Conclaves for Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde and Health insurance

The Verhofstadt government again takes up the issue of last year's 'super' council of ministers, focused on a political priority. Only now they will take on the shape of conclaves and are not so much aimed at emphasising the government's decisiveness, as at removing the fuse from the powder keg of a few thorny issues. That is how after the budget conclave in the second half of March, conclaves on the politically sensitive topics of health care and Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde will be organised. That also means that the federal government assumes that the B-H-V discussion will drag on for at least another month and that the timing of the Flemish government parties CD&V and N-VA will not be respected (FF).

The council of ministers formula is slimmed down: no meetings will be held while travelling and there will be no media-friendly announcements with a host of proposals. According to those in the know, the conclaves will be more like the Vel Duchesse meetings of the former Dehaene government.

The intention is to achieve 'in-depth reflection' on a specific political issue with an extensive core cabinet. Budget control will come under the microscope first, then health care and Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde. Especially the latter conclave could be essential to the survival of the Federal Government in its current form. By the middle of next month in particular it must be clear whether Didier Reynders' MR can be nudged to a compromise on B-H-V. If this is not the case, the government is headed for a crisis. A change in the coalition, whereby the MR could be nudged to a compromise on B-H-V, can be clear whether Didier Reynders' MR can be nudged to a compromise on B-H-V. If this is not the case, the government is headed for a crisis. A change in the coalition, whereby the MR could be nudged to a compromise on B-H-V.

That in addition the government wants to examine health care as a priority is no coincidence. There has been political high tension for a while over the budgetary derailment of health care insurance. Early this week a heated discussion developed in the Riziv insurance committee, which controls health insurance because Budget Minister Johan Vande Lunette's (SPA) representative did not want to allow a budget increase. And yesterday a Riziv study leaked from which appeared that all savings on medicines were a failure.

INTRODUCTION

I just had to happen. Dissatisfaction in the white sector has taken on such proportions that for the time being there is no compromise in sight with the government. A strike, of an indefinite period at that, is the strong answer with which the trade unions led by the Christian LBC aim to strike up the right tune. The government proposal for a CLA were first wiped from the table by the LBC grassroots support, then by the union leadership and lastly by the Tremaingun union. Then there was a Riziv proposal that paid 10% less than other sectors and the government proposal is not of a nature to close that gap. De Standaard (24 February) understands the reason can be found in the call for striking the right balance and putting an end to the snowball effect that could result from giving in. It could encourage other sectors (e.g., education) to take action. In the meantime the conflict threatens to acquire a community undertone, reports de Tijd (24 February). One of the LBC's demands is a decrease in working hours as of age 45 for 'federal' personnel in rest homes and hospitals. This is already the case in sectors such as the care for the disabled and social/cultural non-profit sector, which comes under Flemish jurisdiction. It can be explained by the Federal Government as a plot by the Christian Democrats, who are not in the Federal but in the Flemish Government and the Christian trade union LBC. That the strike is a success in Flanders and not in Wallonia and Brussels feeds this suspicion even further. In the meantime SPA Chairman Stevaert has appointed himself watchdog over the health insurance budget, which is under major pressure. He wants to have the Treasury investigate what hospitals do with the money. He wants to have the Treasury investigate what hospitals do with the money. Every strike day saves the health budget 20 million euros, calculated de Tijd, although the newspaper immediately added that by calling in personnel (20,000 a day) and postponing operations that figure should be taken with a huge grain of salt.

Frank Vandeaveye | editor in chief
Hospital and rest home workers on strike

The largest trade union from the non-profit sector, the Christian LBC that represents 85% of hospital and rest home workers has rejected the principle agreement with the Federal Government for a new collective agreement for the period 2005-2009. Strikes will be held from Thursday 24 February. The socialist trade union, BBTK that had previously approved the agreement by a narrow majority will also be striking. The principle agreement promises extra days holiday for workers over 50 years of age (particularly those over 58 years), a higher end-of-year bonus and additional pension, 10,000 jobs and extra training (FF).

PETER DE BACKER/JOOST LONCIN
HETNIEUWSBLAD • 23 FEBRUARY

Initially, it looked good for the Government because it received cautiously positive reactions to its proposals from socialist trade unions. The Government wanted to use a delaying tactic regarding the promised 10,000 jobs in the white-collar sector. Social Affairs Minister Rudy Demotte (PS) had promised this for around 2009 but it now looks as though it will not happen until around 2011 as there are not going to be enough people on the employment market to fill these jobs in future years. Of the 375 million-euro package the Government has available, 125 million will therefore be finding its way into employees’ pockets. This is not, however, enough to cool tempers. It is particularly the LBC that is afraid the Government will misuse negotiations as a ‘political experiment’ to create precedents that could force trade unions into the defensive on the coming end of career debate. Now the LBC has decided to strike, an agreement is further away than ever. As well as the 10,000 jobs, the negotiations will be dealing with three things: the thirteenth monthly wage payment, extra pension and more holidays for older employees. The Government gave some concessions for this on 21 February. It is prepared to pay a bonus of 300 euros but the LBC is demanding a full thirteenth monthly wage. The same bonus is to apply to everyone. The lowest salaries in the white-collar sector are as low as the rest of the non-profit and private sectors but the higher salaries are lower than elsewhere. A real thirteenth monthly salary will be an over-taking manoeuvre for higher white-collar workers. The Government also wishes to pay 150 euros a year into an additional pension fund but the socialist union BBTK wants a proper pension. The Government also wants to give extra holidays to employees 50, 52 and 55 years old of up to 66 days for those 58 years of age. However, the LBC suspects a manoeuvre behind this for scrapping early retirement. LBC leader Walter Cornelis said, ‘We fear the early retirement pension will slowly drop to below the poverty level. This is discouraging people from going into early retirement at 58 and we are not putting up with it any longer.’

PETER DE BACKER/JOOST LONCIN
HETNIEUWSBLAD • 23 FEBRUARY

The gap between unions and government is very big

The Federal Social Affairs Ministers Rudy Demotte (PS) and the Federal Employment Minister Freya Vanden Bossche (SP.A) are extremely bothered by the strike of the white sector but are not prepared to negotiate as long as it continues. Trade union leader Walter Cornelis of the LBC who now has support from the social and liberal trade union sees it differently. He wishes to strike and negotiate at the same time. He does not wish to stop the strike until there is a viable government proposal. Meanwhile, hospitals, rest homes and handicapped institutions must carry on operating with minimum staff levels. Where minimum staffing levels are not reached, the Flemish Provincial Governors are calling in personnel with ‘warrants’ issued by the police authorities. Non-emergency operations in hospitals are delayed and elsewhere, therapeutic sessions are dropped. A compromise between the employees of the white sector and the Government is becoming very difficult. It is reported the Government has already reached the far end of its concessions with its proposal. Furthermore, Minister Demotte may not let the health budget grow by more than 4.5% (FF).

BART DOBBELAERE • DE STANDAARD
24 FEBRUARY

Officially, Minister Vanden Bossche does not want to renegotiate with the sector during the strike, but this will not produce any results and it is not clear how long the strike will last. It remains extremely difficult for all to foresee how the large gap between unions and government can be closed. The Government is after all, afraid that concessions to the white sector (for example on the thirteenth month) will give ideas to other sectors. Phasing in measures over time seems a possibility. This means not letting all promises get through straightaway but also not waiting until 2009.

Meanwhile, the Flemish Welfare Association is looking towards the Flemish Welfare Minister, Inge Vervotte (CD&V). Vervotte did not give them too much hope in the Flemish Parliament. ‘Negotiations can only take place if budgetary possibilities are in sight within the framework of the Flemish Government budget over several years’ says the Minister. So we need to be patient.
The Social and Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) is a consultation and advisory body of the Flemish employers’ and employees’ associations that adopts positions and formulates policy advice on socio-economic issues. The SERV outlines the social and economic position in Flanders in a report every two years. The advisory body compares a number of social and economic indicators from Flanders/Belgium with those of a few countries and regions in social and economic terms. This time, he compared Flanders with the USA, Japan and a selection of eight top European regions. These were the west of the Netherlands, the southeast of the UK, Bavaria, western Austria, Noreste (Spain), Est (France) Nord Est (Italy) and Kozep-Magyarorszag (Hungary). The SERV shows with this comparison how Flanders can learn from the better-performing regions for the benefit of its long-term policy. From the comparison, it appears that Flanders is undeniably one of the top regions but does show a lot of weaknesses. We are at the top for education, social provisions and labour productivity but we do poorly in business dynamics, the functioning of the employment market and environmental quality. This report also does away with the cliché that Flanders is more of a high-tech region than Wallonia (De Tijd). Wallonia fares better than Flanders for example, in the area of computers, telecommunication equipment and components for aircraft and spacecraft. Thirty-seven per cent of Flemings nevertheless works in an innovative sector for example, producing cars, trains and medical equipment, but this is not real high tech (FF).

BART HAECK • DE TIJD • 19 FEBRUARY

By comparison, Flanders scores average as regards its gross domestic product per inhabitant - a key indicator of the economy. GDP is growing in Flanders a little faster than the level of the EU-15 and its share in private investments in fixed assets is the highest of all regions and countries surveyed.

Socially, Flanders/Belgium generally seems to be doing reasonably well from the comparison. Then again, we also do very poorly in the working of the employment market. We are regularly hovering around the tail end as regards employment levels (proportion of the population that actually works), average age on leaving the employment market (only one in four people over 55 years of age still works), number of long-term unemployed and work unit costs. Flanders is in the middle group for unemployment levels and our labour productivity is back on top. The output results of our education system are also among the best but we score no more than the average EU-25 level for our participation of the active workforce in training and education. We also score average on innovative performance even if the Government is mainly in default with insufficient financing.

We score well for the number of entrepreneurs in the working population but most countries surveyed perform better as regards the numbers of starting and growing businesses.

The Belgian economy is the most open of those in the countries surveyed. The total tax burden and the implicit tax rate on work by employees (the tax rate including employees’ and employers’ social security contributions) in Belgium are the second highest of the countries surveyed.

The implicit tax rate of capital and business income [the effective paid tax rate after fiscal deductions] is in turn the second smallest in Belgium. The quality of Belgium’s distribution infrastructure is average. The high-energy intensity of the Flemish economy is in stark contrast to the low score we achieve for electricity and renewable energy sources. Electricity prices [domestic and industrial] are the second highest of all the countries surveyed. Gas prices fluctuate around the European average.

Major challenges remain for a better environment. Flanders scored the worst for water purification. Only the USA scores lower as regards CO2 emissions per inhabitant. The road to the objectives of the Kyoto Protocol is still long.

WWW.SERV.BE

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### Direct and indirect employment in 14 branches (2002)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Ratio Direct/Indirect</th>
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<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>405,300</td>
<td>176,259</td>
<td>581,559</td>
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<td>234,100</td>
<td>272,828</td>
<td>506,928</td>
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<td>304,673</td>
<td>230,505</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food and drinks</td>
<td>92,926</td>
<td>222,094</td>
<td>315,020</td>
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<td>83,933</td>
<td>228,633</td>
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<td>50,549</td>
<td>82,486</td>
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<td>45,155</td>
<td>66,007</td>
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</table>
National Bank calls for an economy with innovative products

The growth of 2.7% is due to increasing domestic demand

FF EDITOR

Belgium achieved 2.7% economic growth last year. From the beginning of 2002 to the third quarter of 2004, the Belgian BBP grew by 6.2% compared with just 3.4% for the Eurozone. What is now happening is most unusual according to the De Standaard. According to the National Bank Annual Report, the growth is not due to the growth in export but the increase in domestic demand. Private use increased in 2004, just as in 2003, by over 2%, in real terms, that is. Consumption also increased much faster than disposable income. For the National Bank, the conclusion was quick in coming, the tendency to save has declined; in three years by as much as 2.3% whilst remaining stable in the Eurozone even though at 14.2% of disposable income, it is still significantly higher than the European average. In 2004, 31,000 extra jobs were created which made the employment level grow to 60.4%. However, this is still far behind the European average of 64%. The growth in employment was also not enough to prevent the unemployment level rising to 8.6% (De Tijd, 23 February).

The Governor of the National Bank, Guy Quaden is warning against self-satisfaction and is calling on Belgians to make enterprise and innovation priorities as well as the reorganisation of government finances and increasing activity levels. The Governor said that innovation assumes businesses will concentrate their production on goods with a comparative advantage. It also appears from the results of the fourth quarter of 2004 that growth is not being maintained. Economic growth was halved to 0.4 and it seemed to slow down more still early in 2005. The National Bank’s economic barometer dropped to -8.1 points and business confidence dropped to the lowest point in 16 months (De Tijd, 24 February). Economists put the low business confidence down to expensive oil, the strong euro and slow growth in neighbouring countries.

www.nbb.be

Preparatory diplomacy for the organisation of the Congolese elections

During their meeting with President Bush Verhofstadt and De Gucht pressed for US support for the disarming of the militias in east Congo

FF EDITOR

It seems quite difficult for a meeting between Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht (VLD) and the Congolese President Kabila to go off without a hitch. A few months ago, De Gucht himself caused a mini diplomatic com- motion by commenting on the quality of political leaders in Congo for which he received the indignation of Kabila & co. Also his visit to Kinshasa last week went anything but smoothly. The Francophone newspaper Le Soir revealed that a press file of accompanying journalists contained information questioning the Congolese origins of President Kabila. The Congolese President reacted by postponing talks with De Gucht until the evening. Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) minimised the incident by lodging a public protest with Le Soir. De Gucht was, however, satisfied with the talks he had with Kabila. This is important, as it was part of diplomatic preparations for President Bush’s visit on 21 February. Washington still sees Belgium as a privileged and well-informed partner of its former colony. The Belgian Foreign Office wants elections in Congo whatever the cost but to this end, stability in the east of the country is an absolute must and Washington can play a crucial role here in persuading the neighbouring countries of Rwanda and Uganda not to invade Congo again. The Rwandan Army has its sights trained on the displaced Hutu militia that currently operates in east Congo. During their meeting with President Bush on 21 February, Verhofstadt and De Gucht pressed for US support for the disarming of the militias in east Congo. They also asked Bush for support in training a national Congolese army. De Gucht is going to Washington in March to discuss the Congo case further.

www.diplomatie.be
Bush’s visit makes dialogue with Europe possible again

According to Foreign Affairs Minister De Gucht, the main purpose of the visit by Bush was to iron out the creases in relations with their European partners, to turn over a new leaf and open new dialogue.

The US President made a good impression during the most important address of his five-day European visit on 21 February in the Concert Noble hall in Brussels. He asked for Europe cooperation to fight terrorism and spread freedom and democracy. The majority of the 300 or so people invited - diplomats, politicians, academics selected by the US Embassies to NATO, the EU and Belgium reacted positively to the speech. Prime Minister Verhofstadt said in his introduction that Europeans appreciate that Bush after his re-election came to them first and that he hopes a line can be drawn under the differences of the past. The European public was a lot cooler than the President is used to in his own country.

Afterwards, those present reacted extremely-to-cautiously positive although disillusioned voices could be heard here and there, according to De Standaard (22 February). According to Foreign Affairs Minister De Gucht, the main purpose of the visit by Bush now and Condoleezza Rice two weeks ago was to iron out the creases in relations with their European partners, to turn over a new leaf and open new dialogue. Important differences of opinion such as the arms embargo against China, the position on Iran's nuclear programme and the Kyoto Protocol was not really discussed. Bush also carefully sidestepped these thorny issues in his address to the European Union on 22 February (FF).

HUBERT VAN HUMBECK • KNACK
23 FEBRUARY

It is possible that this visit by Bush is the most important stage in his entire presidency. What Bush came to Brussels to say was more or less known in advance. It was not by chance that Condoleezza Rice chose two weeks ago during a preparatory round trip to hold her major speech of reconciliation at the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques [National Political Science Foundation] in Paris, the very heart of European protest against Washington's recent international policy. What she said there was significant. Rice had only praise for the European Union. She also knew that the USA could only succeed with reinforced European cooperation. Bush himself added on Monday that the USA and Europe together must not just ensure more freedom and democracy in the world but also give more consideration to the fight against poverty. A thought that until recently would only disturb Europeans. The new US message breaks with the sometimes-brutal manner in which the White House tried to drive European countries apart the last four years. The coming months will show whether the cold front is over between Brussels and Washington. In return for his words of reconciliation, Bush in any case went home with a lot of promises and the thought that he could again talk with the President of France and the German Chancellor. However, the time is also right for Europeans to line up once more behind the USA. There are no more immediate sounds of sabre rattling in the air and the elections in Afghanistan, Iran and Palestine went well enough. There is much work to be done.

WWW.DIPLOMATIE.BE

Unprecedented security measures for president Bush’s visit

Unprecedented security measures were taken for the two-day visit to Brussels by President Bush. This was because it was the first time that a visit from a US President was to be combined with a NATO and an EU summit. All leave applications from the police were revoked during the visit. Most money transport operations in Belgium were postponed because the policemen had to be deployed in Brussels. There were more than 2,500 officers on duty at any one time. Bush himself brought 500 men plus over 200 journalists with him. There were some 300 members of his own Secret Service for his protection. Members of this Secret Service came to Belgium on various occasions to make preparatory arrangements with the Belgian intelligence and police services.

Police also had to be deployed to maintain order at the demonstration that took place in the vicinity of the US Embassy on the first day of Bush's visit. The demonstration was an initiative of 'Stop Bush', a platform organisation of peace movements, environmental organisations, human rights movements, trade unions and political parties. The 3,500 demonstrators chanted slogans against US policy in Iraq and against US refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol. Together with a number of Green Party politicians, there were also some from SPA and Spirit.

Both political parties are part of the Verhofstadt Government. SPA, Spirit and Groen! also demanded that diplomacy be given priority over military intervention in Iran. The fact that the USA does not recognize the UN rule of international law and has just as little recognition for the International Court in The Hague is a sign for them that little has changed in the US position despite the charm offensive.

WWW.BUSHWANTED.BE
Stevaert wants to give all workers white-collar status

The need for a generalized white-collar charter has become clearer in the latest wage negotiations in the private sector

Heavy brainstorming has been taking place within the SP.A since the difficult establishment of the social agreement between trade unions and employers as to two interventions by employees. Federal Employment Minister Freya Vanden Bossche (SP.A) is calling for the introduction of temporary unemployment for white-collar workers. There is already a similar provision for blue-collar workers when production comes to a complete or partial standstill within the company. Vanden Bossche believes that in this way she also partly meets the employers’ demand for more flexibility. More flexible legislation should enable them to be as competitive as possible abroad. The Minister wishes in the initial phase to offer mainly white-collar workers close to the production process the possibility of temporary unemployment benefit. In this way, the Minister believes employers will not have resort to dismissal straightaway. Her thoughts are aimed at foremen. The white-collar trade unions BBT and LBC are somewhat aloof. They do not believe many jobs will be saved by the introduction of temporary unemployment. They argue that white-collar workers can normally continue working if production comes to a standstill. SPA Chairman Steve Stevaert reacted to his Minister’s proposal with a variation of the former SPA proposal to clear the division between white-collar employees and workers (De Morgen, 19 February). He believes all workers should be white-collar employees. The need for a generalized white-collar charter has become even clearer in the latest social consultations. Here, the workers’ trade unions voted for the social agreement and the white-collar unions opposed it. Stevaert says one charter will also bring negotiators representing all employees’ interests back into line (FF).

JOHAN RASKING • DE STANDAARD 21 FEBRUARY

Stevaert is comparing the operation with an old socialist demand concerning the railways. ‘Making everyone a white-collar worker is like abolishing the second class in trains instead of the first class. If you abolish the first class, you have to invest in order to degrade first class carriages down to second class standards. In the other case, you have to invest in order to upgrade those in second class to first class levels. How is the passenger best served?’ The SPA Chairman will no doubt receive more applause from the white-collar trade unions LBC and BBTK than Minister Vanden Bossche with her proposal for the introduction of temporary unemployment. Trade union leaders Luc Cortebeeck (ACV) and Xavier Verboven (ABVV) are pleased that the socialist Party Chairman acknowledges the ‘upgrading’ of the employees’ status but they both stressed that the dossier is much more complex than suggested by Stevaert’s one-liner.’ The VBO leader Rudi Thomaes supports them in this. The industrial spokesman adds that the harmonisation of the two charters ‘may not result in increased costs for industry.’ Cortebeeck and Verboven feel there may be ‘no social reversal whatsoever’ for blue- or white-collar workers. The conflicting declarations from Stevaert and Vanden Bossche are not just causing intrinsic confusion on the position of the Flemish Socialists. They also contradict the recent promise from the Verhofstaden Government to the social partners to (temporarily) refrain from working out political solutions. It is up to a working group of trade unions and employers to do so towards the end of the year.

However, it took years for trade unions and employers to reconcile their differences on harmonisation of two charters. Even if everyone already agrees that the division of brainwork and manual labour is ‘completely outdated’. Belgium is the last country in Europe with such rules. The Court of Arbitration already ruled against its discriminatory character in 1992.

Getting married - no charges and no paper

Getting married in Belgium should be possible without any fees or paper from 2006. This is the idea of a bill from State Secretary for Administrative Simplification, Vincent Van Quickenborne (VLD). People getting married now still have to submit four sets of documents to the municipal register: a copy of the birth certificate from the district where the birth took place and proof of entry in the population register and evidence of nationality and marital status from the parish where the bride and groom are resident. It takes a lot of time to collect all these documents and will easily cost a couple 40 euros. From now on the collection of these details will take place by the civil servant of births, marriages and deaths, said Mr Van Quickenborne. The philosophy behind this measure is that of unique data collection, a principle adopted in the coalition agreement of 2003. Through more effective use of details already known to the Government, citizens are no longer burdened with administrative red tape, says the State Secretary. Citizens with complaints about too much bureaucracy will be dealt with at the State Secretary’s Kafka Registration Centre.

WWW.KAFKA.BE
Umicore is splitting off its copper division

More and more stress is being placed on the production of precious metals

Umicore, the Belgian non-ferrous group and precious metal producer is taking its copper division to the Stock Exchange under the name Cumerio. The new business is spread all over Europe. Of these, the copper foundry in Pirdop and the refinery plant in Olen are the most important. Cumerio will first be quoted on 29 April at Euronext in Brussels. Analysts estimate the value of the copper division at 350 million euros. Umicore will also be reducing its zinc activities. The sale of primary zinc as used in the steel industry has been stopped. This will lead to 216 people losing their jobs in the French branches in Calais and Auby. Annual zinc production was reduced by 130,000 tons. Umicore will, however, remain investing in special zinc products such as powders for rustproof paint and materials for the construction sector. More and more stress, however, is being placed on the production of precious metals says the Managing Director, Thomas Leysen. That already appeared to be the case in 2003 with the purchase of the German Precious Metals Group, active in catalysts and the refinement of precious metals (FF).

MARC DE ROO • DE TIJD • 23 FEBRUARY

‘The splitting off of the copper division gives both Umicore and Cumerio more possibilities to focus on key activities and growth,’ said Umicore managing director Thomas Leysen on presenting the annual results. ‘The copper industry is ready to proceed alone. Last year, the division booked 20 million euros profit although forward contracts for processing concentrates to copper are on a historic low. There will certainly be improvements for this and following years. This is already visible in current profit 224.4 (+318%) corporate profit 260.9 (+262%) and growth,’ said Umicore managing director Thomas Leysen on presenting the annual results. ‘The copper industry is ready to proceed alone. Last year, the division booked 20 million euros profit although forward contracts for processing concentrates to copper are on a historic low. There will certainly be improvements for this and following years. This is already visible in current profit 224.4 (+318%) corporate profit 260.9 (+262%) and growth.’

Flanders loses its best-known furniture designer

His quest for functional perfection in tables, chairs and interiors was quickly described as minimalism

Ghent furniture and interior designer Maarten Van Severen (48) died of cancer this week in his flat. With him, the Belgian designer world loses its most important international figurehead. His death comes at a time when his work is right in the spotlight. There is currently a special exhibition of his work being shown at the Ghent Design Museum and there is an exhibition at the De Coker gallery that wishes to give an insight into Van Severen’s world of experience. His quest for functional perfection in tables, chairs and interiors was quickly described as minimalism, a label he always rejected. His breakthrough came in the mid-90s when he was commissioned to carry out work for the renowned Swiss-German designer Vitra and other makes. He also found the name ‘designer’, which he really did not want, artificial and preferred ‘someone who makes things for everyday life’. Van Severen was the son of the abstract painter Dan Van Severen (FF).

SASKIA VEREENOOGHE • DE TIJD
22 FEBRUARY

He began designing furniture in his studio in Ghent in the late 80s. His designs were simple, clear and well thought-out, the result of a quest for perfection in form, detail and execution and particularly with regard to new materials and construction techniques. ‘The pressure of time or commercial considerations had no hold over his determination to achieve a perfect result,’ says Lieven Daenens Director of the Design Museum in Ghent. Van Severen’s creations – chairs, cupboards and tables – were made in his studio. Recently they were also increasingly produced by major manufacturers such as Vitra, Edra, Durlet and Bulo. They are very successful in Japan, the United States and many other countries. For example, the .03 chair from Vitra was a renewed experiment with synthetics whereby polyurethane and steel inner springs provide for unparalleled comfort. As well as his often-revolutionary product designs, Van Severen also produced high-profile interior designs. The architect Rem Koolhaas entrusted to him the design of his most famous buildings such as the Villa d’Ava in Paris and the residence in Floirac, near Bordeaux.

Van Severen created a new library, museum shop, auditorium and restaurant for the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. He also recently received a commission from Rolf Fehlbaum, the curator of the Vitra Design Museum. The counter and the library in the S.M.A.K. in Ghent are also his handywork. Daenens thinks it would be dishonest and pretentious to sum up Maarten Van Severen’s work in a few sentences. However, he believes the leading
thread runs through his creations: ‘simple honesty in the use of materials and construction, summed up in a function-bound form. The link between form and functionality is combined in an almost elementary structure seen as strictly minimalistic.’ Foreign producers also saw that characteristic as progressive leading to commercial successes. ‘And so Flanders received the gift of an international design reputation in the form of Maarten Van Severen’. Van Severen won various prizes, including the prize for Industrial Design in Hanover and the Flemish Design Award.

**WWW.DESIGN.MUSEUM.GENT.BE**

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**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE**

- 28 February: *The handsome family* (USA), Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- 2 and 4 March: Recital Marc Claesen with Schumann, Wolf and Mahler, Flanders Opera, Antwerp and Ghent; info: www.vlaamseopera.be
- 6 March: *Dankq Jones, Ancienne Belgique*, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
- 7 March: *Josh Roush (USA)*, Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- 7 March: *Les Arts Florissants conduct ed by William Christie*, *The Garden of Voices with Purcell, Händel and Mozart*, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- 8 to 25 March: *Julie (after Strindberg)* by Philippe Boesmans, Opera, De Munt, Brussels; info: www.demunt.be; 02 229 12 00
- 5 and 7 March: *Jesu deine Passion*, *Col legium Vocale* with JS Bach Concertgeb ouv, Bruges and De Singel, Antwerp, www.concertgebouw.be and www.desingel.be; info: 03/248.28.28
- 8 March: *Barber's Easy* by Richard Goode (piano), De Singel, Antwerp; info: 03/248.28.28 www.desingel.be
- 10 to 23 March: *Salomé* by Richard Straus, co-production with Hamburgische Staatsoper and Nationale Reisoper a, director: Willy Decker; Flanders Opera, Antwerp; info: www.vlaamseopera.be; 070/22.02.02

**EXPO**

- Until 4 May: *Rudolf Lange*, war witness, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres; info: www.inflandersfields.be
- Until 13 March: *The Heart*, exhibition, Museum Dr Guislain, Ghent; info: www.museumdrguislain.be
- Until 28 February: *Fake/not Fake*, Jef Vander Veken, restorer of the Flemish Primitives, Groeningemuseum, Bruges; info: www.brugge/musea

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**CULTURE**

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