotte (SPA) and Reynders (MR). Parallel to the conference, the bills on BHV are being discussed in the parliamentary home affairs committee. There the Flemish Christian Democrats of CD&V and the Flemish nationalists of N-VA are aiming to force through the Flemish bill for a split with a Flemish majority. That would inevitably lead to the government falling, and is therefore an opposition strategy, say the majority parties. Initially CD&V and N-VA refused to send delegates to the working group, claiming that having the working group set up was a delaying tactic. But on 19 January they decided to send someone after all.

WIM VANDE VELDEN • DE TIJD • 18 JANUARY

The Flemish coalition partners in the federal government, SPA-Spirit and VLD, want to seek a compromise with the Francophones, with give and take. CD&V and N-VA are demanding that Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde be resolved separately from all other state reform matters. They still refer to the Flemish coalition agreement, concluded with SPA-Spirit and VLD. According to a CD&V memorandum, no room is left in that agreement for concessions to be made on the Peeters-Martens circulars on facilities, the language laws in Brussels or the Minorities Treaty (which favours minority rights for the francophones in Flanders, ed.).

CD&V/N-VA on the one hand and the purple parties on the other are each following a strategy and course of their own. CD&V and N-VA want the Flemish bill on the splitting of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde to be discussed ‘immediately’ in Parliament. For the time being they are not sending any delegates to the BHV working group that has just been set up. The fear is that the purple majority parties will delay the parliamentary debate on the proposal for the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency to be split, pending a broad compromise.

For the purple majority parties, the debate in Parliament is not without political risk. If the Flemish parties unilaterally impose their will, the Francophones threaten setting in train the ‘alarm bell procedure’. The issue of BHV will then go to the federal government, with the risk of the Verhofstadt II cabinet falling. This is why purple is aiming for a compromise in the BHV working group. A watch is also being kept on the steps that CD&V/N-VA wants to take from within the Flemish Government. The VLD will not support CD&V/N-VA in invoking a conflict of interests on the law on sanctions for young offenders.

WOUTER VERSCHELDEN • DE STANDAARD • 20 JANUARY

The committee decided with a large majority to begin dealing with the bills on the splitting of the constituency next week. At the proposal of CD&V parliamentary party chairman Pieter De Crem, everyone agreed that one of the ministers for institutional reform (Vande Lanotte or Reynders) should be present at every committee meeting in order to explain progress at government level.

‘If you sabotage us in the parliamentary committee, we’ll sabotage you in the working group’ had hitherto been the CD&V’s and N-VA’s reasoning. The little tactical game ended yesterday with the assurance for both parties that they are keeping their ‘big stick’ - the bills in the House. Both parties immediately decided to send someone to the working group after all.

The Flemish Government and the social partners have agreed on a series of measures aimed at boosting employment. The government will be earmarking EUR 24 million for these each year in 2005 and 2006. With that budget extra jobs will be created for the long-term unemployed in the social economy sector and in the non-commercial sector, and work experience posts will be offered to young persons in part-time vocational training. It wants to use tax benefits to stimulate older workers to look for new work. Extra training places will be provided for in order to retrain unemployed persons for bottleneck professions. Employers who take on a retrained employee will only have to pay the difference between unemployment benefit and the wage during the first two months. Finally employees can supplement their professional qualification with certificates of work experience.

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE

STATE REFORM

POLITICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

SPECIAL REPORT

WIM VANDE VELDEN

DE TIJD • 18 JANUARY

The Flemish coalition partners in the federal government, SPA-Spirit and VLD, want to seek a compromise with the Francophones, with give and take. CD&V and N-VA are demanding that Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde be resolved separately from all other state reform matters. They still refer to the Flemish coalition agreement, concluded with SPA-Spirit and VLD. According to a CD&V memorandum, no room is left in that agreement for concessions to be made on the Peeters-Martens circulars on facilities, the language laws in Brussels or the Minorities Treaty (which favours minority rights for the francophones in Flanders, ed.).

CD&V/N-VA on the one hand and the purple parties on the other are each following a strategy and course of their own. CD&V and N-VA want the Flemish bill on the splitting of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde to be discussed ‘immediately’ in Parliament. For the time being they are not sending any delegates to the BHV working group that has just been set up. The fear is that the purple majority parties will delay the parliamentary debate on the proposal for the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency to be split, pending a broad compromise.

For the purple majority parties, the debate in Parliament is not without political risk. If the Flemish parties unilaterally impose their will, the Francophones threaten setting in train the ‘alarm bell procedure’. The issue of BHV will then go to the federal government, with the risk of the Verhofstadt II cabinet falling. This is why purple is aiming for a compromise in the BHV working group. A watch is also being kept on the steps that CD&V/N-VA wants to take from within the Flemish Government. The VLD will not support CD&V/N-VA in invoking a conflict of interests on the law on sanctions for young offenders.

WOUTER VERSCHELDEN • DE STANDAARD • 20 JANUARY

The committee decided with a large majority to begin dealing with the bills on the splitting of the constituency next week. At the proposal of CD&V parliamentary party chairman Pieter De Crem, everyone agreed that one of the ministers for institutional reform (Vande Lanotte or Reynders) should be present at every committee meeting in order to explain progress at government level.

‘If you sabotage us in the parliamentary committee, we’ll sabotage you in the working group’ had hitherto been the CD&V’s and N-VA’s reasoning. The little tactical game ended yesterday with the assurance for both parties that they are keeping their ‘big stick’ - the bills in the House. Both parties immediately decided to send someone to the working group after all.

The Flemish Government and the social partners have agreed on a series of measures aimed at boosting employment. The government will be earmarking EUR 24 million for these each year in 2005 and 2006. With that budget extra jobs will be created for the long-term unemployed in the social economy sector and in the non-commercial sector, and work experience posts will be offered to young persons in part-time vocational training. It wants to use tax benefits to stimulate older workers to look for new work. Extra training places will be provided for in order to retrain unemployed persons for bottleneck professions. Employers who take on a retrained employee will only have to pay the difference between unemployment benefit and the wage during the first two months. Finally employees can supplement their professional qualification with certificates of work experience.

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE
Chairman of the Liberaal Appel commits suicide

In the morning of 15 January the lifeless body of Ward Beysen was fished out of a lake near the University of Antwerp. The Antwerp public prosecutor’s office officially confirmed that it was a case of suicide, although no suicide note was found. Although the reason for his suicide must be sought in the private realm, Beysen was chiefly known as chairman of the right-wing progressive Liberaal Appel (Liberal Appeal), the tear-away party he formed after turning his back on the VLD. Up until 1999 he had headed the Antwerp branch of the PVV - the forerunner of the VLD. From that point on he was constantly at variance with the ‘overly left-wing course’ steered by chairman De Gucht and Prime Minister Verhofstadt, and turned his back on the VLD in January 2003 to set up his own party. However, the result he achieved with his LA in the federal elections of 2003 was disappointing (1.21%). Since then Beysen had more or less found himself in the political sidelines, and did not even take part in the regional elections of 2004. He wanted to go all out once again by running in the municipal elections on its own, even if there is a very real chance that the VB will be interested in the municipal elections

Even the plan to pool the right-wing forces has failed. The Liberaal Appel has always been an Antwerp clique, and even there not everyone ranged themselves behind the new party. Right wing Antwerp figureheads such as Hugo Coveliers did not defect to it. It speaks volumes that members of the LA party executive are now hoping that Coveliers will come and save them. After two years, Liberaal Appel has thus proved to be a largely unsuccessful political project.

The party is trying to look for a path between the VLD and the Vlaams Belang, but lacks figureheads and grassroots support.

The themes that the party wants to broach - the course steered by the VLD and the relationship with the extreme right wing - are now being thoroughly discussed in the VLD itself. If the VLD adjusts its course under pressure from right-wing Liberals such as Hugo Coveliers and Jean-Marie Dedecker, LA might be rendered completely redundant.

Next week the party executive will hold a crisis meeting to discuss what should happen in the wake of Beysen’s death. The party ought perhaps to ponder over whether it has, and will continue to have, enough raisons d’être for its continued existence.

WWW.LIBERAALAPPEL.ORG

The strategy of Liberaal Appel to seek contact with the Vlaams Blok has yielded little. The party even set itself up as the lubricant with which the cordon sanitaire in Antwerp could be broken and the extreme right wing could come to power. But the Vlaams Blok was not so keen on the idea of co-operation. On this occasion, too, Liberaal Appel would reportedly have gone into the elections on its own, even if there had indeed been talks with the Vlaams Belang. Now, after Beysen’s death, there is a very real chance that the VB will be interested in co-operation at all.

Two in three long-term unemployed are looking for a job

Only 7% of the long-term unemployed whose job application behaviour has been checked by the National Employment Office (RVA) failed to turn up on the occasion of the obligatory checks, according to Employment Minister Freya Vanden Bossche (SP.A). Moreover two in three unemployed persons were able to show that they were actively looking for work. These are the initial findings of the new unemployed persons control system, which was set up by her predecessor Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A). The new system is designed to spur all the long-term unemployed to look for a job. Anyone who has not made enough of an effort to do so must sign a commitment to start making applications with the aid of careers guidance or training. Unemployed people who do not accept the RVA’s invitation risk a suspension of at least four weeks. An initial phase will address the 100,000 young people under the age of 30 who have been unemployed for more than seven months (in the case of the under-25s) or more than 13 months (those aged between 25 and 30). Of these, 29% come from Flanders, 55% from Wallonia and 16% from Brussels.
On Tuesday morning unions and employers reached an inter-professional agreement on wage and employment conditions for the 2.2 million or more employees in the private sector. The agreement came as a surprise since the social partners had barely got round to any negotiating in the last few weeks, during which time they merely issued strongly worded statements in the press. At the end of last year a national trade union demonstration made the atmosphere even more hostile. Last week things finally began to get moving when the government offered a bait in the form of a EUR 200 million reduction in charges for employers (EUR 80 million for overtime and EUR 120 million for shift work) and urged them for a more accommodating approach to be adopted as regards the wage increase demanded by the unions. In addition the government has set aside EUR 50 million for employees on the lowest wages and for employees at risk of not being paid in the event of bankruptcy. A Fund for Company Closures should protect them against this.

Both unions and employers show themselves to be satisfied with the agreement that has been reached. The rules governing overtime are being made more flexible at the employers' request, and the number of hours doubled to 130 a year. A choice is being introduced between time in lieu and payment. For the first 65 hours the employee can make the choice himself, whilst for the next 65 hours the sector must take the decision. The good news for the employees is that a benchmark pay rise (the basic wage rate) of 4.5% has been agreed on. In this account has been taken of an index of 3.3% and wage-scale increases of 1% for white-collar workers, so that the margin for a real wage increase remains small. In sectors that are performing well, the wage increase could thus end up being more than 4.5%, whilst in sectors faced with profitability problems it might be rather less. A third key factor in the wage agreement concerns the extension of the early retirement scheme. Trade unions and employers agree that the discussion on early retirement from the age of 58 is a matter for the career-end conference. However, three specific regulatory arrangements are extended for two years, namely for early retirement from the age of 56 for construction workers unfit for work, for people with a career of 33 years of which 20 years have been in night work or shift work, and the system of part-time early retirement. The wage agreement still has to be approved by the rank and file. The aim is for the agreement to be definitively signed within three weeks (FF).

JOHAN CORTHOUTS/JANINE MEIJER • DE MORGEN • 19 JANUARY

Yesterday trade unions and employers were the best of friends and jostled each other to explain the main advantages of this agreement to their rank and file in front of the cameras. The employers stress that the basic wage rate of 4.5 percent is the lowest since 1996. The employers’ organisation VBO even said that with this agreement the Belgian economy is getting rid of part (0.8%) of its wage handicap vis-à-vis other countries. An end has come to successive wage increases.

The employers also say they have made enormous progress in the field of flexibility. From now on employees can be asked to work 130 hours’ overtime a year. Thanks to the government subsidy these overtime hours will be a lot cheaper for the business community.

The tax charges on shift work and night work are also being brought down substantially. In total the government is stumpung up some EUR 120 million for this. It is mainly heavy industry and the chemical sector that will reap the advantages of the regulation for shift work and night work. They export 70% of their products and can well use the subsidy in order to help stay afloat in the tough competition with neighbouring countries.

On the other hand the reduction in charges for overtime will help SMEs and the services sector.

In SMEs employees currently often work overtime which is then paid but not declared, because otherwise it is unaffordable for employers and not very attractive for employees. Unizo CEO Karel Van Eetvelt stressed that the arrival of this regulation represented a major advantage for employers in small companies.

Trade unions explain the 4.5% basic wage rate very differently. According to the socialist union ABVV and the Christian ACV, it is a ‘significant wage increase’. Subtracting the 3.3% index from the basic wage rate leaves just 1.2%. For white-collar workers the wage-scale increase also still has to be subtracted, leaving a real wage increase for them of 0.2%. Blue-collar workers do not have a wage-scale increase, so the wage increase is much higher for them.

The unions also point to the Netherlands. A wage increase of 4.5% is a good deal more than the 2.5% employees there managed at the very most to pull out of the fire. ‘As regards the wage margin this was the highest feasible result’, says ACV chairman Luc Corteebeek.

The Rue de la Loi heaved a sigh of relief yesterday. Now that a social agreement has been reached, the ‘purple’ government can get to work on the much tougher debate on the career-end issue and the refinancing of the social security system. Prime Minister Verhofstadt was particularly delighted with the agreement reached between the two sides of industry. According to the Premier, this has also provided proof that the collective bargaining model still works.

WWW.ABVV.BE
WWW.ACW.BE
WWW.VBO.BE
Tsunami 12-12 up to Eur 40 million

The account (000-0000012-12) of the Belgian emergency relief organisations for the tsunami victims, will remain open for two years until the end of 2006.

The fund-raising campaign ‘Tsunami 12-12’ in aid of the victims of the seakeep in South East Asia promised a fantastic grand finale in the form of the TV show jointly organised by the commercial channel VTM and the public broadcasting corporation VRT on Friday 14 January. The programme started with an amount of EUR 24 million on the board. After the benefit show the figure stood at more than EUR 38 million. The person responsible for the initiative, Flemish Development Co-operation Minister Geert Bourgeois (N-VA) was pleased with the result and said that he hoped the wave of solidarity would not be limited to this campaign. The call centre staffed by Flemish personalities crashed under the volume of calls (70,000). Companies also stole a march on each other in generosity. Those donating more than EUR 125,000 could come and present their donation live on the show. The mobile phone operators Belgacom, Base and Mobistar together took the lead with almost EUR 900,000, followed by the supermarket chains Delhaize (EUR 600,000), Carrefour (EUR 370,000) and the KBC Bank (EUR 250,000), and a campaign among readers of the popular newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws (EUR 227,000). The National Lottery donated EUR 2 million - one euro per ticket from the most recent lottery draws. And it had previously been announced that the government had also stumped up handsome amounts: the federal government donating EUR 30 million, the Flemish Government EUR 500,000, the Walloon Government EUR 800,000 and the Brussels Government EUR 340,000. The account (a/c 000-0000012-12) opened by the Belgian emergency relief organisations for the tsunami victims, will remain open for two years until the end of 2006, according to an announcement by spokesman Philippe Henon (FF).

DE STANDAARD • 17 JANUARY

‘It’s important that we get the message across to the public that it’s not all over’, said Henon. ‘Therefore we’re keeping the bank account for emergency relief for South East Asia open for two years. Money will always still be needed, for the reconstruction of the affected areas’.

The large-scale sympathy action in aid of the victims of the tsunami on Friday evening brought in EUR 39.3 million. ‘And it’s not over yet. There are campaigns still under way all over the place. We will certainly get to forty million euros. This surpasses our most optimistic expectations.’

Henon says that the challenge now is to continue to maintain the solidarity with the tsunami victims. ‘We will regularly be telling the public what is being done with the money in the field. The Flemish Government has given us a donation of EUR 500,000, but we are obliged to justify the way the money is spent.’

The most important lesson that the aid organisations have learnt from the television benefit show is that pooling of forces yields a considerable added value. ‘As a consortium we have achieved far more than we would have been able to as individual organisations. That has given us this access to the media’. ‘Islands of Peace’ (Vredeseilanden) also raised 25% more funds this year than last year - EUR 650,000 in all. This was the first fund-raising campaign after the tsunami benefit that was not specifically directed at South East Asia.

WWW.1212.BE

Jan Verheyen steps down as director of programming at VTM

The major news from the world of television after the overwhelming success of the tsunami benefit show was the resignation of VTM’s director of programming Jan Verheyen. The official version of events is that the management of the commercial broadcasting company and Verheyen had come to the conclusion that his assignment had in large part been fulfilled.

In 2003, together with his colleague Bert Geenen, he was given the task of turning VTM into a strong family channel again. Geenen would deal with the channel’s strategy and profile, whilst Verheyen’s role was to set in train an innovative range of programmes, including a number of drama series, that would get people talking. 2004 was announced as the year of the commercial channel’s great counter-offensive against the public broadcasting corporation’s first channel TV1. A few programmes, such as the docudrama series ‘de Pffafi’ or the search-for-a-star programme ‘Idool’, hit the mark, and this year’s new drama series ‘De Matroesjka’s’ is also going down well with the public. But across the board VTM gained barely 0.4% of market share in 2004. The top 20 programmes with the highest audience still include 15 TV1 programmes, compared to just five VTM programmes. According to other sources, therefore, it is chiefly the disappointing viewing figures that are the reason for Verheyen’s departure. In any case, Mike Verdergh, who was director of programming during VTM’s golden years and still works as a consultant for the company, hinted at this in De Morgen (18 January). Jan Verheyen, whose roots are in the film sector and can point to a fine record of achievements as distributor, producer and director, is now once again craving for creative work and in this job had too many management obligations for his liking, as he says himself. However, Verheyen will be continuing to support a number of television drama projects and to present films on the company’s second channel, Kanaaltwee, until the end of 2005.

WWW.VTM.BE
Little cause for celebration in the antiques sector

From 21 to 30 January the fiftieth - and thus golden anniversary - edition of the Belgian Antiques Fair is to be held in the former freight station of Turn & Taxis in the Brussels dock area. 2005 also marks 85 years since the Belgian Royal Chamber of Antique Dealers was established, but antique dealers in Belgium have little cause for celebration. The high taxes on art and antiques are causing Belgian heritage to disappear abroad, according to Jan De Maere, chairman of the Chamber (FF).

‘Unfortunately we are being forced to operate internationally,’ says De Maere. ‘We can no longer compete against the competition from abroad. During the fair in Maastricht the Dutch Government allows a reduced VAT rate of 5.5%. Here VAT is 21%, fair or no fair. In Germany, too, VAT is levied at only 6%. Unlike Belgium, a lot of countries do not levy a full resale right in auctions (a levy of 4% on lots with a hammer price of EUR 1,240 in respect of artists who have been dead less than 70 years). And then there’s corporation tax, which is also higher in Belgium. The above-mentioned factors also explain why galleries that used to specialise in contemporary art have gone to the wall by the dozen in the last 15 to 20 years, says De Maere. Anyone who has a Magritte in their attic and wants to see some money in exchange for it, would be best advised to sell it abroad. He says that this also means that Belgian heritage is disappearing to other countries. The largest market is North America, which accounts for 60% of purchases by private collectors and 75% of museum purchases. In Belgium the antique sector provides employment for 20,000 people, including the 10,000 second-hand goods dealers.

WWW.ANTIQUES-FAIR.BE

Policy memorandum from Anciaux raises fundamental questions

HE WANTS TO LOOK INTO THE POSSIBILITIES OF SETTING UP A CULTURAL INVESTMENT COMPANY

Culture Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit) has prepared a policy memorandum for 2004-2009 in which he raises a number of fundamental questions about the existing priorities and the accompanying subsidies in the cultural sector. The minister feels that the institutionalisation of the cultural field, be it in performing arts, heritage management or socio-cultural work, is no longer self-evident. Semi-professional artistry should, in his view, be given more opportunities. Anciaux also feels that partnership with cities and municipalities should take the place of the tutelage approach adopted by the Flemish Authorities. And finally, he wants to look into the possibilities of setting up a cultural investment company, after the fashion of the Regional Investment Company for the financing of companies. Anciaux put forward his plans before an audience of 500 guests in the Brussels Kaaitheater (FF).

THOMAS PEETERS • DE TIJD • 19 JANUARY

‘Not all art has to fall into structures. A specific structure is too often a fetish that cannot be questioned, but that in practice not always generates a demonstrable added value. The question needs to be put in both directions: we should ask ourselves not only who needs a new structure of their own, but also which structures are perhaps no longer of any use,’ says Anciaux, arguing here in favour of a differentiated approach.

One of his first policy challenges is the creation of a policy framework for the semi-professional sector. ‘I discover, with great interest, a whole host of cultural initiatives, which have risen up from purely local community life and sometimes also operate in small international subcircuits. They often need professional impetus, but do not want to turn wholly professional for that reason. I want to avoid all these initiatives nestling under the umbrella of subsidised professional arts for lack of alternatives,’ says the minister.

Anciaux is also of the view that the cities and municipalities should pursue a cultural policy together with the Flemish Authorities. He feels that the relationship between the district councils and the Flemish administration has changed drastically in recent years. ‘That relationship should be one of shared responsibility,’ says Anciaux. Anciaux is also examining the idea of setting up a cultural investment company. ‘The traditional grant system, with its relatively cumbersome procedures, its emphasis on a long-term view and its inherent mistrust of any form of commercialisation and profit making, offers too little consolation here’. As regards intercultural character and diversity, two more of the minister’s hobbyhorses, Anciaux wants to develop a three-part diversity concept during this legislature: more opportunities for participation, a range of cultural activities that reflects intercultural society, and cultural diversity within the art houses.

WWW.ANTIQUES-FAIR.BE

CULTURE

CULTURE POLICY
More than half of all men over 40 and more than half of all women over 50 in Flanders suffer from overweight (a body mass index of more than 25). Flemings also do far too little sport - an observation particularly striking among women. These findings are revealed in a large-scale survey among 5,170 Flemings carried out by the Regional Office for Sport, Movement and Health.

Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

- 23 January: Budapest Festival Orchestra conducted by Ivan Fischer with Mahler and Bartók; Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- 24 to 30 January: Blush, Ultima Vez (dance) with music by Eugene Edwards, Hallen van Schaarbeek, Brussels; info: www.kvs.be
- 25 January: Storioni Trio Amsterdam with piano work by Haydn, Schumann and Brahms; De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- 26 January: Oidipus Surgrade, director: Sahika Tekan (Turkey) with Studio Oyunlari, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- 26 January: Katerina Papadopoulou, Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be
- 27, 28 and 29 January: De Nachten with Henry Rollins and others; De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- 28 January: Vijayalakshmy Subramaniam, classical songs from South India, Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be 03/248.01.00
- 27 January: Mario Cortes (Flamenco); Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- 26 January: Ivana Margutelitun, 50 bronze sculptures by Rodin, Claudel and Degas; Royal Library, Brussels; 50 Bronze sculptures of Light/Tony Conrad, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be 09 265 91 65
- 31 January: Eliane Elias quartet, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be 02/548.24.24
- 2 to 4 February: Jan Fabre with choreography on Angel of Death, Elle était et elle est et Estant données, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be

EXPO

- Until 27 February: Tatu-Tattoo, exhibition, Royal Museum for Art and History, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/741.72.11 or www.kmkg.be
- Until 4 May: Fashion turns back, Trade Fair, Brussels; info: 02/547.92.22
- Until 27 February: Dear ICC, aspects of contemporary art in Belgium, exhibition, Muhka, Antwerp; info: www.muhka.be
- Until 3 April: Anton Corbijn, exhibition, Fotomuseum, Antwerp; info: 03/242.93.00 www.fotomuseum.be
- Until 30 January: Belgian Antiques Fair, Turn & Taxis, Brussels; info: www.antiques-fair.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.