Philip Morris – the largest cigarette manufacturer in Belgium – will not be passing on the latest increase in excise duty to the consumer, and will therefore be keeping its prices at last year’s levels. More and more tobacco manufacturers are following its example. Philip Morris has already announced that it will pay the excise duties to the government and will simply reduce its profit margins. The government had introduced increases in excise duty with the intention of making cigarettes and other tobacco products more expensive and discouraging smoking. This measure is now coming to nothing. It is therefore threatening tough penalties.

In the meantime there is another dispute ongoing between the tobacco industry and the government, reports De Tijd (11 February). Four out of five tobacco manufacturers are refusing to report the composition of their tobacco products to the federal Public Health Department on the grounds of manufacturing secrets, despite being obliged to do so since 2002. The tobacco manufacturers’ unwillingness is arousing the suspicion of the public health authorities, which in particular want to gain an idea of additives and substances making up for the reduction in nicotine content. [FF]

GAZET VAN ANTWERPEN • 11 FEBRUARY

Price increases are a major weapon in the fight against tobacco. Young people regard the cost price as the major obstacle preventing them from venturing to start smoking. But recently, more and more cigarette brands have been appearing that can be bought at a lower price, and thus find a ready market among young people. Three quarters of the price of a packet of cigarettes consists of excise duties. An increase in excise duties should lead to a higher price and fewer young people smoking. This increase was scheduled for January. All cigarette brands indeed became more expensive – except Philip Morris products. In fact Philip Morris even brought its products onto the market at a lower price, as a result of which the increase in excise duty was offset and consumers could buy the cigarettes at the same price. Since then Philip Morris’ example has been followed by other brands.

‘The masks are falling off,’ reacts Public Health Minister Rudy Demotte. ‘Now of all times, when we are achieving good results in the fight against tobacco. This shows that the industry is not worried about young people’s health, but on the contrary, wants to win over as many consumers as possible. The price has to go up. The Finance department has to see that.’
By a narrow 52% majority, the rank and file of the socialist trade union ABVV has rejected the wage agreement for the 2.5 million employees in Belgian private companies. The Inter-professional Agreement (IPA) basically contained an indicative wage increase of 4.5% and a more flexible arrangement for overtime. The agreement was widely supported in the Christian trade union ACV and the Liberal union ACLVB, with 75% and 67% backing respectively. ACV chairman Luc Cortebeeck quickly did his sums and announced that a numerical majority of employees accepted the agreement, but nonetheless the ACV and ACLVB will not be signing the draft social agreement. They do not want it to come to a rupture with the ABVV. Never before in recent industrial relations has one trade union rejected what has been agreed, and the others accepted it.

However, both Cortebeeck and the spokesmen of the employers’ organisations VBO and Unizo reject new negotiations on the agreement and are urging for it to be implemented. The employers’ organisations had also encountered opposition amidst their own ranks, for example from the technology companies’ umbrella organisation Agoria. But the argument that an agreement is needed for industrial peace eventually clinched it. Subsequently the ball was in the Federal Government’s court. It had to decide the extent to which the agreement was to be implemented. During the negotiations it had even helped the social partners arrive at a compromise by promising tax relief to the tune of EUR 250 million on shift work and overtime. The position adopted here by the largest Francophone party, the PS, with a substantial rank and file in the French-speaking socialist trade union, was decisive. When party Chairman Di Rupo announced on 8 February that his party continued to support the wage agreement, a sigh of relief was felt in the government, especially at the department of the Employment Minister, Freya Vanden Bossche (SP.A) [FF].

For Di Rupo it is not self-evident for the agreement to be supported so clearly. After all his FGTB [French speaking wing of ABVV, ed], in particular, rejected the agreement. With his message, Di Rupo is therefore rubbing up his union delegates the wrong way. The PS chairman has his reasons for doing this: he is thereby proving to Flanders and its environs that it is not true that PS and trade union is one and the same thing. It is a long time since the PS was that ossified. Di Rupo is also giving the signal that the PS is there for all employees and therefore not just those who are members of the FGTB. Just as the Flemish SPA has long been saying that the party not only stands up for workers affiliated with the socialist trade union.

More important still is the fact that the SP chairman fears widespread industrial unrest if the wage agreement lies smashed to pieces. After all, there has already been unrest in Wallonia for some time. So how does the chairman placate the FGTB? By pointing out that rejecting the wage agreement is worse than accepting it. ‘It’s about us having to save our social model. The PS must assume its responsibility and see to it that the relations between employers and employees remain good - certainly now that we are faced with a difficult debate on end-of-career arrangements.’ And then, just to fill the whole of Wallonia with dread, Di Rupo says: ‘Without the wage agreement we will be giving extra ammunition to those who advocate the regionalisation of the social negotiation process.’ The PS is dead scared of that.

What happens then would be horrible, outlines Di Rupo: more uncertainty for employees, more competition between the north and south of Belgium and in particular the end of the federal social security system. Di Rupo does lay down two conditions. The employers must fulfil their commitments [not to do so would be nonsensical] and the government must offset the fall in revenue from the social security system on account of this agreement (this is not that great a demand either, since the fall in revenue is certainly not that much).

Government implements social agreement in full

Employment Minister Freya Vanden Bossche (SP.A) received the social partners once again yesterday before the federal cabinet. She explained why the government was deciding not to change anything more in the draft agreement, which was only rejected by the ABVV. She did not need to do much convincing, since that is what had been requested by everyone barring the ABVV. So it was just a question of waiting and seeing how the socialist trade union would react. But the union adopted a very moderate stance. In a statement, the ABVV first stressed that there were also a lot of important positive points in the agreement. But it maintains its criticism of overtime being made more flexible, among other things. There was no threat of immediate industrial action, and in particular the union said it was looking forward to the forthcoming negotiations on career-end arrangements.

Vanden Bossche must now transpose the draft agreement into a law on the Inter-_sectoral Agreement. Within the sectors the discussions will partially start up again. For example, the indicative wage rule has to be converted sector by sector into a maximum wage increase, and the debate on overtime can be pursued at both sector and enterprise level. Vanden Bossche does not fear any immediate industrial action.

WWW.META.FGOV.BE

SOCIAL POLICY

WAGE AGREEMENT

Socialist trade union rejects wage agreement, but PS supports it

When party chairman Di Rupo announced that his party continued to support the wage agreement, a sigh of relief was felt in the government
In the ABVV it was mainly the white-collar workers’ union BBTK (97%) and the metalworkers’ union CMB (60%) that were against the wage agreement. According to ABVV negotiators Xavier Verboven (Flanders) and André Mordant (Wallonia), the votes against were submitted mainly because of the authorisation of more overtime in times of high unemployment and the aggressive tone of the employers’ organisations (longer working hours for the same pay). The fierce opposition of the white-collar workers has to do with the maximum pay rise of 4.5%. After deduction of index adjustments and wage-scale increases, the real wage deduction of index adjustments and the maximum pay rise of 4.5%. After the white-collar workers has to do with the same pay. ‘We have always made it clear to the leadership that we would not give our consent to an agreement that destroys employment. Our union’s leaders have attempted to have their cake and eat it, but that does not mean that we have to accept the agreement.’ The question that has to be asked is whether a leadership that does not dare to or is unable to convince its rank and file, is in fact a capable leadership. ‘Not only are they unable to judge their own rank and file, but they also dare not to defend the agreement,’ according to one insider. The contrast with the resolute chairman of the ACV Luc Cortebeeck is becoming greater with every day that goes by.

Cortebeeck had also encountered a lot of opposition from his own rank and file in recent months. But in the end the chairman of the Christian union was able to convince his people of the importance of the agreement.

WWW.ABVV.BE

On 7 February André Mordant and Xavier Verboven were officially elected as chairman and general secretary, respectively, of the socialist trade union ABVV.

Up until this weekend the two men held these posts ad interim, in order to fill the void left after the departure of chairperson Mia De Vits. The mandates of Mordant and Verboven run until the summer of 2006, but the question is whether they will hold out that long in a union that since then appears to be adrift. In an attempt to put the union back on track, Mordant was quickly shoved into De Vits’ post. But from the word go the Walloon Mordant, who does not speak a word of Dutch, was not well liked by the union’s Flemish divisions. The Fleming Verboven was appointed interim general secretary, and although he speaks the two languages perfectly, he lacks the necessary authority to lead the union. That gives the federations (food, metal, textiles, etc.) a free hand. The ABVV openly concedes that it does not understand why the federations that voted against had not indicated their opposition earlier. ‘We have always consulted them and they gave their approval every time. Only at the very last minute did they pull on the brake,’ said the spokesperson. Christian Roland, chairman of the white-collar workers’ union, contradicts that. ‘We always made it clear to the leadership that we would not give our consent to an agreement that destroys employment. Our union’s leaders have attempted to have their cake and eat it, but that does not mean that we have to accept the agreement.’ The question that has to be asked is whether a leadership that does not dare to or is unable to convince its rank and file, is in fact a capable leadership. ‘Not only are they unable to judge their own rank and file, but they also dare not to defend the agreement,’ according to one insider. The contrast with the resolute chairman of the ACV Luc Cortebeeck is becoming greater with every day that goes by.

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WWW.ABVV.BE

VLD parliamentary party leader in the Flemish Parliament (and former minister) Patricia Cseysens and the current Welfare Minister Inge Vervotte (CD&V) waged a minor verbal war last week over the Policy on Sanctions for Youth Offenders and the Disabled Persons Policy. Last week Vervotte announced that the Authorities of Flanders were discontinuing their cooperation with the federal detention centre of Everberg, because they cannot accept the bill tabled by Minister Onkelinx for a new policy on sanctions for young offenders. Cseysens reproaches Vervotte for what she claims was merely an unnecessary provocation of the Francophones and the Federal Government. A second provocation from Vervotte, according to Cseysens, came when she announced that she would no longer be using the waiting lists for disabled persons requesting assistance. These waiting lists were introduced by the previous government, under the Green Ministers Vogels and Byttebier, to gain a better overview of the needs of disabled persons. These lists were also constantly used by the CD&V opposition to criticize the government welfare policy. Without these lists the transparency of the disabled persons policy is lacking, says Cseysens. Not a bit of it, counters Vervotte, who claims to have introduced a system that is a refined version of the waiting lists (FF).

The conflict between the CD&V minister and the VLD parliamentary party leader on the waiting lists has a remarkable side to it. In the previous period of office CD&V indeed mercilessly pitched into the welfare policy, with the waiting lists as the cudgel. The VLD always defended itself by saying that the waiting lists gave a rather oversimplified picture and that the system had to be ‘refined’. A CD&V minister is now defending a ‘refined’ counting system, and the VLD parliamentary party leader cannot laugh about it. The Everberg issue provides for another such strange déjà-vu. In the previous period of office the VLD called the most energetically for a decree to put an end to the agreement for cooperation on Everberg if no law on sanctions for young offenders was introduced. Now that CD&V Minister Vervotte is implementing that decree without the Liberals’ agreement, the VLD is screaming that Vervotte is jeopardising national security [because for the time being there is no Flemish alternative accomodation for hardened juvenile delinquents, ed.]

WWW.INGEVERVOTTE.BE
WWW.PATRICIACEYSSENS.BE
Since the New Year only a small technical margin is still applied for speed offences on Belgian roads. A circular from the Procurator-General puts this at 128 km/h on motorways and 57 km/h in built-up areas. Up until now, in practice the police had only been taking photos for serious speed offences with thresholds from 136 km/h on motorways and 67 km/h in built-up areas. The measure is aimed at introducing uniform enforcement of fines for traffic offences. The Belgian Institute for Road Safety (BIVV) has reacted with satisfaction. According to the BIVV there had hitherto been too many differences in the fines depending on the legal district. The police trade unions are less happy with the measure. They predict up to three times as many fines and an insurmountable increase in workload.

heavier fines, can no longer be denied. Serious arguments are therefore needed for not continuing further along the same path. It is therefore surprising that the reaction yesterday from the police unions was so uninspiring. Is that really the most intelligent thing they can think of? To start drizzling on about paperwork in the face of the overwhelming proof that the policy pursued is really working?

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 5 FEBRUARY

There is the danger that the slowly growing social acceptance of a stiffer enforcement policy will be jeopardised by the new rule. First of all because there is no variation in the penalty. Driving slightly over the speed limit risks costing the same as driving way over the limit, and that does not square with an elementary sense of justice. But worse still is that the circular does not take any account whatsoever of an age-old ingrained national character. It is an innate Flemish trait to assert that just over the limit is in fact the same as just under it. The new measure therefore risks having just the wrong effect: because the social support for it is as good as non-existent, it also threatens to adversely affect acceptance of the hefty fines in the case of really serious offences.

WWW.BIVV.BE

Opinion

BART STURTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 5 FEBRUARY

It is only a couple of years ago that the first speed cameras appeared at the sides of the roads, and in that space of time they have become something you cannot help but be aware of. In what way has that measure impacted on our motoring freedom? Figures revealed this week answer that question: the more cameras there are and the more intense the monitoring, the fewer offences are committed.

This about-turn is saving lives. In the first eleven months of last year 8.7% fewer accidents involving injury were recorded in Belgium. In Wallonia, where the opposition to speed cameras lasted longer than in Flanders, there is now also a marked fall in the number of road accident victims. The connection with the tit-for-tat policy, including

MOBILITY AND TRANSPORT/AGRICULTURE

Still 128 km/h on motorways and 57 km/h in built-up areas

The police trade unions are not happy with the measure. They predict up to three times as many fines and an insurmountable increase in workload.

Still 128 km/h on motorways and 57 km/h in built-up areas

The police trade unions are not happy with the measure. They predict up to three times as many fines and an insurmountable increase in workload.

Organic sector shrinks for the third year in a row

Things have not been going so well in the Belgian organic farming sector for three years now. The surface area of all organic farms taken together has shrunk by 6.5%. Compared to 2002, the reduction is as much as 20%. The Flemish farming administration sees two reasons for the negative trend. Consumer interest in organic products is reportedly no longer on the rise. In 1999 the demand for organic products rose spectacularly as a result of the dioxin and PCB contamination of food products. The number of organic farms then rose from 164 in 1998 to 253 in 2001. The then Agriculture Minister, the Green Vera Dua, presented an action plan for organic farming in 2000, aimed at having farmers switch over to organic farming. The objective was to have 10% of Flemish farming land farmed organically by 2010. At the moment the surface area of farming land under organic farming is 3,219 ha, barely 0.5% of all farming land. In 2001 the figure was 4,000 ha. The number of organically bred animals did increase last year, especially among chickens and pigs, but among cattle and goats the figure declined.

A second reason for the downward trend is the problem of sales and markets, among other things due to the stiff competition from abroad. For the first time the Flemish farming administration has also made an estimate of turnover in the organic sector. In 2003 a turnover of EUR 231.1 million was reportedly recorded, with the consumption of fresh organic products amounting to some EUR 130 million in that year.
Vande Lanotte refuses reimbursement of expensive new medicines

Vande Lanotte’s colleague at social affairs, Rudy Demotte (PS) denies that there is discord between him and the budget minister on the strict policy

Budget Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SPA) has done the pharmaceutical industry a nasty turn. Expensive new medicines will not come onto the market as long as the industry does not take steps to make its old medicines cheaper. Vande Lanotte is simply refusing to put his signature to the decree governing the reimbursement of these medicines by the social security system. In this way he wants to avoid the budget for health care going further off track and jeopardising his own budget. Over the last five years there has been much spouting about the health insurance system going off the rails, and now things are serious, says the minister in Het Laatste Nieuws (9 February). This provoked the umpteenth clash between a socialist and the sector of the pharmaceutical industry. SPA Chairman Stevaert had earlier been drawn into a fierce debate with the pressure group Pharma.be, because he advocated the introduction of public invitations to tender for medicines, the so-called ‘Kiwi-model’ that is in use in New Zealand. He wants to use that procedure to ‘break down’ the prices of medicines. Vande Lanotte’s colleague at social affairs, Rudy Demotte (PS) denies that there is discord between him and the budget minister on the strict policy (FF).

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 10 FEBRUARY

On this matter together they are carrying out what the government has decided on minister Demotte’s proposal: the acceptance for reimbursement of new medicines is made tougher: only medicines that are really innovative and occasion fewer expenses will still be accepted. Demotte’s department says that Johan Vande Lanotte has not blocked all applications but has let through a few that meet those two conditions. This is in the line of budgetary austerity, according to Demotte. And Vande Lanotte reiterates that the pharmaceutical industry has to learn that there is only room for new medicines if old ones are made considerably cheaper. And with that last comment we are on familiar terrain. There has been criticism of the high price of medicines for months. Steve Stevaert wants ‘to break down the prices of medicines’. All partners, including health insurance funds and doctors’ associations, accept this. What the pharmaceutical industry forfeits, they do not have to forfeit. The only ones reacting to this refusal of new medicines are two parties espousing contrasting views: doctor Dirk Van Duppen, the guru of the kiwi model, and the organisation of the pharmaceutical companies Pharma.be. Van Duppen says that the government ought not to be drastically opposed to new medicines if it were to issue an invitation to tender for the medicines and only reimbursed the cheapest. Pharma.be says that it is disgraceful for the government to be denying patients the right to the best medicines. And that innovation - the wonder cure for the economy - is forswn if the government has to pay for it. It is striking that nobody is talking any more about the major problem concerning medicines. Their prices are not markedly higher in Belgium than elsewhere. What is a lot higher is the amount of medicines consumed. If the pharmaceutical industry wants to prevent its prices from being broken down and its innovative products from being blocked, it would be well advised to start a campaign against the excessive consumption of medicines. ‘Eat a kiwi instead of a pill’ is the best way of avoiding the kiwi tender model from being introduced.

WWW.PHARMA.BE
WWW.RUDYDEMOTTE.BE
WWW.JOHANVANDELANOTTE.BE

Vande Lanotte refuses reimbursement of expensive new medicines

Vande Lanotte’s colleague at social affairs, Rudy Demotte (PS) denies that there is discord between him and the budget minister on the strict policy

Leuven-Eindhoven-Aken Research Triangle

As in North Carolina in the United States, a huge Research Triangle between Leuven in Flanders, Eindhoven in the Netherlands and Aachen in Germany is coming into being. With Imec Leuven has the largest independent European research centre in the field of microelectronics. Eindhoven is home to the famous Physics Laboratory (NatLab) and Aachen has a well-known technical university. The CEO of the Philips group Gerard Kleisterlee pointed out in Trends (10 February) that the R&D percentage in this triangle is much higher than the Dutch average and much higher than the European norm. Between Eindhoven and Leuven he even sees a Broadband Valley coming into being, a development axis for microelectronics originating in the cooperation between Philips Research and Imec, originally a spin-off of the Catholic University of Leuven. On the Leuven-Aachen axis there is cooperation in the field of medical appliances and on the Eindhoven-Maastricht-Aachen axis there is growing cooperation in the development of biomedical appliances, says Kliesterlee.

WWW.PHIIPS.NL
WWW.IMEC.BE
WWW.NATLAB.NL

THE TOP-TEN OF BELGIAN ADVERTISERS

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(1) WELL, HEAD & SHOULDERS, ANEL, AIRW.....
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SOURCE: ‘PIGE’ CIM MEDIA DATABASE, ROULART MEDIA RESEARCH
Belgian All Shares Index reached record of 1998

On 4 February the Belgian All Shares return index (BAS) surpassed the historic record of 20 July 1998, rising to 22,494 points (as compared to the 1998 record of 22,348 points). The BAS groups together all Belgian shares, weighted according to their market capitalisation, and, unlike the Bel20 index, does take account of the dividends paid out. The Bel20 index is still listed at 17% below its record listing of the beginning of 1999. With these results the Brussels indices are faring a lot better than the Dutch AEX index or the European Stoxx, which remain 48% and 44% below their respective record levels (FF).

KURT VAN STEELAND • DE TIJD • 5 FEBRUARY

With this listing the BAS is able to notch up a record again for the first time since 20 July 1998. On that day the market indicator knocked off at 22,348.33 points, the 64th and last record of the 1998 stock market year. The record formed the crowning moment of the golden years of the Brussels stock markets. Belgians were falling over themselves to buy shares, either directly or via one of the many Bel20 funds. In July the euphoria experienced one final crescendo. Traders then talked of the ‘campsite boom’, since many investors that summer were even sending stock exchange orders from their holiday addresses in the South.

There then followed the great disillusionment. When the euro was launched in 1999 major Belgian investors, such as pension funds and insurance companies, immediately swapped their Belgian shares for a pan-European portfolio. Many small investors sold their Bel20 funds and moved over to a Euro Stoxx50 or Nasdaq fund. Due to a lack of technology shares, Brussels saw the technology craze pass it by. Whilst the Euro Stoxx50 leapt 54% between the beginning of 1999 and the peak of the technology bubble (on 6 March 2000), the BAS index lost a quarter of its value.

Brussels then shared in the general stock market malaise for three years. The low point came on 12 March 2003, when the BAS index closed on 9,849.51 points, the lowest level since October 1996. Since then there has been a spectacular stock market revival, which has seen the value of the BAS rise by 128% in less than two years.

VLD disciplinary committee expels Coveliers

Hugo Coveliers is no longer a member of the VLD. The statutory committee of the Flemish Liberals yesterday expelled the dissident senator from the party. In theory Coveliers can still appeal against the decision, but it does not look as though he will do so.

Coveliers has been expelled on account of ‘his personal attacks, his systematic taunting of people within the VLD, and his intention to set up a new political formation’, according to the committee’s verdict. On the doorstep at the entrance to the VLD headquarters, Coveliers was able to vent his gall one last time, before the multitude of cameras, on the lack of democracy and the inquisitorial mentality in his former party and on the dictatorship of Verhofstadt & Co (FF).

STEVEN SOMERS • HET LAATSTE NIEUWS • 9 FEBRUARY

‘I don’t feel out of sorts,’ said Coveliers on the doorstep at the entrance to the VLD headquarters. ‘Even in hard times I’m affability itself.’ Why had he not affably resigned from the VLD himself, given that mentally he had long since taken leave of it? ‘The procedures are more democratic in the Pigeon Society, I want to file a complaint against that,’ came the answer. After party Chairman Somers has formulated his complaint before the committee, Coveliers was called in. But initially he refused to go in. ‘Surely they don’t think I’ll be going in like some well-behaved young lad! I’m waiting for my legal adviser Leo Goovaerts, who was also removed from the party two years ago.’ A little later the dissident duo of Hugo and Leo were heard - behind closed doors, for the disciplinary committee with old Liberal sages such as Karel Poma and Willy De Clercq has been meeting in this way for some 12 years. After an hour Coveliers emerged. ‘For the serenity of the debates it is better that I leave, and that Leo deals with the procedure from here on,’ says Coveliers. ‘Even before I had a chance to defend myself my expulsion had been arranged over a Tuscan wine and a Cuban cigar (a veiled reference to Verhofstadt and De Gucht, both of whom have country houses in Tuscany, ed.). I won’t be playing in that puppet show anymore.’ A little later the decision was announced.
Bourgeois wants politicians to stop appearing on entertainment programmes

FF EDITOR

Media Minister Geert Bourgeois is calling on the public broadcasting corporation VRT and the Vlaamse Mediamaatschappij VMMa (VTM, Kanaal 2, Jim TV) and VT4 only to invite politicians for information and ‘infotainment’ programmes. The minister feels that they should not be admitted onto entertainment programmes, since such appearances undermine the credibility of the politicians as seekers of media attention. Among politicians themselves Bourgeois has never really has much success with his call for more seriousness. Therefore he is addressing the broadcasting companies directly. This he did on the occasion of the presentation of the radio and television critics’ awards in Antwerp.

As expected, reactions were not long in coming. Bert Anciaux (Spirit Culture Minister in the same Flemish Government) feels that Bourgeois is missing the point. In his view, it is not politicians participating in light entertainment programmes, but all kinds of patronising rules that result in people behaving like two-year-olds [Het Laatste Nieuws, 8 February]. He thinks that seeing politicians having fun on TV prompts people to seek amusement themselves. And amusement is the best remedy for the omnipresent negative bitterness in this society. It’s as simple as that, as far as Anciaux is concerned. TV is the new church and politicians cannot fail to attend, since there should be no growing gulf between politicians and the people. On the other hand, politicians reduce their own credibility by creating the impression that they are a different kind of person. VLD politician Jean-Marie De Decker, never shy of a television appearance or some stunt or other, is on the same wavelength. Bourgeois does not realise that a TV quiz replaces that of the local association under the church tower.

Last year the VRT produced a series of guidelines for programme makers and production companies responsible for ‘infotainment’ and entertainment programmes presenting politicians, according to De Standaard (7 February). One of these rules is that the appearances of the politicians in programmes should not be of a repetitive nature. In addition such occasions are not the arena for party standpoints or political debates.

The carnival is in crisis

Today the phenomenon appears to be suffering from too much partying

KURT BOES • DE MORGEN • 8 FEBRUARY

On 6 February, the carnival this year again mobilised more than 100,000 people for the procession in Aalst, Flanders’ carnival city. In the parade the Aalst carnival groups poked fun at local, national and even international public figures and situations. The party of the local mayor Anny De Maeght gets a lashing. The hilarious desertion of Congolese soldiers in training in Belgium is played out in street theatre. The Flemish Minister-President Leterme is a giant goat mounted and driven by Vlaams Belang figurehead Filip Dewinter, and jokes are made about the cancelled wedding of tennis star Kim Clijsters. It is often forgotten that the parade and the three-day festivities are the climax of months of preparation. The more than 1,000 members of the carnival groups sacrifice almost all their free time for this purpose from November onwards. But except in Aalst, and a few cities and municipalities in Limburg and Brabant, carnival has long since ceased to be a tradition. It used to be far more popular, in the 1950s for example, according to Stefaan Top, professor in folklore at the Catholic University of Leuven. Today the phenomenon appears to be suffering from too much partying (FF).

Originally carnival represented the transition from the bleak winter to the green spring. A new season and a new period was about to start and that, just before Spring, had to be celebrated. ‘People could let themselves go once more before having to spend a couple of weeks in reflection and contemplation,’ says Top. ‘These days it’s ‘carnival’ every weekend. Every week there’s something to celebrate. People are up to their eyeballs in partying, and carnival is no longer that special festive occasion that people looked forward to.’

Also because the times have changed, along with the rules and values. ‘The authorities and the church wanted to keep diversion and fun within limits, but in the case of carnival, for once a blind eye was turned. Carnival was actually the party in which people could really let their hair down. The excesses would not have been much less than today, but these days the media are all over the event and television brings those not always equally palatable images into our living rooms. Perhaps it is a bit worse today than it was in the old days, but more than anything it is more eye-catching. Everything is magnified.’

However, those same media are blind and deaf during the preparations for carnival, whilst it is precisely at that stage that they could disseminate a much more important message. ‘Carnival counteracts negativity and bitterness,’ says Top. ‘In the months and weeks leading up to carnival, everyone is busy and occupied in a positive manner. Carnival is a ‘doing’ party - you can’t just stand by and watch, you have to take part. For many, that is a drug, and they spare neither time nor energy in ensuring they have the largest or finest float ready in time. If they don’t succeed, they simply try again the following year. That is the true spirit of carnival.’ Anyone who wants to know what exactly the true spirit involves should go to Herenthout next Sunday, advises Top. ‘For more than a hundred years they have been celebrating carnival on a small scale in this tiny village. There are no contributions from anyone outside the village, only people and groups from Herenthout take part in the procession. This is a ‘private party’ that enjoys the support of the council, and is doing extraordinarily well. Herenthout has the oldest carnival in Flanders and will be keeping the tradition alive for some time to come.’
Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE
• 15 February: Il Fondamento conducted by Paul Deboer with Zelenka, Fux and Heinichen, Conservatory, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be.
• 15 to 18 February: Quando l'uomo principale è una donna by Jan Fabre and Troublemaya, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be.
• 15 February: Rachel Podger (violin) with Telemann, von Biber, JS Bach, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be.
• With thanks to: Concentra nv, De Vlijt nv, de concerto conducted by Patrick Battistelli [composer] and Ian Burton [libretto], director: Robert Carson, Flanders Opera House, Ghent, conductor: Luca Paffi, info: 070/22.02.02 www.vlaamseopera.be.
• 17 February: Eros and thanatos, Spectra Ensemble di Diabolus in Musica with vocal music by Vivier and Scellí, Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be.
• 17 to 20 February: Rosas and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker with Dés, the second part, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be 02/201 59 59.
• 17 to 19 February: Kulturama, the cultural high days of Leuven, Face a Face with Fabre, photos by Layla Aerts, Film festival in Stuk and music with Tri, Anaparanoa, rockymun Festiv Express, Jazzcotech dancers and the Flemish Radio Orchestra conducted by Baldur Brönniman with Norman Perryman and many others; info: 016/51.63.29 www.kulturama.be.
• 18 February: Het Collectief, Robin Engelen and Oxalys with Schönberg, Korngold, Dlage, Ravel and Stravinsky; De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be.
• 18 February: The Flemish Radio Orchestra conducted by Baldur Brönniman with Norman Perryman, compositions by Dvorak and Adams, Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be.
• 18 February: Novalis Trio with Rachmaninov and Anton Arensky, Wanderer Trio with Franz Liszt and Johannes Brahms, Concertgehouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgehouw.be.
• 19 February: Trio Parnassius with Turina, Albéniz, P de Sarasate and E Lalo, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be.
• 21 February: Low, Ancienne Belgique Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be.
• 14 to 19 February: Artefactfestival, Stuk, Leuven with Jamie Lidell, Pan Sonic, Christian Fennesz, Rechenzentrum, theatre with Chris Kondek and installations by Yukiko Shinozaki, Christelle Fillod, Lab(n), Scott Sauble, Wim Vander Vurst and others; info: www.stuk.be.
• 22 February: Capilla Flamenca (B) o ensemble Oltremontano Obrecht, Josquin, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be 02/201 59 59.
• 22 February: The Dresden Dolls, piano adventures, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be.
• 23 and 24 February: Wim Vande Keybus and Ultima Vez with Les portueuses de mauvaises nouvelles; Vooruit, Ghent; info: www.vooruit.be 09/267.28.28.
• 23 February: Artemis Quartett with Juliahe Basine, De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.18.28.
• 24, 25 and 26 and 27 February: Clásicos Réggy, les ateliers contemporains, theatre, French language: De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be.
• 25 February: Konstantin Sjerbakov (piano) with Shostakovitch, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be.
• 25 February: Eros and thanatos, Spectra Ensemble di Diabolus in Musica with vocal music by Vivier and Scellí, Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be.
• 25 February: Konstantin Sjerbakov (piano) with Shostakovitch, De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be.
• 26 February: Low, Ancienne Belgique Brussels; info: 02/548.24.24 www.abconcerts.be.
• 14 to 19 February: Artefactfestival, Stuk, Leuven with Jamie Lidell, Pan Sonic, Christian Fennesz, Rechenzentrum; theatre with Chris Kondek and installations by Yukiko Shinozaki, Christelle Fillod, Lab(n), Scott Sauble, Wim Vander Vurst and others; info: www.stuk.be.
• 22 February: Capilla Flamenca (B) o ensemble Oltremontano Obrecht, Josquin, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be 02/201 59 59.

EXPO
• Until 27 February: Tatu-Tattoo, exhibition, Royal Museum for Art and History, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/741.72.11 or www.kmkbg.be.
• Until 4 May: Rudolf Lange, war witness, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres; info: www.inlandersfields.be.
• Until 28 February: Maarten Van Severen, exhibition, Design Museum, Ghent; info: http://design.museum.gent.be.
• Until 13 March: The Heart, exhibition, Museum Dr Guislain, Ghent; info: www.museumdguislain.be.
• Until 20 February: Dedicated to a proposition, Extra City, Antwerp; info 0484/2.10.70.
• Until 10 April: Retrospective Floris Jespers, exhibition, PMMK, Ostend; info: 059/50.81.18 www.pmmk.be.
• Until 27 February: Dear ICC, aspects of contemporary art in Belgium, exhibition, Muhka, Antwerp; info: www.muhka.be.
• Until 3 April: Anton Corbiën, exhibition, Fotomuseum, Antwerp; info: 03/242.93.00 www.fotomuseum.be.
• Until 27 February: (Im)perfect by design, exhibition, Royal Museum for Art and History, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/741.72.11 www.kmkbg.be.
• Until 17 April: Jazz in Little Belgium, MIM-museum [musical instruments], Brussels; info: www.mim.gouv.be.
• From 5 February onwards: The memory of Congo, the colonial period, exhibition, Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren); info: www.museumtcf.be.
• Until 17 April: SMAK-exhibitions: Orla Barry, Michael Borremans and Bernd Lohaus + opening Art Now-exhibition with Ivo Provoost & Simona Denicolai, SMAK, Ghent; info: www.smak.be.
• Until 10 April: 25 years of press photography, Fotomuseum, Antwerp, info: 03/242.93.00 www.fotomuseum.be.

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