Door-to-door controls in Antwerp

This summer, in the framework of its ‘Urban Safety Plan’, the city of Antwerp will be starting systematic checks of identity and social circumstances of all its residents. Teams of four officials will be making door-to-door visits, asking to be let in and posing a number of well-targeted questions. In the evenings the information gathered will be sent to other competent government and monitoring departments, possibly with the request for intervention. If people are found without identification documents, the data will be forwarded to the Aliens Department. Rental conditions will also be checked. Antwerp says that it is not aiming to hunt down illegal aliens, but wants to map out the situation of difficult streets and offer help where necessary, for example by organising Dutch courses for immigrants in the neighbourhood (FF).

GUY FRANSEN • DE STANDAARD • 10 JUNE

If during their visit the inspectors find a foreigner who cannot speak Dutch, his dossier will be sent by e-mail to the ‘House of Dutch’ (the Dutch Centre), with the question as to whether he should follow an integration course. If the resident says he is unemployed, his data are checked by means of an e-mail sent to the National Employment Office.

If people are found without identification documents, the officials will look into the illegal alien’s situation. If it turns out that his procedure is still pending with the Council of State, the officials will not hesitate in asking which lawyer is handling the matter and what fee is being charged, in order to establish that the lawyer in question is not making improper use of the situation. The possibility of an illegal alien being handed over to the Aliens Department for repatriation is not ruled out. The city says that it will not hesitate to bring in lawyers itself if it transpires that tenants are not paying a reasonable rent in the inspected premises. If many problems of the same kind are found in the same street or district, the city will provide for a collective service. If a street is visited, every house must be inspected, at the express request of the Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Fight against Racism, which accepted no discrimination. The resident may refuse to co-operate, but a decree authorises the mayor to inspect the situation of the house. The Privacy Committee has unofficially issued a favourable opinion.

INTRODUCTION

The soap story in the Flemish media about baby Donna, borne by a surrogate mother from East Flanders, ordered by a couple from Limburg, and eventually adopted by a Dutch couple in Utrecht, was front-page news last month in the popular papers. The surrogate mother allegedly refused to give up the child to the would-be parents, and subsequently is reported to have sold the infant to the Dutch couple, most probably via the Internet. The judicial authorities are still investigating whether the Dutch adoption parents did indeed pay for the baby. If that is the case, an offence has been committed, both in Belgium and in the Netherlands. The tragic story very quickly made public opinion aware of the legal vacuum in which surrogate motherhood operates here. It is not penalised, but it is not prohibited either, so that both surrogate mother and would-be parents can at all times go back on the agreements made. Usually the surrogate mother gives up her child, whereupon the would-be parents adopt it by means of a deed of adoption before a notary-public or the court.

In the Senate’s bio-ethics committee all parties are aware that such cases of ‘baby trading’ must be avoided at all costs. The CD&V paid very considerable attention to this aspect at its family conference at the end of May. Its French-speaking sister party CDHF is simply calling for a blanket ban on surrogate motherhood. In the meantime most parties do want to give surrogate motherhood a chance now that have their proposals ready. The first detailed proposal came from ministers Onkelinx (PS) and Demotte (PS). In their version surrogate motherhood is only permitted in specialised centres. The ministers also want to recognise the surrogate mother as the lawful mother until the adoption arrangements have been taken care of. The bill prepared by the Flemish socialists, on the other hand, makes provision for ‘pre-conception adoption’, a kind of contract between the would-be parents and the surrogate mother, under the terms of which the baby legally becomes the child of the would-be parents from the moment of conception. In the VLD’s proposal, put into words by Patrick Vanenkruiskoven, chairman of the above-mentioned bio-ethics committee (De Standaard, 7 June), a legal pre-adoption agreement is concluded in which the surrogate mother undertakes to give up the child and the would-be parents also undertake to accept it. The SPA and VLD are also of the view that the conditions under which surrogate motherhood should be allowed are clear. For the SPA there should be genetic consanguinity between the would-be parents and the surrogate mother; under the terms of which the baby legally becomes the child of the would-be parents from the moment of conception. In the VLD’s proposal, put into words by Patrick Vanenkruiskoven, chairman of the above-mentioned bio-ethics committee (De Standaard, 7 June), a legal pre-adoption agreement is concluded in which the surrogate mother undertakes to give up the child and the would-be parents also undertake to accept it. The SPA and VLD are also of the view that the conditions under which surrogate motherhood should be allowed are clear. For the SPA there should be genetic consanguinity between the would-be parents and the child. The basic principle for the VLD is medical - the condition being that the would-be mother’s womb does not enable her to bear children or that pregnancy would be life threatening for mother or child. In short, all parties agree that a legal regulation must curb commercial malpractice in the field of surrogate motherhood, without excluding it as possible, but that is where the consensus ends. Broad political support, as in the case of adoption rights for gay couples (see page 6), is not in evidence as yet - let alone unanimity over the terms and conditions of a regulation.

Frank Vandeveye • editor in chief
Elia wants to raise 528 to 595 million on stock exchange

THE FLOTATION IS A STAGE IN THE LIBERALISATION OF THE ELECTRICITY SECTOR

The period between 9 June and 20 June will see the initial public offering of Elia taking place. The high-tension company is raising between EUR 528 and 595 million among private and institutional investors at a price of EUR 22.5 to 26.5 per share. At that price the company is valued at EUR 1.1 to 1.26 billion. The sellers are the electricity producers Electrabel and SPE. Elia’s flotation is an important stage in the liberalisation of the Belgian electricity sector. Elia was set up in 2001 with the task of managing Belgium’s high-tension infrastructure for the next twenty years. Prior to that, the high-tension network had been owned by the electricity producers Electrabel and SPE. The liberalisation of the European energy markets rendered obligatory a distinct separation between production, transmission, distribution and supply of electricity. In the production and supply of electricity free competition was the norm, with distribution and transmission remaining geographical monopolies, regulated by the government. Electrabel and SPE promised to gradually decrease their shareholding in Elia. In an initial step the Belgian municipalities acquired a 30% stake in Elia, via the holding company Publi-T, and paid EUR 221.5 million for this. The electricity producers then agreed with the Belgian Government that a further 40% would be brought to the market within two years. That deadline expired in the autumn of 2004. To the great dissatisfaction of the other electricity suppliers, the flotation was delayed by several months (FF).

David Adriaen • De Tijd • 9 June

The reason for the delay was the uncertainty over the revenue and valuation of Elia. After all, the federal energy regulator CREG fixes the prices that Elia can charge for the use of its transmission network. The stumbling block here is that these prices only remain valid for between three months and a year, which makes the valuation of the high-tension company’s prospective profits difficult. Electrabel felt that in order to be able to get new investors interested, long-term prices were needed, and this resulted in the flotation plans being put on the back burner. The curtain of fog with which Electrabel enshrouded the operation for months led to considerable displeasure among competitors, major electricity consumers, the regulators and the government. However, the government itself caused a delay in the flotation. The approval of an amendment to the law designed to make long-term prices possible dragged on for months. It was only at the end of April that the Lower House approved the new Electricity Act. But when, against all expectation, the Upper House said that it wanted to peruse the Act as well, it looked as though a flotation before the summer would be unfeasible. But last week Electrabel nonetheless announced the definitive flotation plans.

In addition to the sale of Electrabel’s and SPE’s shareholding, Elia is also raising EUR 150 million in fresh capital. The company wants to use this to invest in the extension and maintenance of the network. In the period 2005-2008 Elia will be investing EUR 800 million. Elia has around 1,200 employees. KU Leuven professor Ronnie Belmans is chairman of the board of directors, in which Electrabel and Publi-T each have three representatives. Elia also has six independent directors. www.elia.be

The 2004 property boom

THE MAJOR REASON FOR THE BOOMING MARKET IS THE LOW INTEREST RATE, WHICH HAS SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASED THE POPULATION’S BORROWING CAPACITY

2004 was an excellent year for the property market, according to the analysis made by the Trends Property Guide. House prices rose by 10.25%, with prices of apartments experiencing a 14% increase. For that matter, apartments are much more sought after for living in, having previously found favour mainly as an investment. Small and medium-sized dwellings are also faring well. According to Philippe Janssens of the study and consulting firm Stadim, the major reason for the booming market is the low interest rate, which has substantially increased the population’s borrowing capacity. But second homes are also doing well, and it was here that much of the capital repatriated to Belgium in 2004 in the framework of the ‘tax amnesty’ was invested. The sale of premises for let on the coast benefited from this. Total property sales last year yielded EUR 23 billion, up 8.3% on 2003. The share of the apartment market in this total amounted to 21.7%, compared with a figure of just 13.7% at the beginning of the 1990s (FF).

Trends • 9 June

The number of new homeowners has been rising since 1996, and in the past few years this upward curve has become even more pronounced. On a national scale the housing market is one of the markets that generates most wealth. If we add all segments together (sales, construction, shares, long leases, fixed-capital investment companies, rental market, interest paid) it accounts for EUR 90 billion, or a third of gross domestic product. Another trend being confirmed is the marked fall in new construction. In 1960 seven out of nine new owners were builders; today it’s less than two. In 1976 we had 47,000 new houses, whereas in 2003 this figure had fallen back to 20,000. In 2004 demand was oriented in the main towards two kinds of property: apartments and small houses. These are mainly sought after by young families looking for their first home. At the current rock-bottom rate, the repayment of a mortgage loan of EUR 125,000 does not weigh any heavier than an average rent of EUR 800 per month. On all fronts, the purchase of one’s own home therefore continues to be the winning combination. www.stadim.be

Focus on Flanders • 4 June - 10 June 2005 • Number 23
Harry Potter row between the Netherlands and Belgium

As a Minister for Foreign Affairs de Gucht should have kept quiet and above all not lied, claim most newspapers

The biggest diplomatic row between Belgium and the Netherlands in years. This was how Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad described the conflict that arose between both countries following certain comments by Belgian Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht (VLD) about Dutch Prime minister Balkenende. In the weekend edition of Het Laatste Nieuws, De Gucht described Balkenende as ‘a mix of Harry Potter and virtuous ceremoniousness, a man completely devoid of charisma’. In the contested interview De Gucht also criticised the European constitution campaign of the Dutch cabinet. ‘Their campaign was negative and played on feeling, not reason,’ said De Gucht. ‘You won’t convince people like that. Verhofstad and I would have approached things very differently.’ Balkenende and his government reacted strongly offended to the comments. There followed a period of intense phone calls between The Hague and Brussels. De Gucht, who at the time was on an official visit to China with the King and Queen, initially tried to shift the blame onto the paper. He had been mis-quoted and had not approved the text, he explained. However, it subsequently emerged that his spokesman and parliamentary private secretary had. He immediately sent a letter to Balkenende in which he attempted to explain the whole thing and once again stated that he had been mis-quoted. After the tape of the interview had been broadcast on all Dutch TV and radio channels however, the opposite appeared to be true. There was nothing else for De Gucht to do but to apologise in a second letter. But that was not enough for the Dutch government. On Monday morning the Belgian chargé d’affaires in The Hague was invited by Foreign Affairs Minister Bot and asked for an explanation. Finally, after Balkenende and Verhofstadt had spoken on the phone, both first ministers decided to finally put a stop to the diplomatic incident with a joint statement. They ‘both regretted the interview’ that De Gucht gave to Het Laatste Nieuws and stated that the good bilateral relations between the two neighbours took priority, including those within the frame-work of the Benelux and the European Union. Although only 19% of the population still support Balkenende’s policy in the Netherlands, more than half the Dutch agree with his reaction in this incident, according to an opinion poll. In Flanders, De Gucht has a reputation for blunt and to say the least undiplomatic comments. After a visit to the Congo he told the press in Rwanda that he had met few serious politicians there. This led to a diplomatic row with the Congo and severe criticism in the media and from opposition parties in his own country. Now is no different. In the Flemish papers De Gucht’s comments have met with mixed feelings. As Minister for Foreign Affairs he should have kept quiet and above all not lied, claim, among others, Gazet van Antwerpen, De Standaard and Het Laatste Nieuws. In the end he is also head of Belgian diplomacy. De Morgen sticks up for him (FF).

Opinions

Peter Vandermeersch • De Standaard • 6 June

Has the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs gone too far by grandiloquently lecturing the Dutch? Absolutely. Europe, it does not need repeating, is in the midst of its most serious crisis since the creation of the EU. Both our southern and northern neighbours are asking with shock what should happen now. That the Belgian political class is not in shock is simply due to the fact that the people of this country have not expressed themselves in a referendum. ‘One shouldn’t break a brused reed’ is also true of international politics. Neither the Netherlands nor France needs grandiloquent Belgian schoolmasters saying in the papers how badly Paris and The Hague have sold Europe to their subjects. The tangle in which Europe finds itself will not be straightened out like this. Even a Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs should realise that.
Flanders needs new Kyoto agreement

According to Minister Peeters, every Flemish family has to reduce its emissions from 37 tonnes to 32 tonnes by 2012

On 16 February 2005 the Kyoto Protocol came into force. In it, Belgium promised to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases by 7.5% by 2012 compared with the values measured in 1990. In Flanders the reduction must be 5.2%, Flemish Environment Minister Peeters (CD&V) warns. Things are not currently going to plan in Flanders. Instead of dropping, CO2 emissions have risen by 2% compared to 1990. In 1990, 87 million tonnes of CO2 equivalents were released into the air, and in 2003 that figure was 91 million tonnes. If this increase continues at the same rate, Flanders will emit 105 million tonnes in 2012, while the target figure is 83 million tonnes. Flanders’ poor performance is also evident from a comparison with the European average. In 2002 that was 11 tonnes per European, 13 tonnes per Dutchman and 12 tonnes per German, compared with 15 tonnes per Fleming. According to Minister Peeters, every Flemish family has to reduce its emissions from 37 tonnes to 32 tonnes by 2012, a drop of 12% in six years. Given that industry and agriculture have already made considerable efforts, much is now expected of traffic measures and measures to better insulate homes. A Flemish climate conference, with representatives of all parties concerned, from the transport sector to environmental and agricultural organisations, must bring council. On 6 June these signed a declaration of intent. By 15 September the concrete measures must be on the table that will form the basis of a new Flemish climate plan (FF).

DOMINIQUE MINTEN • DE STANDAARD • 7 JUNE

The declaration of intent confirms that Flanders urgently has to address the task of reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. It does not yet contain any concrete measures, as expected. Working groups will meet over the coming months to draft these. Concrete measures only have to be ready by 15 September. These will then be enshrined in a Flemish climate plan (2006-2012).

A number of points have, however, already been highlighted for consideration: making homes and offices more energy-efficient, energy savings in the horticultural sector and in small- and medium-sized enterprises. If a car is inspected every year, why can a house not be placed under the energy magnifying glass every ten years? The Flemish Environment Minister, Kris Peeters (CD&V), announced that energy consultants must help businesses. Climate objectives should also be built into transport policy. The points to be considered are obvious. It is more important to see how they are being implemented in concrete terms. Which parties should be making most effort? Yesterday everyone remained very pleasant about things. The Farmers’ Union (Boerenbond) announced that since 1990 the agriculture sector had already cut CO2 emissions by 13% and that that is a unique result. But, it added straight away, the horticultural sector could be more energy-efficient.

On the employers’ side Unizo made it clear that small- and medium-sized enterprises had to take a number of ‘no regret’ measures: energy-saving interventions that pay for themselves within a very short time. ‘The decision simply has to be taken to make the investment.’ And yet people are also saying that businesses have to remain competitive. Transport policy will be crucial. Decisions will have to be taken there that hit the public hard. The unions are saying that environmental costs can be incorporated into car costs, but ‘who will have to pay those costs?’ Will everything fall on the man in the street? Working groups revealed that the leasing fleet cannot remain undisturbed.

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE/LUCHT TABLE PAGE 7

Tough line against rack-renters

A tougher line is being taken against rack-renters, who let rooms to asylum-seekers, illegal immigrants and other poor people in buildings declared uninhabitable. In a large-scale police campaign in Ghent and Antwerp a number of rack-renters were recently arrested, and in Antwerp this week the police again raided several properties. On 6 June, twenty-two owners of such properties came before Ghent Court for Summary Jurisdiction, together with four companies. In total they let fifty-nine properties in Ghent. Prison sentences ranging from two to eighteen months were handed down, as well as fines of up to 75,000 euros. The judge justified the heavy sentences by pointing out that the owners had disgracefully abused the vulnerable position of the tenants. From the end of this year rack-renters will be obliged to repair their properties. If they fail to do so the authorities can make the house habitable at the expense of the owner. Flemish Housing Minister Marino Keulen (VLD) wants to amend the Flemish Housing Code to this effect (FF).

KURT TUERLINCKX • GAZET VAN ANTWERPEN 7 JUNE

Keulen is stepping up the fight against rack-renters. ‘We are not targeting ordinary landlords, but those who take advantage of the most vulnerable groups. For the worst excesses we’ve already increased the fines to 50,000 euros, but that doesn’t make the houses habitable. So we are now amending the Flemish Housing Code. I’m including a repair demand, so that rack-renters will be obliged to make their properties habitable again. That does not violate property rights, because these rack-renters pull down the value of the other houses in the street. Rack-renters will be forced to repair the house. If they fail to do so, then the authorities can have the house repaired at the owner’s expense. The owner will also have to pay the costs of relocating and rehousing the tenants for a specific period. The judge can also link the repair order to a penalty.’
The delaying behaviour hides disagreement as to which expenses should take priority

The Flemish multi-year budget, a financial projection for the next four years, is a long time coming. First it was to be ready in April, then May, but then Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde threw a spanner in the works. According to the latest reports it is being drafted together with the Flemish budget for 2006 after the summer. According to Knack, this delaying behaviour hides disagreement as to which expenses should take priority. In any event, the Flemish Liberals do not want the planned tax cuts of a total of 500 million euros to be put at risk. That was the main reason why, for example, Patricia Ceyssens, Parliamentary Party Leader of the VLD in the Flemish Parliament, was strongly opposed to the planned purchase by the Flemish Government of an office block for the Flemish Parliament (FF).

The delaying behaviour is at odds with the ‘solid, reliable administration’ Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) wants to make his trademark. It also conceals the fact that differences of opinion within the majority are greater than the outside world is led to believe. Budget Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD) has for some time been using a system with a margin for new policy which amounts to 1.8 billion euros in 2009. In this way he is clearly also trying to secure a Flemish tax cut claimed by the Liberals for all working incomes.

The pressure to do so is even greater now that for several new social agreements in de ‘soft sectors’ withdrawals have been made from the multi-year budget. Welfare Minister Inge Vervotte (CD&V) was given 190 million euros for the Collective Labour Agreement in the Flemish non-profit sector and was able to respect this envelope thanks to the remarkable compliance of the Christian trade union. Education Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) has set the counter for a new Collective Labour Agreement in education at 215 million, but will find it more difficult to avoid protests from trade unions. Add to that new and far-reaching commitments such as that for the Zaventem region (ed. according to Yves Leterme in De Tijd, the Flemish airport plan would cost 800 million euros) after the DHL debacle, and it is then clear that the Flemish Government needs more money than it though a year ago. However, its financial elbow room is less than first thought. That makes the political choices within the Flemish majority even more difficult. This is spurring Leterme on to explore public-private channels to finance urgent requirements in the field of healthcare, education, and transport. Even with the ‘small change’ (31 million) that he earned because the Flemish Government does not need to pay social contributions on the holiday bonuses of its Flemish civil servants, he will not get there. What’s more, this sum is intended to help reduce Flemish debt.

www.vlaamsparlement.be

The construction of 48 new rest homes in Flanders was approved, but the homes could not be built because the 218 million euros worth of subsidies were not available. According to Welfare Minister Inge Vervotte (CD&V), however, that should not delay construction. Her office drafted a financing system in which VIPA, the Flemish infrastructure fund, does not repay the normal 60% directly, but repays 60% of the bank loan of the new rest home’s developer. In this way Vervotte (CD&V) wants to get rid of the waiting lists for the construction of rest homes within one to two years (FF).

Of its annual budget for 2005 of 160 million euros, VIPA is spending 34 million euros on subsidising the construction and extension of hospitals, rest and care homes. This budget is far from sufficient. In the period 2002-2005 48 dossiers for the construction of a new rest home were approved by the VIPA coordination committee for the whole of Flanders. Together they account for a VIPA subsidy of 218 million euros.

‘The total amount of subsidies currently required is seven times greater than the available pot,’ says Vervotte, whose party had promised before the elections to do away with waiting lists. Last month Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) announced that his government wanted to quickly solve the problem of waiting lists with alternative financing methods. Vervotte now has these ready for the rest home sector.

‘I want to get rid of this pile of 48 dossiers in one, maximum two years with an alternative temporary financing system,’ Vervotte said yesterday in the Welfare Committee of the Flemish Parliament. ‘Whereas in the current system VIPA provides direct subsidies, this catch-up manoeuvre will allow developers to take out a bank loan. Instead of financing 60% of the costs directly, VIPA will repay 60% of the bank loan. This will allow construction to begin immediately and they will not have to wait seven years before VIPA has the funds available to finance their approved project.’

www.ingevervotte.be
Six years of tax administration reforms: where is the result?

The VAT services of the Ministry of Finance are suffering from a systematic shortage of staff, according to complaints by a number of heads of the VAT administration. The two biggest cities, Antwerp and Brussels, are pretty much fiscal free states for businesses and the self-employed, where barely 2% of tax returns are checked and then mainly those of wage-earners. True, the IT budget of the Finance administration has tripled, but until a few weeks ago little had been done to rectify the acute shortage of PCs that civil servants had complained about six years ago when new Finance Minister Reynders (MR) took office. After all, new computers have to be bought before the old ones are replaced. Thus, customs officers in Antwerp still have to share one computer between four. These are some of the conclusions drawn by De Standaard, which after six years of policy from current Finance Minister Didier Reynders (MR) has spent a week devoting a dossier to the visible results of the promised reforms in the fiscal administration. The findings are far from reassuring. According to an Antwerp civil servant, Reynders is not tackling fraud. The occasional spectacular operation is designed to cover that up (FF).

Opinion

GUY TEGENBOS - DE STANDAARD - 7 JUNE

One four-year period of government is too short, it was said at the start of the previous period of government. That is true. Four years is not enough to bring a fiscal administration that has been neglected for years from 1950 to 2005 in a single leap. But eight years should be. And so after six years, in the middle of Reynders’ second period of office, we should be able to see whether the reforms are working.

Initial reports are far from reassuring. A regional director of taxes in Brussels recently sent a letter to companies to tell them that unfortunately there was still no staff to carry out VAT audits. It’s like a department store announcing that due to a reorganisation there will be no staff on the dried food tills for the next few months but that customers are kindly asked to leave the money for their purchases in the boxes next to the tills.

The government says that it is working hard on the reforms. A great many programmes and plans are ‘under development’. But will they achieve anything? Scepticism on the shop floor remains great.

The most remarkable thing about this whole story is that revenue from taxes continues to rise. That is partly due to the return of capital from abroad, but mainly to the many individuals and businesses who more or less spontaneously pay their taxes more or less correctly. They are keeping the country going. They are also keeping social security going.

MINFIN.FGOV.BE

CD&V in favour of adoption right for gay/lesbian couples

SPA MP Guy Swennen believes his bill has a good chance with the support of the CD&V

It appears that the right of gay and lesbian couples to adopt has a good chance of shortly acquiring the force of law. There are still likely to be a few more debates before things go that far, but now the Flemish Christian Democrats have also confirmed that they will back the proposal of SPA MP Guy Swennen, it looks as if it will be able to count on a majority.

On the Francophone side the PS and Ecolo are for, the CDH against, and MR Chairman Didier Reynders wants to let his MPs vote perfectly freely. But in an interview with La Libre Belgique Reynders let it be known that the debate was not yet over. Reynders is therefore calling for the dossier to go before the Senate after being debated in the Chamber. Reynders also wants the laws governing gay marriage to be assessed first. According to Guy Swennen, who tabled the bill, the delaying manoeuvre shows that the MR is divided (De Morgen, 8 June). Swennen nevertheless still believes his bill has a good chance with the support of the CD&V (FF).

LIESBETH VAN IMPE/FABIAN LEFEVERE - DE MORGEN - 8 JUNE

The CD&V is speaking out in favour of gay and lesbian adoption now that several international studies have shown that gay and lesbian couples make equally good parents. ‘There is no more reason at all for saying that same-sex parents are not able to raise children,’ says MP Liesbeth Van der Auwera.

Figures for the CD&V show that a ruling is needed. At present, 14% of lesbians and 8% of gays are raising a child. Because the new adoption ruling provides for a suitability test of the parents, the CD&V is relinquishing its opposition to gay adoption. The question now is how many MPs will do the same if it comes to a vote. Chair Jo Vandeurzen: ‘This is a sensitive subject for our party. It may be that a number of colleagues adopt a different position in all good faith in the Chamber.’

With the support of the CD&V the backers, the PS, SPA-Spirit, VLD, Ecolo and perhaps a number of MR members, will have sufficient votes, although one or two counter-votes and abstentions are still expected from various frictions, inspired by personal convictions. Only the VB and CDH remain radically opposed. www.fed-parl.be
Retrospective of Memling's portraits in Bruges

Anyone coming to Bruges this summer should not fail to visit the retrospective devoted to ‘Flemish primitive’ Hans Memling in the Groeningemuseum. The exhibition, which in Bruges forms part of the summer project Corpus 05, brings together Memling’s best-known portraits. The numerous works on loan from leading museums such as the Louvre, the National Gallery in London and the Uffizi in Florence mean that this has turned into a quite fascinating exhibition with twenty of the 28 portraits Memling is known to have painted. The exhibition was already on display at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid last winter, and after Bruges will travel to the Frick Collection in New York. Each venue establishes its own points of emphasis. Bruges has opted to situate Memling’s portraiture in the context of old Flemish painting. The exhibition thus begins with a superb ensemble of portraits by Robert Campin, Jan Van Eyck, Gerard David and Petrus Christus. The comparison with these painters shows how Memling modernised portraiture by placing the models against a landscape as a backdrop, which was very much to the liking of the Italian merchants who visited thriving fifteenth-century Bruges (FF).

Hans Memling was born around 1435 in the German town of Seligenstadt. Specialists assume that as a young painter he worked for a time in the workshop of Rogier Van der Weyden in Brussels. Memling’s oeuvre offers an original synthesis between the pious, interiorised style of Van der Weyden and the elegant individualism and illusionist effects of Van Eyck and his successors, whose paintings Memling became acquainted with in Bruges. It should come as no surprise that Memling chose Bruges. In the fifteenth century, when the Burgundian dukes established their magnificent court there, Bruges was at the height of its power. The large numbers of foreign merchants, the monasteries and the local bourgeoisie that was beginning to appear created a sizeable demand for paintings in Bruges. Memling simply came to get his share of the pie.

Memling’s work was much to the taste of the Italian merchants in Bruges, who were struck by the realism and refinement of his portraits. Memling’s portraits were very true to life, but he was nonetheless willing to represent the model as slightly more attractive than was in fact the case. A host of subtle nuances - the sheen of the smooth skin, the fine locks of hair, the accurate representation of fabrics and jewellery - caressed the eye of the beholder.

Memling’s modernising approach of no longer portraying his models in front of an even background, but in front of a landscape, was a revelation for the Italians. The delicate rendering of distance brought a breath of fresh air to the portrait. And here, too, he included a profusion of pictorial details.

Memling’s portraits had a very great influence. Many foreign merchants went back to their native country at a given moment and took their portrait home with them. In this way the painters of various European countries came into contact with them. Great masters of the Italian Renaissance - such as Antonello da Messina, Perugino, Leonardo da Vinci and Rafaël - were attracted by the charms of northern portraiture and turned them to good account in their own work.

www.brugge.be/musea

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### Properties 2004

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**Source:** DE TIJD

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### Growth of GDP (in %) according to the National Bank

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<th>EU-15 AVERAGE</th>
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<th>THE NETHERLANDS</th>
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**Source:** DE STANDAARD
**Diary**

**MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE**

- **9 to 19 June:** Il Barbieri di Seviglia, opera by Rossini, director: Gyu Joosten, Flanders OperaHouse, Ghent; info: www.vlaamseopera.be
- **11 June:** Laureats of the Queen Elisabeth Competition for Violin. De Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be
- **8 to 29 June:** Die Frau ohne Schatten by Richard Strauss, director: Matthew Jocelyn, conductor: Kazushi Ono, De Munt, Brussels; info: www.desemunt.be
- **17 June:** Jan Michiels/Daniel Kwartet, Hommage a Brahms, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **15 June:** Dinosaur Jr, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: www.vooruit.be 09/267.28.28
- **15 June:** BJ Scott, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be 02/548.24.24
- **16 June:** Suzanne Vega duo, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be 02/548.24.24
- **17 June:** Morcheeba, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be 02/548.24.24
- **18 June:** Open air concert with Deborah Voigt and José Van Dam, Fragments from operas by Wagner and Strauss, Grande Place, Brussels; info: www.desemunt.be
- **17 June:** Vinz, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
- **21 June:** Philippe Catherine/Brussels Jazz Orchestra, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **21 June:** Styx, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be 02/548.24.24
- **24 and 25 June:** Anne Theresa De Keersmaeker and Rosas, Love supreme and Raga for the Rainy Season, Concertgebouw Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **24 June:** Aster Aweke (Ethiopia), concert, Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
- **25 June:** Chuclo Valdes sextet, Jazz, Flagey, Brussels; info: www.flagey.be (02) 641 10 10
- **28 June:** Devendra Banhart + Magnolia electric co, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
- **29 June:** Peter Cincotti (US), jazz, Flagey, Brussels; info: www.flagey.be (02) 641 10 10

**EXPO**

- **From 5 February onwards:** The memory of Congo, the colonial period, exhibition, Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren); info: www.museumdrguislain.be
- **Until spring 2005:** Loam Mosques in Djenné (Mali), Photo exhibition, Bozar, Brussels; info: bozar.be
- **Until 19 June:** Airworld, design and architecture in aviation, Design museum, Ghent; info: www.design.museum.be +32 (0)2 267 99 99
- **Until 26 June:** Cast for eternity [bronze statues from India and the Himalaja in Belgian and Dutch collections], Ethnographic museum, Antwerp; info: +32 (0)3 220 86 00
- **Until 19 June:** In/out of the treasure rooms: jewel collections – Diamond Museum, Antwerp; info: www.diamant.museum.be
- **Until 11 September:** Ensor to Bosch, exhibition, Vlaamse kunstcollectie, an overview of the collections of the art museums of Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp; info: www.kmsk.be
- **Until 14 August:** Beyond Desire/Desire, attitude and styling in African and Western culture - MoMu, Antwerp; info: +32 (0)1 470 27 70 www.momu.be
- **Until 31 December:** Master pieces from the Dutch treasure room, KMSK, Antwerp; info: www.kmsk.be
- **Until 28 August:** Renato Balestro, Fashion museum, Hasselt
- **Until 2008:** Art at the Frontline 1914-1918, Royal Army and Military History Museum, Brussels; info: 02 737 78 33 www.klm-mra.be
- **Until 27 May:** Bangkok, Bangkok, exhibition, De Markten, Brussels; info: www.kunstenfestivaldesarts.be
- **Until 31 December:** Art nouveau and Design 1830-1958, Royal Museum for Art and History, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/741.72.11 www.kmkg.be
- **Until 7 August:** Between Skin and orgasm, exhibition in the halls of the Belfry in Bruges; info: www.corpusbrugge05.be
- **Until 4 September:** Kinshasa, imaginary City, with texts by Filip De Boeck and photos by Marie-Françoise Plissart (golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for Architecture), exhibition, Bozar; info: www.bozar.be
- **Until 4 September:** Retrospective of portraits by Hans Memling, Groeningemuseum, Bruges; info: www.brugge.be/musea
- **Until 11 September:** Ensor to Bosch, exhibition by Vlaamsekunstcollectie, an overview of the collections of the art museums of Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be

**Focus on Flanders provides a weekly overview of articles from the Flemish press and appears in English, French and German. This newsletter is published by Uitgeverij Lannoos nv, Kasteelstraat 97, 8700 Tielt and can also be obtained by e-mail.**