Flemish civil servants go on strike

For the first time since the Flemish administration came into being in 1980, Flemish civil servants are going on strike. They cannot accept the cuts of EUR 13 million that the Leterme government is carrying through on its staff policy and the recruitment freeze it has introduced. The public-sector trade unions are prepared to discuss the coming reform of the administration, but not the previously established savings objective.

Minister-President Leterme considers the action to be out of proportion. He points out that the cuts represent only 0.7% of personnel costs and that 575 new jobs were created the last 3 years. The action is also being felt outside the administration's buildings, and in particular in the ports. After all, it is Flemish Government staff that are responsible for the escorting of shipping in Belgian coastal waters and on the Western Scheldt. The naval staff who bring the pilots on board the ships are also government personnel. The economic damage is not inconsiderable (FF).

DE STANDAARD • 25 MARCH

Flanders' ports are currently paralysed by the strike of Flemish Government civil servants. The action comes at a very inopportune time for the port of Antwerp. Many ships, including various container ships, had planned to call in at the port before the Easter weekend. For that matter, the shipping traffic into and out of the port of Antwerp has been subject to delays for some days now due to wild cat action by pilots, who have decided not to work night shifts any more.

The director of Flanders' Pilotage Services, Jacques D'Havé, does not want to take any risks. He regards pilotage on the Western Scheldt without ship escort or even radio communication as irresponsible.

Flanders' other ports, Ostend, Zeebrugge and especially Ghent, are suffering heavily from the strike by government officials. It is expected that the port of Ghent will be inaccessible in the morning due to action by the operators of the bridge over the Ghent-Terneuzen canal in Zelzate.

INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of the Anti-Racism Day (21 March), Jozef De Witte, director of the Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Fight Against Racism, called on the government to encourage companies more and even to force them - to take on immigrants. The centre wants to work out a ten-point plan to encourage a proportional employment of immigrants, part of which involves a pact with employers including clear obligations in terms of results to be achieved. The reaction of employers' organisations VBO and Unizo has been to dismiss obligatory recruitment quotas because, in their view, this would have to be reconciled with recruitment on the basis of skills and motivation, and sometimes cause tensions on the work floor (De Standaard, 25 March). De Standaard does not regard quotas as a good idea either. The paper points out that Flanders has had a decree on proportional labour market participation since 2002, which strives for a proportional representation of women, the elderly, immigrants and disabled persons on the job market and in society. Trade unions and employers' organisations undertook to do away with the resistance among their members. Unfortunately the government, unions and employers all neglected to convey one important message effectively enough to the outside world: namely that there is a risk of severe shortages on a labour market with insufficient immigrant participation, when the effect of the ageing of the population hits hardest after 2010, according to the paper. Leuven professor Albert Martens, author of the study on immigrant employment in Brussels, claims that the figures demonstrate that for all the good intentions, the measures have hitherto failed to work. He feels that a law should be promulgated which makes the ethnic registration of employees in companies compulsory, and which brings the percentage of immigrants in the district and on the work floor to the same level. There is simply no other way. In the nineteen eighties it was impressed upon Moroccans, Turks and Congolese that they would find a job more easily if they took on Belgian nationality. Now they are finding that this has not been of much use, says Martens. A similar message comes from SPA senator Fatima Pehlivan. The noncommittal charters against discrimination on the job market have not worked (De Standaard, 25 March). She concludes. She wants to make lists with the composition of the workforce per company compulsory, with the possibility of these being screened, and to introduce an anonymous application procedure. On 24 March things came to a head in a clash between PS and VLD over a bill tabled by Equal Opportunities Minister Dupont (PS) which he had drafted with the Centre for Equal Opportunities. The bill involves anonymous field-testers being sent out in the event of a complaint of discrimination. The method already exists in the Netherlands, and is aimed at acquiring evidence of witnesses that an employer or the operator of a disco is actually guilty of discrimination. But according to a Dutch professor of criminal law, quoted in De Morgen, this has remained basically a symbolic ‘big stick’. The VLD wants to hear nothing of such ‘discrimination spies’. ‘You don’t send a naked woman to a man to find out whether he’s unfaithful,’ said a spokesman for the party (De Standaard, 25 March).

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
The idea of a centre-right alliance in Antwerp

We are still a good year and a half away from the local elections of October 2006, but in Antwerp ideas for new alliances are already being bandied about. Whilst everyone is looking forward to the clash of the titans between the current left-wing mayor Patrick Janssens (SP.A) and the candidate heading the Vlaams Belang’s list, Filip Dewinter, N-VA chairman Bart Dewever has put forward the idea of forming a centre-right alliance list with Christian Democrats, Flemish Nationalists of the N-VA and Liberals. Dewever prefers not to extend the ‘one-against-all’ formula of the current city council into the election battle, since he feels that that would chiefly be to the advantage of the extreme right-wing party. In his view, a centre alliance is an alternative. The current mayor Patrick Janssens, in particular, thinks that an alliance between VLD, CD&V and N-VA would be a good thing for Antwerp’s municipal elections in 2006 (Gazet van ANTWERPEN, 21 March). VLD and CD&V do not reject a pooling of their forces, but regard it as being too soon to talk of this. Dewever also feels that it is pretty decisive, either. For the city it would be impossible and probably not judicious, either. For the city it would be no good thing if things were to come to a Janssens-Dewinter polarisation. But I’m busy with the city’s administration at the moment. Mentally the elections are a very long way off. I sincerely hope that such tactical discussions can be put off at least until the autumn.

Van Peel gave the idea more of a wide berth. ‘If it’s a good idea, we should certainly not form such an alliance in the media. As a city dweller I want to concentrate on the city’s administration and I hope that we can wait a year for this. It’s far too early’.

There is also movement on the left wing of the political landscape. Last week Mieke Vogels, the Groen! figurehead, hinted that she was ‘not interested’ in an alliance with Mayor Janssens’ SP.A. If the centre-right alliance is formed, the Greens’ standpoint could be crucial for the balance of power in Antwerp’s city council after 2006. After all, without Green support it would be difficult for Patrick Janssens to cope with the VB-list and the new alliance at the same time.

The confusion at the Vlaams Belang

The Vlaams Belang has had a tough time of it lately. Every week a Belang official makes some statement somewhere that causes a minor media storm and that the party executive is subsequently forced to correct or explain. There was the debate on headscarves that was fanned further by the threatening letters sent to a West-Flanders employer who refused to dismiss Naïma Amzil, an employee who came to work wearing a headscarf.

Naïma Amzil was able to count on the broad support of the average Fleming. That turned out to be bad news for the VB, which was promptly reminded of VB leader Filip Dewinter’s speech in which he said that ‘anyone wearing a headscarf is signing for a return ticket back to their country of origin’. A little later came the threat by the VB of city theatres being stripped of their subsidies if they continued with their ‘elitist’ programming. Last weekend VB MP Filip De Man declared on the VRT that Muslims are by definition not democrats, because the Koran makes women subordinate to men and does not recognise the separation of church and state. He made the comment during a party clash with MP Gerolf Annemans, who had said in an interview in Het Nieuwsblad that Muslims who had assimilated into society could run on VB lists. According to De Man, that is out of the question. With his latest pronouncement he forced Belang leader Dewinter to make a subtle distinction. He spoke of a ‘conflicting relationship’ between Islam and democracy and dismissed the whole discussion as rather theoretical. But Dewinter also feels that it is pretty much out of the question for a Muslim to run on a VB list. The various immigrants on SP.A, Spirit and CD&V lists regarded De Man’s comments as a blatant affront. The differences of opinion within the Vlaams Belang can hardly be dismissed as an incident. According to De Tijd (23 March), the VB’s MPs have been banned from making statements. In addition to the battle between hardliner De Man and Annemans, there is also a conflict with the ethical-conservative Alexandra Colen, who had to give up her place in the party executive in favour of Marie-Rose Morel.
About the outpourings of VB parliamentary De Man

Opinion

MATHIAS DANNEELS · HET NIEUWSBLAD · 22 MARCH

De Man’s outpourings illustrate that the Vlaams Belang is still blind. De Man is rather confused, Dewinter has tens to add. The truth is that the Vlaams Belang does not know which way to turn in the new Flanders that is under construction. The party talks in whimpering and jubilant tones about freedom of speech, yet says that the Spirit politicians Talhaoui and Ahidar will never belong to our society. Some in the Vlaams Belang are still not prepared to open their eyes to a number of social developments, including in respect of Flemings themselves. As in other societies in the ‘old Europe’, so too in Flanders must one of the most complex debates be set in train. How do we see to it that a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional population agrees on a number of basic rules, a jointly shared foundation stone upon which a colourful and thriving Flanders can be built?

De Man’s comments indicate very clearly that, on a human, intellectual and political level, the Vlaams Belang is wholly unprepared to set about working with this socio-economic and cultural-cum-religious reality. The headscarf is a private matter (chairman Vanhecke), the headscarf means a tick-et on a plane back to the country of origin (Dewinter), a Muslim cannot be a democrat (De Man), and so on. For the average Belang member there is no knowing what will happen. Yet De Man’s foolish utterances are also instructive, for in the confusion one thing becomes all too clear. The Vlaams Belang is not inclined to approach half a million immigrant fellow countrymen as democrats, interlocutors, believers, colleagues or neighbours.

Muslim community elects new council

IN THE PAST THE EXECUTIVE HAS Seldom BEEN ABLE TO ADOPT A UNANIMOUS STANDPOINT

69,500 Belgian Muslims went to the polls on 20 March to elect new representatives for the Muslim Council. The run-up to the elections did not go off without a hitch, because some of the outgoing council members contested the validity of the elections. In recent years the Muslim Council has often hit the news in a rather negative light, with internal quarrels, a fraud investigation and legal cases to oppose the elections. The 68 members of the Muslim Council represent the various streams in Islam and have to adopt a position on religious matters such as the wearing of the head scarf. From the Council a Muslim executive is chosen, which determines, among other things, the syllabus for the religious subject of Islam.

In his farewell address the outgoing chairman of the executive, Mohammed Bouliji, complained of the constant political interference. But the reality is that the executive has seldom if ever been able to adopt a unanimous standpoint. It was reproached by a large number of Dutch immigrant politicians for also failing to do so after the murder of the Dutch film maker Theo Van Gogh by a Muslim fanatic (FF).

The Council of State can still decide that the elections were invalid and should be held again. Even if that does not happen, problems can be expected to arise. The Muslim Council must appoint an executive during the next few weeks. At the proposal of minister Onkelinx a law was approved a few weeks ago which authorises the National Security Department to screen members running for the executive. The last time the executive was formed, the intelligence service had expressed a negative opinion in respect of eight of the sixteen members, because they were of a radical Islamic trend. The then Justice Minister Marc Verwilghen (VLD) was forced to disregard the negative opinions, however, because there was no legal basis for the screening by the National Security Department.

Now there is a law, and this law foresees the possibility of appeal by rejected members. It is expected that thorough use will be made of this. That would mean that it will be a long time yet before the new executive is ready for real work.

WWW.KIKFIF.BE

Gwen Declerck · De Tijd · 19 MARCH

The federal Justice Minister, Laurette Onkelinx [PS], decided in the spring of last year that the squabbling had to come to an end and ordered the executive body to hold new elections for the Muslim Council. Since the members of the executive were unable to agree on that either, Onkelinx appointed an ad-hoc commission for the organisation of elections. Two honorary magistrates and two members of the Muslim community sit on this commission. The outgoing Muslim executive and the Council went to the Court of Arbitration and the Council of State to stop the elections. They felt that Onkelinx did not have the right to set up a commission for the organisation of an election, claiming that this amounted to ‘unacceptable government meddling in the internal organisation of the Islamic faith’.

Of the 70,000 registered voters, 45,000 actually took part in the elections. The Turkish candidates secured most votes and won 40 of the 68 seats in the Muslim Council. Twenty seats go to the Moroccan group and eight to other factions.
Poll: more Flemish autonomy, but Belgium should remain intact

Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) is still the most popular politician

The opinion poll carried out by La Libre Belgique/VTM/Het Laatste Nieuws is considered by many observers to be the most reliable. The survey is not carried out by telephone, but takes the form of face-to-face interviews. However, the March poll did not throw up any major shifts. The CD&V/N-VA and SPA alliances gain one percentage point (25.2%) and half a percentage point (21%) respectively, in comparison with the last poll in December 2004. Vlaams Belang (24.8%) and Groen! (7.5%) each lose 0.4%, whilst the VLD (19%) falls back by 0.5%. Compared with the regional elections of June 2004 the shifts are somewhat greater, but equally unspectacular. Those who have lost most ground are the VLD (-1%), and the Christian-Democrat/Flemish-Nationalist alliance CD&V/N-VA (-0.9%). SPA-Spirit (+ 1.3%) and Vlaams Belang (+ 0.6%) have notched up slight gains. The difference is especially marked when a comparison is made with the telephone opinion poll commissioned by De Standaard/VRT, which took place barely a month ago. In that poll the Vlaams Belang (22.1%) fell back to 2.1% below its election result and the CD&V/N-VA (27.4%) came out at 1.3% above the result it recorded in June. However, generally speaking the shifts are not statistically significant. The most striking shifts are found in the personal popularity of the politicians. Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) leads the ranking here, ahead of Steve Stevaert (SP.A) and Jean-Luc Dehaene (CD&V). The Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme, the most popular politician according to this political barometer. He leads the field, ahead of Steve Stevaert (SP.A) and Jean-Luc Dehaene (CD&V). Dehaene thus moves up a place to third. The Flemish Government fares better in the poll. 33% have faith in Yves Leterme’s team, whilst 25% do not. The Flemish Minister-President says that he attributes the difference with the federal government to the long-drawn-out Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde affair, as a result of which the federal government appears to be in trouble. Leterme himself, recently the most popular politician according to the poll commissioned by De Standaard and VRT, is fourth in the La Libre- VTM survey (up two places). The poll also asked whether Belgium should continue to exist as one country. 87% of the interviewees said that it should, with the remaining 13% of the view that the country could be interred. However, Flanders does want more regional competencies. 64% of Flemings want the regions to have a greater say. Only 28% of Walloon respondents backed that view. The survey also wanted to find out whether PS chairman Elio Di Rupo could become prime minister. In Wallonia he received the backing of 39%. In Flanders, this was barely 14%.

Confidence in the Federal Government has never been so low as in the poll conducted by La Libre Belgique and VTM. Only 26% still trust the Federal Government, whilst 42% do not trust it. The last poll in December 2004 showed a proportion of 30% trust to 33% distrust. Three months earlier, in September, the ratio had been 32% trust to 31% distrust. Oddly enough Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) is still the most popular politician according to this political barometer. He leads the field, ahead of Steve Stevaert (SP.A) and Jean-Luc Dehaene (CD&V). Dehaene thus moves up a place to third. The Flemish Government fares better in the poll. 33% have faith in Yves Leterme’s team, whilst 25% do not. The Flemish Minister-President says that he attributes the difference with the federal government to the long-drawn-out Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde affair, as a result of which the federal government appears to be in trouble. Leterme himself, recently the most popular politician according to the poll commissioned by De Standaard and VRT, is fourth in the La Libre-VTM survey (up two places). The poll also asked whether Belgium should continue to exist as one country. 87% of the interviewees said that it should, with the remaining 13% of the view that the country could be interred. However, Flanders does want more regional competencies. 64% of Flemings want the regions to have a greater say. Only 28% of Walloon respondents backed that view. The survey also wanted to find out whether PS chairman Elio Di Rupo could become prime minister. In Wallonia he received the backing of 39%. In Flanders, this was barely 14%.

BART DOBBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 21 MARCH

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Vandevelde sets out new course for Carrefour

Since 54-year-old Fleming Luc Vandevelde became chairman of the board of directors of Carrefour, the largest supermarket chain in the world after Walmart, the Flemish press has obviously been curious to see what strategy Carrefour would follow in Belgium. Vandevelde is ‘notorious’ for the drastic reorganisation he carried through at the British group Marks & Spencer. But he regards a similar operation for Carrefour, which last year saw its net profit fall by 15%, as inadvisable.

In its home country France, in particular, the hypermarket chain is performing below expectations. Carrefour needs a new commercial dynamic if it is to stop the downward slide of its share, says the new chairman. Vandevelde swears by growth in turnover rather than cost cutting. He is not entirely satisfied with Carrefour-Belgium, either, which took over the GB chain of supermarkets four years ago. Although Carrefour is market leader in Belgium, the EBIT margin is only 0.5% here, compared with 4.5% for the whole group. Vandevelde regards that as too low. The hypermarket has to adapt to the consumer by optimising the range of products and services it offers, he feels. He wants to orient prices towards those of the local competitors. Carrefour has therefore set aside EUR 300 million to invest in price cuts. But he does not want to unleash a price war with discount food store chain Colruyt, for example. He feels there is more margin for price reductions in the non-food area, especially electronics (FF).

Luc Vandevelde yesterday declared war on MediaMarkt. He reckons there is nothing more to be earned in the food sector, but that there is in electronic goods. The declaration of war is also bad news for chains such as Fnac, which are already having difficulty standing their ground against the electronics discount stores. Carrefour’s hypermarkets will be increasing their range of electronic goods and improving the service. ‘Previously we worked almost exclusively with promotional campaigns. The inexpensive televisions or DVD players that we featured in our leaflets were considered first and foremost to be a means of attracting people,’ says Vandevelde. ‘In the future we want to offer a permanent range of electronic items in the broadest sense of the word. We urgently have to work on service, too. In this way we aim to be direct rivals of the new discount group MediaMarkt. As we are much bigger, it should be possible to undercut their prices,’ says Vandevelde.

The price war, which has already been raging for months in the supermarket sector, is thus extending from food to electronics. However, MediaMarkt sees no reason for panic. MediaMarkt manager Jean-Marie Christiaens: ‘The hypermarket chain is now already one of our major competitors. In the last two years they have come out with real price-beaters in all their leaflets, from refrigerators to digital cameras. But I don’t think they’ll be able to beat us with their new strategy. The service that they now suddenly want to offer does not fit into Carrefour’s structure or cost strategy. They could get their fingers quite badly burnt there,’ says Christiaens. ‘Moreover, Carrefour will never be able to offer the same range on its shelves. We can offer our customers all the major brands. In the field of electronic goods, Carrefour is more specialised in unbranded or unknown imported products,’ the MediaMarkt manager adds.

At Fnac Vandevelde’s announcement does not really come as a surprise. ‘In France we’ve been used to competition from Carrefour for years,’ says Ann de Heyn of Fnac.

WWW.CARREFOUR.BE

KBC records sizeable profit and announces dismantling of investment company Gevaert

In March 2004 the banking and insurance group KBC merged with the holding company Almanij and the private bank KB Lux. On 23 March the ‘old KBC’, without Almanij and KB Lux, presented its annual figures for 2004 and these were quite simply excellent.

The group increased its net profit by 57% to EUR 1,758 million. The most important factor was the marked drop in the credit losses item. The end of the sizeable credit losses in Poland is also the reason why the profit contribution in Central Europe improved by EUR 401 million to almost 16% of the profit now. For that matter all divisions in the bank increased their profit contribution, so that the banking line, with EUR 1.51 billion, accounts for almost 76% of the group profit. The insurance business recorded a profit of EUR 284 million.

The new post-merger KBC Group currently consists of a bank, an insurance division, a private bank (KB-Lux), a venture capital fund and an asset bank. From the first internal study of the possibilities for synergies after the merger, it now emerges that the investment company Gevaert will be almost completely dismantled (Tijd, 24 March). Gevaert’s venture capital portfolio will move to KBC Investco, share participations are to be sold or transferred to the insurance division, whilst the real estate and leasing activities (Amalfin) will move to KBC Bank. What is left over is the 26% stake in the image processing company Agfa-Gevaert. If an opportunity presents itself, KBC wants to sell this shareholding.

KBC, CONSOLIDATED RESULTS 2004 (in million euro)

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Electrabel and inter-municipal companies undervalued, says Knight Vinke

The American fund manager Knight Vinke, a shareholder in the French holding company Suez, is of the view that Suez subsidiary Electrabel is undervalued to the tune of 55% as a result of an inefficient capital structure. Electricity producer Electrabel and its subsidiaries are sitting on a mountain of cash money and have too few liabilities in comparison with their equity capital, according to Knight Vinke. The fund manager reckons that instead of lending that money to other Suez subsidiaries, it would be better off reinvesting it or distributing it among its shareholders. In cooperation with a number of London merchant banks, Knight Vinke analysed Electrabel’s balance sheets and those of the mixed inter-municipal companies which are responsible for the distribution of the electricity, and sent its findings to the independent directors of Electrabel. Knight Vinke has some EUR 150 million in Suez and Electrabel shares in portfolio and is partly owned by Calpers, a California retirement fund and one of the largest industrial investors in the world. It had previously advised Suez to hive off Electrabel (FF).

MARC DE ROO • DE TIJD • 23 MARCH

The study shows that the distribution inter-municipal companies, which are half owned by Electrabel, are practically debt free. The Commission for the Regulation of the Electricity and Gas Market (CREG) sets its distribution tariffs on the basis of a capital structure whereby one third equity capital and two thirds loan capital can be used. By not applying this ratio, Electrabel and the municipalities are securing too low a return from the distribution inter-municipal companies. If the distribution inter-municipal companies were to increase their loan capital to two thirds of their total assets, as is generally accepted in the distribution sector, the return on their investment would be much higher, says Knight Vinke. What is more, EUR 6 billion would be released which could either be reinvested or paid out as a dividend to the shareholders, i.e., Electrabel and the municipalities.

According to Knight’s detailed study, after the payment of the dividend the inter-municipal companies are still worth between EUR 9 and 12 billion. That gives a valuation of EUR 15 to 18 billion. They are therefore worth almost as much as Electrabel, which has a market capitalisation of EUR 18.5 billion. That figure is in stark contrast to the EUR 2.2 billion valuation that Electrabel gave its 50% stake in the inter-municipal companies at the end of 2003. The municipalities are therefore, perhaps without realising it, sitting on a whole heap of money. Vinke is asking Electrabel’s independent directors to put the under-valuation on the agenda of the next board of directors’ meeting.

WWW.ELECTRABEL.BE
WWW.CALPERS.COM

Increase in imports from Eastern Europe leads to halving of trade surplus

Exports rose by 13%, but imports from these countries increased by no less than 41%

The recent enlargement of the European Union has thus far had mainly negative effects for the trade surplus with countries from Eastern Europe. Belgium’s trade surplus fell in the period May-December 2004 to EUR 547 million, compared with EUR 1.1 billion for the same period the previous year. Exports rose by 13%, but imports from these countries increased by no less than 41% (FF).

WOUTER VERVENNE • DE TIJD • 19 MARCH

In the media it is striking that it is chiefly negative stories about the EU’s enlargement that are receiving attention. The farmers’ organisations said last summer that the increasing imports from Poland were putting pressure on the price of vegetables. The Japanese electronics group CMK stopped production of printed circuits in Geel and referred to the EU’s enlargement. ECA in Assende is reducing the production of dashboards and door panels for cars, because its French partner is starting up production in Slovakia. Bekaert Textiles is moving part of its activities to the Czech Republic. The construction sector is complaining about unfair competition from cheap East European builders.

Trade between Belgium and the ten new EU Member States also tends to indicate that the enlargement of the EU is for the time being having mainly negative effects. Figures on the volume of trade (the best indicator) are not published. But the data on trade in terms of value speaks for itself. The trade surplus in the period between May and December 2004 fell to EUR 547 million, from EUR 1.1 billion in the same period in 2003.

Exports have increased by 13%, but imports have climbed by 41%. Imports from the Czech Republic rose by more than 60%, imports from Lithuania doubled, and imports from Cyprus and Latvia tripled. Belgium is mainly buying more machinery and cars in Eastern Europe. That is striking, for machinery and cars are not obviously labour-intensive products. There are indications that the trade surplus could continue to shrink, with the monthly figures showing the trade balance gradually worsening.

Every now and then the new EU Member States also provide for some good news in Belgium. The Eastern European activities of the provider of joint banking and insurance services KBC again showed a profit in 2004, after the Polish subsidiary had occasioned losses in 2003.
ECONOMY AND CULTURE

Flanders has sold all steel shareholdings

Without having given much publicity to it, Flemish Finance and Budget Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD) has disposed of the last participating interest held by the public holding company Staal Vlaanderen [Flanders Steel] in the steel group Arcelor. In all the liquidation of that holding company has yielded EUR 728 million for the Authorities of Flanders. Staal Vlaanderen had a 4.2% block of shares in Arcelor, which it had acquired in exchange for Arcelor’s acquisition of its 27.8% stake in the East Flanders steel company Sidmar. Between 2002 and 2004 this block of shares was sold off in phases. In 2004 the Authorities of Flanders again subscribed to a capital increase in Arcelor and purchased shares to the tune of EUR 70 million, which it again sold at the end of 2004 with a 30% gain. Wallonia still holds a 3.5% stake in Arcelor and is not planning to follow the Flemish pull-out scenario. Walloon Economic Affairs Minister Jean-Claude Marcourt (PS) sees the shareholding as a necessity, in order to be able to protect the group’s employment in Wallonia (FF).

WIM VANDE VELDEN/MICHALE SEPHIHA • DE TIJD • 24 MARCH

According to Van Mechelen Flanders has no qualms about it. On the contrary. ‘There was scepticism at the beginning, but with the increase in value of our steel shareholding we have settled debts to the tune of EUR 340 million, raised EUR 207 million in liquid assets, acquired EUR 80 million in shares in the steel knowledge centre Ocas, and avoided EUR 101 million in debt repayments’, said the minister by way of an appraisal of the operation. With the EUR 207 million in available funds he wants to develop the Participantenmaatschappij Vlaanderen [PMV - Flanders Venture Capital Company] into a new investment company. At PMV he will be pumping EUR 75 million into an innovation fund, which can be used to acquire participating interests in companies with a technological future. The idea is that in this way the original role of the GIMV [the regional Flemish investment company, ed.] will be resumed. A further EUR 75 million is to go into an investment fund.

With the establishment of the Ocas knowledge centre for steel, Van Mechelen has also aimed to give the steel sector in Flanders a new future.

EXHIBITIONS

The Entry of Christ live in the streets of Brussels

Culture Minister Bert Anciaux again demonstrated his sense of timing, according to De Morgen [21 March] by announcing on 20 March that Flanders had purchased an important drawing by the Ostend painter James Ensor. A day later, on Sunday, a procession paraded through Brussels, depicting a live representation of the painter’s masterpiece The Entry of Christ into Brussels. In this way, the Ostend-based organisers of the initiative wanted to express their displeasure at the sale of Belgian masterpieces abroad. Ensor’s monumental painting The Entry of Christ into Brussels has been hanging in the Getty Museum in Malibu, California, since 1987. It has not even come back for the exhibition ‘Visionary Belgium’, which is currently running in Brussels. To call for a halt to the exodus of Flemish art to other countries, the Flemish Government voted through a ‘major works decree’ in 2003. A purchase fund was set up and a list added of crucial works of art that from now on will not be allowed to leave Flanders. Henceforth if such a major piece were not to secure an export permit, the government would simply have to buy it. And there, precisely, is the rub, according to De Morgen. Ensor’s drawing cost EUR 350,000. For the Flemish fund which has EUR 2.5 million available, that purchase was not a problem. But a major work by Rubens fetched EUR 79.5 million at a London auction in 2002. Anciaux is currently acting as though the decree works, but on the international art market he does not stand the ghost of a chance when it comes to genuine masterpieces, says the paper. However, the absence of Ensor’s major work was unable to put a damper on the exuberant atmosphere surrounding the street reconstruction of The Entry of Christ into Brussels (FF).

JAN VAN HOVE • DE STANDAARD • 21 MARCH

The pretext for the happening was the exhibition ‘Visionary Belgium’, in which the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann presents a compelling overview of 175 years of art and the history of our kingdom. Szeemann would like to have opened the exhibition with James Ensor’s The Entry of Christ into Brussels, a monumental painting which, in his view, symbolises the obstinate and imaginative Belgium which his argument is all about. In Ensor’s canvas, Szeemann heard ‘the scream of modernity’.

Unfortunately the Getty Museum in Los Angeles was not prepared to give the work out on loan. That led the Ostend cultural association Wouse to come up with the idea of reconstructing the missing painting with living figures. Of course that would have to happen on Palm Sunday, the day Christ made his entry into Jerusalem. With the support of the 175-25 committee, which is organising the festivities to celebrate the 175th anniversary of Belgium’s existence, Wouse was able to get to work. Some fifty people from Ostend, some of them from the world of amateur dramatics, began to gather together the right costumes and attributes needed to bring the main figures in Ensor’s painting to life.

And so yesterday the living ‘Entry of Christ’ marked out a trail of good humour through the centre of Brussels. A host of Ensor’s figures were in attendance, enjoying the sunny weather: a fat bishop with a red nose, a general with a peacock’s feather in his cap, a judge in a red toga, the fishermen’s wives and the gendarmes, and of course Jesus Christ himself with his donkey and his aureola.
Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

• 18 to 31 March: The Turn of the Screw, Opera by Benjamin Britten after a novel by Henry James; director: Luc Bondy; conductor Patrick Davin; De Munt, Brussels; info: 02/550 03 50

• 19 March: Les Maîtres de Musique d’Armenie, Vooruit Geluid, info: www.vooruit.be 09/267.28.28

• 30 March: Apcalyptica, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be

• 2 April: The Swan’s lake by P. Tchaikovsky, Ballet St-Petersburg, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be

• 6 April: Rebel; info: www.handelsbeurs.be

• 8 April: Jan Michiels with Ludwig van Beethoven, Fantasie in g op. 77, Johannes Brahms, Ungarische Tänze Gygory Kurtag and Gyorgy Ligeti, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be

• 1 to 9 April: Salomé by Richard Strauss, co-production with Hamburgische Staatsoper and Nationale Reissopera, director: Willy Decker; Flanders Opera, Ghent; info: www.vlaamseopera.be

EXPO

• Until 3 April: Anton Corbijn, exhibition, Fotomuseum, Antwerp; info: 03/342.93.00 www.fotomuseum.be

• Until 10 April: Retrospective Floris Jespers, exhibition, PMMK, Ostend; info: 059/50.81.18 www.pmmk.be

• Until 10 April: boek + brandhuber/co + a42org. [architects, Köln and Masters of Architecture, Nürnberg, 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: André-Philip Lemke, Orla Barry, Michael Borremans and Bernd Lohaus + opening Art Now-exhibition with work from studios of art students, SMAK, Gent; info: www.smak.be

• Until 15 May: The Moroccan Jews, Jewish Museum of Belgium, Brussels; info: 02/512.19.63

• Until 15 May: Particular visions, exhibition with work from studios of disabled people, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be

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