The last obstacles for an agreement between Flanders and the Netherlands on the deepening of the Western Scheldt appear to have been removed. When a meeting last week between the Dutch Minister Karla Peijs and the Flemish Public Works Minister Kris Peeters (CD&V) was postponed, nobody dared give an explanation. In mid January the government leaders Yves Leterme (CD&V) and Jan Peter Balkenende had undertaken to see to it that definite approval, in the form of a memorandum, would follow by the end of February. But that did not happen. A round of talks between Minister Peeters and his Dutch counterpart was even cancelled at the last moment by the Dutch. Although it was not said in so many words, it was becoming increasingly clear that the Dutch first wanted agreements on another thorny issue, the High Speed Train (HST) between Antwerp and Amsterdam. But on that point the Netherlands had to negotiate at federal level, more particularly with the Flemish government. Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SPA). He announced on 10 March that he had laid the foundation with minister Peijs for a number of agreements on the HST. This means that there would appear to be nothing now standing in the way of the definite agreement on the deepening of the Western Scheldt. These deepening works are vitally important for the port of Antwerp, since only with this intervention will large container ships still be able to reach Antwerp (FF).

PASCAL SERTYN • DE STANDAARD • 11 MARCH

The Dutch have always assumed that the Belgians would have some of the high-speed trains run to The Hague and Breda. They have therefore invested heavily in these rail connections. But the NMBS (the Belgian Railways) and Vande Lanotte do not see these branch lines as viable. The message is that it will be difficult enough as it is to make the Brussels-Amsterdam line profitable. The Dutch also criticise the Belgians for the fact that the journey between the two capital cities takes eight minutes longer than promised, on account of delays on Belgian territory. But Vande Lanotte and Peijs have been meeting again over the last few days, and both parties reportedly have an understanding on the matter they are issuing an immediate warning: the employment rate must rise from 60 to 70%. Therefore the government must stop subsidising early retirement and other arrangements for leaving the labour market. The OECD feels that anyone stopping work before the age of 65 should bear the costs of this himself. Early retirement years should not count for the accumulation of pension entitlement and people who have taken early retirement should pay the same social security contributions on their benefit payments as employees receiving a salary, in the organisation’s opinion. The measures ring like music in the ears of employers’ organisations. Both VBO and Unizo advocate a reduction in early retirement schemes and argue in favour of measures prompting older people to work longer. On 9 March Federal Employment Minister Freya Vanden Bossche (SPA) kicked off the negotiations with the social partners, but was soon forced to conclude that the employers’ and employees’ standpoints were too divergent. The trade unions feel that efforts first have to be made to get unemployed people into work before having older workers work longer. They regard the package of 30 measures proposed by the government as too restrictive as a point of departure. They would like to see the debate opened up to include the entire career path, employment of all groups, and the financing of the social security system. For that matter they are issuing an immediate warning: the current early retirement arrangement cannot be touched. The unions – and the employers, too – are only too aware that the water is far too deep for immediate negotiations to be started up already. They therefore suggested that Minister Vanden Bossche hold bilateral talks, using a “confidential box” procedure, with unions and employers separately – an invitation which the minister readily accepted. An agreement should be reached by the summer, but as Vanden Bossche realises, it is an unrealistic low figure, as shown by the soaring costs of recent years. The government therefore plans to take measures at top speed to get as many over-55s as possible back to work. An OECD report,eliculated in all newspapers on 10 March, does not mince matters: the employment rate must rise from 60 to 70%. Therefore the government must stop subsidising early retirement and other arrangements for leaving the labour market. The OECD feels that anyone stopping work before the age of 65 should bear the costs of this himself. Early retirement years should not count for the accumulation of pension entitlement and people who have taken early retirement should pay the same social security contributions on their benefit payments as employees receiving a salary, in the organisation’s opinion. The measures ring like music in the ears of employers’ organisations. Both VBO and Unizo advocate a reduction in early retirement schemes and argue in favour of measures prompting older people to work longer. 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They therefore suggested that Minister Vanden Bossche hold bilateral talks, using a “confidential box” procedure, with unions and employers separately – an invitation which the minister readily accepted. An agreement should be reached by the summer, but as Vanden Bossche realises, it is an extremely difficult balancing act. However, as De Standaard (10 March) pointed out, it might be a good idea to take some comfort to know that the OECD feels that Belgium, with its low employment rate for the over-55s, actually has a trump card to play. Since the country scores so poorly on this issue, the room for improvement is far greater than in other countries. It’s just a matter of how you look at it.

Frank Vandeveeye | editor in chief

INTRODUCTION
Now that a social agreement has been reached in the private sector and in the non-profit sector of hospitals, rest homes and home care, a start can finally be made on the long-anticipated debate on career-end arrangements. The problem and the objective can be outlined quickly. One of the four Belgian sectors was far too far off still working, and therefore Belgium is saddled with an employment rate (60%) which is far too low according to European criteria. A few years the baby boom generation will be retiring and that will burn large holes in the social security system. An agreement should clearly with Public Enterprises Minister Johan Vande Lanotte do not see these branch lines as viable. The message is that it will be difficult enough as it is to make the Brussels-Amsterdam line profitable. The Dutch also criticise the Belgians for the fact that the journey between the two capital cities takes eight minutes longer than promised, on account of delays on Belgian territory. But Vande Lanotte and Peijs have been meeting again over the last few days, and both parties reportedly have an agreement as good as sealed. A nervous silence is being kept as to the content, until the Scheldt issue is out of the way. It is possible that there will indeed be high-speed trains to Breda and The Hague, but that the Dutch will bear the bulk of the associated costs.

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focus on FLANDERS
THE DUTCH SPEAKING PART OF BELGIUM
PRESS REVIEW
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O
n Wednesday 9 March the parlia-
mentary home affairs committee held a hearing on the splitting of the BHV constituency. Three Francophone professors in constitutional law unveiled their view of a 2002 ruling by the Court of Arbitration at the hearing. Their Dutch-speaking colleagues did not show up. The N-VA and CD&V members of the committee stayed away. They referred to the hearings as delaying tactics. In the meantime Deputy Prime Ministers Vande Lanotte (SP.A) and Reynders (MR) are going ahead with their confessional procedure. According to De Tijd a draft agreement is reportedly in the making under the terms of which the splitting of the constituency would be linked to a gradually lapsing right for the French-speaking residents of the peripheral municipalities to vote in Brussels and to the allocation of extra money for Brussels. It is possible that in it a number of changes in the linguistic legislation in Brussels will also be included. What in any case does not form part of a prelimi-

Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde: solution before Easter?

There was a sense of tension sur-
rounding the French-speakers’ demonstration in Linkebeek against the splitting of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde constituency. After all, a counter-demonstration had been announced by the Vlaams Belang, the N-VA and a few Flemish organisations. The negotiations on the constituency are under way and a confrontation in the street could do nothing but hamper a solution, it was feared. But the turnout was meagre: 1,000 participants on the French-speakers’ side, and some 400 on the Flemish side and an impressive police force. The speeches made by a few local Francophone big guns were no less forceful for that. Among other things, they demanded that the Brussels Region be extended to include the facilities municipalities. For the rest, the demonstration, which was an initiative of the PRL and FDF departments (which together form the MR) in the Brussels region, had little support. The French-speaking socialists of the PS had distanced themselves from it. Even MR chairman and Finance Minister Didier Reynders chose the carnival in Stavelot in preference to this demonstration. For Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V), that was a sign that a political agreement on BHV was possible. Leterme regards it as out of the question for the Brussels Region to be extended just like that, as the Francophone demonstrators are demanding (FF).

MARK DEWEERDT/RENAAT SCHROOTEN • DE TIJD • 8 MARCH

There are indications that a consensus moment he will sound out his rank and file. The question is how long the patience can last. The current momentum indicates that the objective is nonetheless to arrive at an agreement before the Easter holiday. After this weekend the Prime Minister leaves for Israel. The following weekend a conference of the FDF (Francophone hard-liners within MR) is scheduled on Brussels and the periphery. Reynders can most certainly imagine a better timing. So, the last week before the Easter recess? Viewed objectively, that could be a good plan: announcing the split while every-
one’s already busy packing their cases, dropping bitter outpourings from Community quibblers between the folds, and two weeks later setting about the serious matters with fresh courage. But nobody knows for sure whether Rey-
ders will eventually give in and will be able to bring his party along with him. In that case, there are only two scenar-
ios. Either the matter is put on the back burner or we head for an unadulterated government crisis. We also have to wait and see what the CD&V’s position will be. For the CD&V, no solution or an agreement that is impossible to defend vis-à-vis the rank and file is tantamount to a choice between the plague and cholera. The former involves the risk of a breach of trust in the Flemish Government, whilst in the latter case there would be rumbling in the party and the alliance.

has grown over the last few days on a draft agreement, and that Liberals and Socialists are only waiting for the meeting of the Halle-Vilvoorde (10 March) Committee in Overijse before holding the final round of negotiations. If the plans are not changed, this will take place at the weekend. Before that, Vande Lanotte and Reynders will be appearing in the ‘confessional box’ again in the next few days. The two Deputy Prime Ministers are holding separate talks with the representatives of VLD, sp.a-spirit, PS, MR, cdH and Ecolo in the BHV working group that had been set up previously. The CD&V/N-VA alliance is staying away this time. The members of the BHV working group already paid Vande Lanotte and Reynders a visit in the third week of February. According to the N-VA and the CD&V, ‘everything was said then’ and they are waiting for a government proposal. Vande Lanotte is reportedly keeping Minister-President Yves Leterme unofficially informed of developments.
The Flemish Government of Liberals, Socialists and Christian-Democrats is a marriage of convenience. When it emerged that the Greens were opting for the opposition, Yves Leterme (CD&V) had no choice but to call on the Liberals when forming his government in June 2004. Initially the relationship and the formation of a compromise worked fairly well, but recently the ministers have been expressing their differences of opinion more and more often. Last week’s debate in the Flemish Parliament between Culture Minister Anciaux (Spirit) and the chairman of the liberal VLD Bart Somers (FF), on the subsidisation of youth centres for immigrant young people, had been the climax thus far. Meanwhile CD&V minister Kris Peeters continued to antagonise his socialist coalition partners by calling into question achievements of the previous ‘purple-green’ government, such as the stop of nuclear energy, the choice of wind energy, or - very recently - even the sorting of household waste into residual waste, PMD, paper, etc. Earlier there had been a clash between Welfare Minister Vervotte (CD&V) and the VLD parliamentary party leader in the Flemish Parliament Patricia Ceyssens on the penal policy for young offenders. Both episodes led De Morgen, in its weekend edition, to conclude that the open debate culture was back after an absence. But not for long, so it turned out. For Minister-President Leterme, a confirmed advocate of the no nonsense approach, things had come to a head. To limit the squabbling, he had his government accept a professional code of ethics ‘to the letter’. (FF).

BART DOBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 5 MARCH

Among other things, the memorandum states that ‘every member of the government must refrain from making ill-considered or rash statements in the press and at public meetings, and even in private circles.’ Every member of the government must also refrain ‘from any deed or statement that expresses a personal standpoint which results in the government or a colleague being liable to suffer’. Expressing reservations about a decision taken by a fellow minister is referred to by the memorandum as ‘unacceptable’.

In addition, every member of the government must also know that he or she must always ask for the government’s standpoint on issues that are of concern to the entire government. It is also striking that the code of ethics states that members of the government may not go on working visits without first notifying the mayor of the municipality in question. Another feature, which is not entirely new in the code, is the comment that members of the government are not allowed to demonstrate. There is one exception to this rule. Demonstration is possible if the entire government is in favour of it. So Equal Opportunities Minister Kathleen Van Brempt (SP.A) will soon be participating in a women’s march with complete peace of mind.

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When the federal government still had competence, it attempted to find a balance between ethics and politics. Now it looks first to the ethical component of its foreign policy, whilst for the region it is the economic interests that take precedence.

Karel De Gucht knows only too well that the Walloon Region will not accede to his request to have the export permit for New Lachausée withdrawn. The Foreign Affairs Minister probably only wanted to give the Walloons a taste of their own medicine. In French-speaking Belgium De Gucht is under considerable fire for his Congo policy, which, according to the Francophones, is not voluntarist enough. By focusing attention on the munitions factory in Tanzania, he is killing two birds with one stone. On the one hand he is exposing the racketeering side of the Walloons, and on the other hand he can present himself as a policymaker with clean hands. The message is clear: Karel The Clean doesn’t need any lessons in ethics from the Francophones.
The Flemish Government had a half-page announcement published in all Flemish weekend newspapers, in which it forcefully condemned the threats and blackmail, which an unknown racist writer of threatening letters is using to try to drive employee Naïma Amzil out of the company Remmery. In the same announcement it also condemns in equally forceful terms any form of racism and discrimination on grounds of origin, religious belief or skin colour. The far right party Vlaams Belang, which was convicted of racism just a few months ago, also realises that it cannot express any opposition to Naïma, who wears a head scarf but is perfectly integrated into the community. The intolerance has gone too far and chairman Frank Vanhecke is doing his best to distance himself from the letter writer. He even goes so far as to say that wearing a head scarf at work and in the street is acceptable. A few months ago the VB's other heavyweight Filip Dewinter was still claiming that the wearing of a head scarf in the street was reason enough for the immigrant in question to be set on a plane forthwith. 'A misunderstanding,' according to Van Hecke (FF).

Opinions
MATTHIAS DANNEELS • HET NIEUWSBLAD • 5 MARCH

Van Hecke, who has political feeling, senses all too well that the overwhelming majority of those who vote for his party would be able to consider what is happening to Naïma as something that has gone too far. Vanhecke has long known that the Flanders of the future will be a multi-ethnic community. However, electoral ‘goldcrest’ Filip Dewinter keeps letting fly at the head scarf, the ruin of lily-white Flanders. That both leaders now have to initiate a dialogue within their party with the Vlaams Belang voters on integration, racism in and around the work floor and the headscarf debate is exciting. For Naïma is right when she says: ‘It’s not just about me’. Leterme and his Flemish Government endorse that statement. Precisely for that reason work has to be done in the fight against racism on the work floor, in the housing market and during the recruitment procedure.

YVES DESMET • DE MORGEN • 5 MARCH

We want to assume that the action (with bullets in threatening letters, ed.) was not planned at the VB’s headquarters. But you might wonder what party this ‘idiot’ voted for in the last elections. You might also wonder to what extent more than 20 years of the spreading of hate and fear, the widespread propaganda of racist opinions and the interminable dissemination of the image of a mono-ethnic ideal can spark ideas in certain unstable minds. This party has been spouting poison in Flemish society for 20 years, but when a madman freaks out, it washes its hands in innocence and we have ‘misunderstood it’.
Wage agreement for hospital and rest home workers

But white rage actions shift to Flemish level

After eleven days of strikes in hospitals and rest homes, the trade unions of the ‘white sector’ and the federal government have reached a preliminary social agreement on the wage and employment conditions for the 250,000 employees for the coming five years. The federal government is releasing a budget of EUR 471 million, two-thirds of which will be earmarked for job creation and a third for wage increases. Spread over six years, there will be 10,230 new jobs in hospitals, rest homes and home care. These jobs should in part relieve the pressure of work among the staff, and in part absorb the rising demand for care among an ageing population. Employees will receive an attraction bonus of EUR 300 to 400 and from 2010 onwards will have access to a top-up pension.

The unions were thus unable to secure a thirteenth month. The advantageous leave arrangement for stressful care professions for those aged 45 and over is extended to 70% of the staff. They will receive 12 extra holiday days from the age of 45, 24 from the age of 50, and 36 from the age of 55. The negotiating ministers Freya Vanden Bossche (Employment, SP.A) and Rudy Demotte (Social Affairs, SP.A) were pleased with the agreement. The rank and file of the LBC (Christian), BBTK (Socialist) and ACLVB (Liberal) unions were also satisfied, so it emerged on Monday 7 March.

They approved the agreement by 99%, 68% and 73%, respectively. But this has not entirely calmed the ‘white rage’. Staff in disabled persons’ institutions, youth support and socio-cultural institutions do not get anything out of this agreement, for they fall under the competence of the Flemish Government. Union leader Walter Cornelis already gave to understand that the Flemish Government can expect a similar series of demands to that presented to its federal colleagues Vanden Bossche and De Motte (FF).

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 8 MARCH

The agreement that the unions concluded with the Federal Government still contains many uncertainties, especially as to the timing of the measures. And those arrangements have to be made with the employers who were not involved in the negotiations. Not the government, but they can conclude enforceable collective labour agreements.

The strike in the federally financed institutions (hospitals, rest homes and home care) has thus been suspended, but not whistled to a stop. Should the talks on implementation go wrong, the strike notification could be activated again.

Where peace is not making its entry is in those institutions that answer to the Flemish, Walloon, Brussels, French-speaking and German-speaking authorities: the disabled persons’ institutions, youth care, crèches and the rest of the welfare care sector, and the entire socio-cultural sector. Walter Cornelis (LBC) said that he now wants to negotiate as quickly as possible with the Flemish Authorities. In these Flemish institutions there will be no (more) strikes for the time being. However, ‘action’ will be carried out, particularly in the streets, and when this occurs it is possible that ‘work will be interrupted’.

It is also not clear whether the government is entirely behind the agreement. It was mainly prepared and concluded by SP.A and PS ministers. The Employment Minister, Freya Van den Bossche (SP.A), who had to follow the negotiations partly from her sick bed, spoke of an ‘exceptionally good agreement’. But the MR’s parliamentary party leader in Parliament, Daniel Bacquelaine, expressed ‘surprise’ that the government had agreed to oblige the small institutions to establish a trade union delegation. MR Deputy Prime Minister Didier Reynders hacked that criticism. And in the VLD it is being said in private that ‘an awful lot of money is going to the ‘white sector’.

Euronav expands tanker fleet with acquisition

The Belgian tanker shipping company Euronav is acquiring the oil tankers of the Greek shipping company Tanklog, which is owned by the Livanos family, for EUR 825 million. In exchange the Livanos family receives a 20% shareholding in the listed Euronav. The stakes held by the main share-holders Marc and Virginie Saverys in Euronav are reduced to 33% and 12% respectively. The acquisition means that Euronav now has 44 oil tankers and positions itself among the top five independent oil tanker companies, according to De Tijd (9 March). Euronav was split off from the shipping group CMB in December last year (FF).

MARC DE ROO • DE TIJD • 9 MARCH

‘There are various reasons why we are doing it,’ explains Marc Saverys, chairman of Euronav. ‘The tanker sector is in the middle of a consolidation phase and we are expecting a whole host of alliances or mergers by the end of the year. We must make sure that we are armoured against that. In our sector the slogan ‘big is beautiful’ is still important, especially among investors. We are issuing new shares in the hope that our liquidity will increase. We have had very good relations with the Livanos family for many years. They are very good shippers with a very new fleet. Most of the ships are charted out on long-term contract to independent American oil refineries such as Valero and Sun Oil. One interesting aspect of these kinds of stable contracts is that the shipping companies make additional profits if the market fares better than the agreed charter prices’. Thanks to the scaling-up, Saverys reckons that international analysts will be following Euronav more closely. ‘We are now among the top five in the tanker shipping sector, together with Frontline, OSG, General Maritime, OMI and Teekay, all companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange. That increases the visibility and the benchmarking.’

Euronav operates a fleet of 28 VLCC and ULCC tankers, ships of 250,000 to 440,000 tons. The shipping company recorded a record profit last year of EUR 236 million.

www.euronav.be
Flemish manure policy heads for European censure

At the time former Environment Minister Vera Dua (Groen!) wanted to colour in a larger ‘vulnerable area’ on the map, but gave way under pressure from the VLD

Belgium is very close to being censured by the European Court of Justice because its Regions of Flanders and Wallonia, which have competence for agriculture, have not transposed the European nitrate directive (1991) to an adequate degree. According to this directive, river water and groundwater may contain a maximum of 50 mg of nitrate per litre. However, due to overmanuring of fields used for farming, far too much nitrate is finding its way into river water and groundwater in large parts of Flanders. According to the Court’s Solicitor General, Flanders’ manure action plan contains far too few ‘vulnerable areas’ where strict manuring rules are applicable. In 2002 the Flemish Government demarcated almost 47% of farming land as vulnerable, but that now appears to be too little according to the Court’s Solicitor General. Therefore he is asking the Court to censure Belgium. Environment Minister Kris Peeters (CD&V) now also realises that an expansion of the acreage of vulnerable farming land seems unavoidable. Therefore Peeters is in favour of a new ‘warm’ reorganisation, in which support is offered to those farmers willing to give up their farming operations voluntarily. By the summer he wants to have a new Manure Action Plan (MAP3) ready, which meets the European requirements. At the time former Environment Minister Vera Dua (Groen!) wanted to colour in a larger area on the map, but gave way under pressure from the VLD and her then Minister-President Dewael (VLD) (FF).

‘Everyone sees the censure coming a mile off, and nobody is doing anything,’ says Vera Dua, chairperson of the Flemish Government demarcated around 47% of farming land as vulnerable, but that now appears to be too little according to the Court’s Solicitor General. Therefore he is asking the Court to censure Belgium. Environment Minister Kris Peeters (CD&V) now also realises that an expansion of the acreage of vulnerable farming land seems unavoidable. Therefore Peeters is in favour of a new ‘warm’ reorganisation, in which support is offered to those farmers willing to give up their farming operations voluntarily. By the summer he wants to have a new Manure Action Plan (MAP3) ready, which meets the European requirements. At the time former Environment Minister Vera Dua (Groen!) wanted to colour in a larger area on the map, but gave way under pressure from the VLD and her then Minister-President Dewael (VLD) (FF).

‘Everyone sees the censure coming a mile off, and nobody is doing anything,’ says Vera Dua, chairperson of Groen! and former Agriculture Minister. ‘If they had let me implement my original proposal, it would never have had to come to this. After all, it was obvious that the EU would consider the 47% that we now have indicated as vulnerable areas, to be nowhere near enough. That’s why I also proposed having large parts of Southeast Flanders and Limburg coloured in as vulnerable areas on the map, which would certainly have mollified the European Commission. There was one problem, though. These areas are De Croo country (VLD and current federal president of the House) and Dewael country (VLD, former Minister-President and current federal Interior Minister, ed.) and therefore totally unacceptable for the VLD. I was told bluntly: manure is a problem for the next government. And now it is indeed saddled with it. This preliminary judgement of the European Court only takes account of Flemish policy prior to 1999. So there is still hope, as after that the Greens were part of the government and real efforts were made. But since we left the Flemish Government, the clock has been turned back and the situation is deteriorating markedly. One of the first decisions taken by Environment Minister Kris Peeters was to make the manure-spreading period more flexible again. Now, you obviously don’t convince the EU by doing that.’

Store and restaurant managers to be paid for public works in their street

An alternative majority of Liberals, CD&V and Vlaams Belang approved a bill on this

If self-employed persons have to close their store because the street onto which their door gives is pulled up for road works, sewage works, and work on electricity, water or gas pipelines, they are to receive compensation of at least EUR 44 per day. The authority carrying out the works (the municipality, or the electricity or gas distribution company) will foot the bill. An alternative majority of Liberals, CD&V and Vlaams Belang approved a bill on this, tabled by VLD senator Jean-Marie Dedecker, in the Senate’s Finance Committee. The alternative majority was necessary because the Flemish Socialists within the ‘purple’ majority opposed the motion. The PS was divided in its voting. The SP.A fears that the municipalities will not carry out certain works for fear of the costs. The proposal still has to be approved by the entire Senate and House (FF).

The new compensation system is only applicable to self-employed persons with fewer than 10 employees or an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 2 million. The measure targets stores and hotel and catering establishments. Dedecker puts the number of possible beneficiaries at 400,000. They have to be affected by the works in question to such an extent that they are forced to close their business for at least 14 days. According to the association of self-employed entrepreneurs Unizo, this is applicable in the case of 8% of retailers. The aggrieved self-employed entrepreneur applies to the Participation Fund, which has to recognise the business as a ‘disadvantaged establishment’. After this recognition, he can receive compensation from the fund to the tune of at least EUR 44.20 per day. The sum must in any case be as great as the amount received by the temporarily unemployed.
If Vlaams Belang gets its way, city theatres risk having their subsidies discontinued

Dewinter can no longer put up with 'the city theatres' 'experimental course for a small elite'.

If the Vlaams Belang ever gets its way in the subsidisation of culture, things look none too good for city theatres. In those places where the far-right-wing party enters local offices in the city council after the elections in 2006, the theatres can start worrying about part of their subsidies. On 3 March VB MP Filip Arckens announced in the Flemish Parliament that his party would turn off the subsidy tap for the Brussels Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS). A ‘pseudo-elitist programming’ was how he described the programme offered by the Brussels theatre. And a short period of contemplation without subsidies would be just the tonic to set that straight. Arckens cannot stand the ‘KVS’s subsidised arty experiments’, in Antwerp’s Toneelhuis and the NTGent as well. And those who are not thinking along these lines. It will not be easy for the Belang to do away with all the subsidies, since the city theatres receive funding from municipal, provincial and regional budgets. But the party can certainly do a lot of harm to the Toneelhuis in Antwerp. For the rest, Vlaams Belang cannot tolerate the three city theatres, with their rich tradition, being guilty of ‘pseudo-elitist programming’.

According to Dewinter, the intention is not for the party to decide itself what should be on the programme. ‘We’ve got nothing against experimenting. Anciaux thinks that the party can certainly do a lot of harm to the Toneelhuis in Antwerp. For the rest, Vlaams Belang is not calling into question all Antwerp subsidies, and has no intention of touching the funds that go to the Philharmonic Orchestra, the Flanders Ballet and the Opera.

In Flanders the three so-called ‘city theatres’ - the NTGent (the former Ghent Dutch Theatre), the Toneelhuis in Antwerp (the former Royal Dutch Theatre) and the KVS in Brussels (the Royal Flemish Theatre) - account for the lion’s share of theatre subsidies. Vlaams Belang has now declared war on these three city theatres. The party feels that these institutions should hark back to their initial raison d’être and put on more ‘traditional’ plays or plays reflecting the national character. Last week Flemish Parliament MP Eric Arckens from Brussels launched the first attack. Yesterday Antwerp city councillor Bob Hulstaert went a step further in the free Belang local paper Antwerps Nieuws. He guaranteed that all subsidies to the Toneelhuis would be cancelled, and would be shared among Antwerp’s other theatres.

Flemish Culture Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit describes the method the Vlaams Belang is proposing to make city theatre directors change their programming as an attack to the heart of democracy. The party wants to temporarily deprive city theatres of their subsidies because the plays they stage are too elitist, too progressive and too experimental. Anciaux thinks that with this standpoint the party is showing its totalitarian side (FF).

JEROEN DE PRETER • DE MORGEN • 10 MARCH

Bert Anciaux stressed that decisions on whether or not theatre companies receive subsidies are still taken democratically. After an evaluation by independent assessment committees, decisions are ratified by the Flemish Government. ‘But once that decision is taken’, says Anciaux, ‘the political establishment should adopt a detached stance. What the Belang is proposing is a policy in which artists can become the victims of totalitarian arbitrariness at any time. I am horrified at this approach and will continue to oppose it as forcefully as I possibly can’. Aside from Anciaux, Jan Goossens, artistic director at the Brussels KVS, also defended himself against the VB’s attacks. ‘The criticism that we are elitist for the sake of provoking, purely to please a small elite. It’s high time the debate on this issue was started, and I’m sure we’re not alone in thinking along these lines’. It will not be easy for the Belang to do away with all the subsidies, since the city theatres receive funding from municipal, provincial and regional budgets. But the party can certainly do a lot of harm to the Toneelhuis in Antwerp. For the rest, Vlaams Belang is not calling into question all Antwerp subsidies, and has no intention of touching the funds that go to the Philharmonic Orchestra, the Flanders Ballet and the Opera.

BART BRINCKMAN • DE STANDAARD • 9 MARCH
**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE**

- *8 to 25 March*: Julie (after Strindberg) by Philippe Boesmans, Opera, De Munt, Brussels; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- *10 to 23 March*: Salomé by Richard Strauss, co-production with Hamburgische Staatsoper, directed by Willy Decker, Flemish Opera, Antwerp; info: www.vlaamseopera.be
- **11 to 26 March**: International Festival for Fantastic Film, Auditorium 44, Cinema Nova and Le Botanique, Brussels; info: www.siff.org
- *15 and 16 March*: Need Company, directed by Jan Lauwers, No Comment, theatre, De Singel, Antwerp, info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- *17 March*: voices from Mali, Boubacar Fofana, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- *17 March*: Otomo Yushihide, De Voruit, Gent; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- *18 March*: Frank London and the Klezmer Brass All Stars, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be 070/22 55 02
- *19 March*: Zap Mama, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- *15 to 19 March*: Jan Lauwers and Need Company, No Comment, De Singel, Antwerp, info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- *17 March*: Une Nouvelle Nature by Ictus with compositions by Misato Mochizuki, Tristan Murail and Yan Maresz, Kaaitheater, Brussels; info: www.kaaitheater.be
- *18 to 31 March*: The Turn of the Screw, Opera by Benjamin Britten after a novel by Henry James, conductor Patrick Davin, De Munt, Brussels; info: www.desingel.be
- *19 March*: Ross Mourea (Portugal), Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
- *19 March*: Satellite City, CO De Schelde, Zandvliet; info: 03/569.93.54
- *22 March*: Académie für alte Musik Berlin conducted by René Jacobs, The Brookeskergroep Lehman, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- *23 to 26 March*: Quando l’ uomo principale è una donna by Jan Fabre & Troubleyn, De Minard, Gent; info: www.vooruit.be
- *22 March*: Pascals (Japan), Handelsbeurs, Gent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be 09/267.93.69
- *23 March*: Brussels Jazz Orchestra conducted by Maria Schneider, Handelsbeurs, Gent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be 09/267.93.69
- *24 March*: Shubada Mudgal and Ensemble (India), De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- *24 March*: Marie Hallynck (cello) & Cédric Tiberghien (piano) with Janacek, Webern, Liszt and Debussy, Handelsbeurs, Gent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be 09/267.93.69
- *22, 23, 24, 25 and 26 March*: Fernando Terremoto (Spain), Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp and Handelsbeurs, Gent; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
- *24 March*: Madeleine Peyroux, Flagey (Studio 4), Brussels; info: www.flagey.be 02/641.10.20
- *25 March*: Delavega (soul) Handelsbeurs, Gent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be 09/267.93.69
- *25 March*: European Youth Orchestra with War Requiem by Benjamin Britten, Schola Cantorum Cantate Domino, Flemish Radio Choir, Ghent Madrigal Choir, Vladimir Ashkenazy, conductor, Marin Shaguch, soprano and Mark Tucker, tenor, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- *26 March*: Concerto Köln with Arsys Bourgogne and Christophe Prãégardien conducted by Pierre Cao, Johann Sebastian Bach, Matthauspassion, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be

**EXPO**

- *Until 13 March*: The Heart, exhibition, Museum Dr Guijlain, Ghent; info: www.museumdrguijlain.be
- *Until 3 April*: Anton Corbijn, exhibition, Fotomuseum, Antwerp; info: 04/932.49.03 www.fotomuseum.be
- *Until 10 April*: Retrospective Floris Jespers, exhibition, PMMK, Ostend, info: 059/50.81.18 www.pmmk.be
- *Until 10 April*: boèk + brandlhuber/co + a42org, architechts, Köln and Masters of Architecture, Nurnberg, Collecting the Future, exhibition; De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- *Until 17 April*: Jazz in Little Belgium, MIM-museum [musical instruments], Brussels; info: www.mim.fgov.be
- *Until 4 May*: Rudolf Lange, war witness, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres; info: www.inflandersfields.be
- *From 5 February onwards*: The memory of Congo, the colonial period, exhibition, Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren); info: www.175.25.be
- *Until 17 April*: SMAK-exhibitions: Orla Barry, Michael Borremans and Benoît Lohaul - open SMAK-exhibition with Ivo Provooost & Simona Denicolai, SMAK, Ghent; info: www.smak.be
- *Until 15 May*: Particular visioons, exhibition with work from studios of disabled people, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- *Until 15 May*: Belgium 175-25, a celebration programme with music, dance, theatre, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- *Until 15 May*: Retn Magritte and Photography, exhibition, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- *Until spring 2005*: Loan Mosques in Djenné (Mali), Photo exhibition, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be

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**Telephone**: 051/44.42.99
**Fax**: 051/40.11.52

E-mail: frank.vandecaveye@lannoo.be