Flemish Parliament wrestles with the problem of how to deal with the Vlaams Belang

The Vlaams Belang has recently managed to gain media attention again with some tough anti-foreigner standpoints. Rob Verreycken, MP in the Flemish Parliament, for example, was quoted last week in De Morgen as saying that he ‘had no problem’ with neo-Nazi White Power groups. In Sint-Niklaas the Vlaams Belang, in its local magazine, blamed immigrants for the desecration of graves, although the police confirmed that the perpetrators had been local youths. And in Antwerp Filip Dewinter advocated quotas in public swimming pools in order to avoid the ‘over-concentration of immigrant youths’. That led to a lot of newspaper commentators deciding that the Vlaams Belang differed not one iota from its predecessor, the Vlaams Blok, which had been censured for incitement of xenophobia. However, the Flemish majority parties and Groen! hesitated to enter into the debate on whether the Vlaams Belang was inciting xenophobia, as the Vlaams Blok did.

There is a great fear of the party being put in the victim’s role. In the Media Committee professor in media law Dirk Voorhoof confirmed that the public broadcasting company VRT had not altered its position since the censure of the Vlaams Blok (FF).

BART HAECK • DE TIJD • 1 JULY

The VRT does not offer a forum to those who incite racism or xenophobia, but if the Vlaams Belang is in the news, the news department gives it coverage. Voorhoof said that, to be on the safe side, the public broadcasting company did well to treat the VB in this way, as long as the party did not publicly change its views.

VB MP Jurgen Verstrepen replied that the Vlaams Blok had been censured, not the Vlaams Belang. Whereupon Jos Stassen (Groen!) reminded Verstrepen of the note Vlaams Belang chairman Frank Van Hecke and parliamentary party chairman Filip Dewinter had given to the Flemish Parliament immediately after the censure in the Court of Cassation. According to that letter, as of 14 November the Vlaams Belang is not only the legal successor, but also the party-political heir to the Vlaams Blok. This meant it continued to be entitled to party funding.

The Flemish Parliament is clearly wrestling with the matter of how it should pursue this debate. Some MPs fear that the discussion gives the VB ‘fodder with which to write propaganda leaflets’ for six months’. Others think it is necessary to carry on drawing attention to remarks made by VB leaders. ■

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
Federal government is a tired team, De Standaard believes

As is traditional at this time of year, De Standaard published its ‘end-of-term report’ for the Federal Government. The editorial staff assessed the 15 federal ministers on vision, efficiency in implementation, and communication. Among the Flemish ministers in the Belgian Government, the Liberal ministers scored poorly. The VLD’s leadership trio has on this occasion failed to attain hall marks. Prime Minister Verhofstaden is given 48%, the same mark as his Interior Minister Patrick Dewael. Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht fares slightly better, on 51%. And actually the same goes for the majority of the French-speaking ministers. Only three of them pass. In short: the ‘Verhofstadt II’ cabinet is a tired team, which is not managing to recover from the DHL and Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde debacles (FF).

PETER VANDERMEERSCH • DE STANDAARD • 21 JUNE

Particularly striking is the fact that Verhofstadt is rapidly losing ground. In 2000, after one year of the ‘Verhofstadt I’ government, this paper gave him a distinction. In May 2003, when the ‘purple-green’ coalition had been in office four years, he was given 65% of the points. Now, two years later, he has failed the exam. The Prime Minister is not lacking in vision (30/40). But he does not make good the high expectations he creates (10/40). And Verhofstadden’s communication strategy - continuing against his will to claim that everything’s going so well - is gradually becoming laughable.

The same could be said for Karel De Gucht, who has been the butt of barely concealed jokes among Belgian and foreign diplomats, and Patrick Dewael, whose policies risks being reduced to communication. Marc Verwilghen, the fourth Flemish Liberal in the government, actually doesn’t appear in the whole matter. The Economic Affairs and Energy Minister, who also holds a few other portfolios, scores barely 28% and thus continues his downward tumble. As Justice Minister he also only managed to glean 41% of the points after four years of the ‘purple-green’ cabinet. Now he himself and the rest of the Belgian political establishment are merely waiting for him to fail the exam. The Prime Minister is on his downward tumble. As Justice Minister he also only managed to glean 41% of the points after four years of the ‘purple-green’ cabinet. Now he himself and the rest of the Belgian political establishment are merely waiting for him to fail the exam. The Prime Minister is on his downward tumble.

Among the French-speaking ministers, only three manage a pass: Laurent Onkelinx (PS), who only last week unveiled the ambitious Themis Plan for the reform of the Belgian justice system, scores 60%. Her party colleague Rudy Demotte (Social Affairs), who is the best at communicating in Dutch, is given 53%. Didier Reynders (MR, Finance), who attained 64% just two years ago, has to settle for eleven percentage points less this time round. After five years, the Finance Department remains little more than a mess. All in all, a sad picture of a tired cabinet that wants to go on for another two years.

WWW.STANDAARD.BE

Boudewijn Boeckaert violates the VLD party line

From now on any VLD mandatory member of the party executive who criticises the party or its members will be expelled from the party executive, ‘said party chairman Bart Somers on Monday 13 June after the VLD conference the previous weekend had been overshadowed by quibbling between heavyweights Karel De Gucht and Jean-Marie Dedecker.

A few days later the chairman turned his words into actions. Patricia Dewaele was suspended after expressing her displeasure at the ‘the dictatorial’ state of affairs in her party. That did not dissuade Boudewijn Boeckaert, member of the party executive and chairman of the right-wing conservative think-tank Nova Civitas, from advocating co-operation with the Vlaams Belang in an interview with the Christian paper Tertio. In an analysis, Bouckaert argued in favour of a political two-stream country along the lines of the Anglo-Saxon model, in which the VLD would lead a right-wing block, of which would be made up of the CD&V right wing, the N-VA and the Vlaams Belang. From his holiday residence, Somers promptly announced that he was lodging a complaint with his party’s statutory committee (FF).

MARK DEWEERDT • DE TIJD • 30 JUNE

For party chairman Bart Somers, Bouckaert’s statement ‘that in the long run the VLD should disband and merge with the extreme right’ was unacceptable.

The incident with Bouckaert comes a few days after a two-day meeting, last weekend, of the party executive and the groups in Liège. Bouckaert did not attend. At the end of the ‘therapeutic ses-

sion’ there was consensus that calm should be restored in the party and that in September a fresh start should be made on recapturing lost voters. Bouckaert reacted with surprise to Somers’ initiative. He does not feel that he has violated the agreements that had been made and will in any case defend himself before the statutory committee. Flemish MP and senator Jean-Marie Dedecker, who to a large degree shares Bouckaert’s views, feels that the chairman of Nova Civitas has violated the agreements. ‘In order to restore calm in the party, it has been agreed that members of the party executive will not besmirch each other’s name and will not criticise the party line. Anyone failing to abide by that will be removed from the party executive,’ he said. However, Dedecker feels that Bouckaert should not be removed from the party executive. In Tertio, Bouckaert wonders whether his position as an academic reflecting on political issues can be combined with membership of the VLD’s party executive.
VLD continues to fall back in libre poll

In the opinion poll carried out by La Libre Belgique/Het Laatste Nieuws/VTM, the CD&V/N-VA alliance remains the largest political formation in Flanders. With 26.7% it gains ground to the tune of 1.5% in comparison with the result of last March. It is only very slightly up on the result obtained in the regional elections (+ 0.1%). The Vlaams Belang (25.7%) continues to do equally well with a rise of 0.9% in respect of the last 'La Libre' poll and up 1.3% on its election result of last June. The left-wing SPA/SPR alliance (21.4%) is also in the ascendant, up 0.4% on the last poll and up one and half percentage points on its election result of June 2004. Things are going manifestly less well for the Liberal VLD (17.1%). The party is down 1.9% on its standing in the last poll in March and as much as 2.9% down on its showing in the regional elections in 2004. The Greens also have cause for concern. For the first time since the last elections they have lost ground, falling 1.6% in respect of the last poll and 1.3% in respect of their election showing.

According to this poll, Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) is for the moment the most popular Flemish politician, followed by Federal Deputy Prime Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SPA). Both leap forward and in so doing overtake Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD). The leading socialist figures all perform well, except for Steve Staevaert, who falls back somewhat - although that is probably because he recently bowed out of active politics. The top ten contains five socialists: Vande Lanotte, Freya Vanden Bossche, Frank Vandenbroucke and Patrick Janssens, three Christian Democrats (Leterme, Inge Vervotte and Jean-Luc Dehaene), one Liberal (Verhofstadt) and the leader of the Vlaams Belang Filip Dewinter.

Confidence in the Flemish Government rose (36%), making it the only government in the country that is still gaining in popularity. For that matter, it arouses more confidence than mistrust (27%), whilst in the case of the federal government it is the other way around (29% confidence, 36% mistrust).

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Leterme and Vandenbroucke are on the same wavelength

According to Moerman they don’t show the whole picture

At a press conference on 23 June, Flemish Education and Employment Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SPA) announced that the Flemish Government unexpectedly had EUR 240 million extra revenue at its disposal. He had been informed of this the previous day by his liberal colleague, the Budget Minister Dirk Van Meechelen (VLD). Vandenbroucke advocated budgetary restraint and the establishment of a social reserve fund, proposing that the money be used for social and economic incentives. The minister said that the money should be invested from 2007 onwards in solutions for keeping older workers in employment, for further developing technical education and for planning the necessary roads infrastructure around Antwerp and Zaventem. Vandenbroucke had evidently discussed the content of his press conference with Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V). Afterwards Leterme was full of praise for the choices made by Vandenbroucke. However, the intervention fell on stonier ground in the liberal camp. They would prefer to see (a part of) the money invested in an easing of the tax and premium burden. Moreover, Vandenbroucke had jumped the gun somewhat and in so doing had given a little too much thought to the competencies of the socialist ministers (FF).

BART DOBBELAERE • DE STANDAARD • 28 JUNE

Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) was full of praise. That’s only logical. He is not only the guardian of the coalition agreement, he is also the guardian of good relations in the team. No unseemly words from him about Vandenbroucke’s idea, for: ‘We can’t have this Flemish Government suddenly consuming more because of one or two pieces of good fortune. We must invest in our economic fabric. Is that not friendly? Well, we’re not here just to be friendly.’ Wholly in accord with Vandenbroucke. Leterme’s examples of where the extra money should go from 2006 are also an echo of what Vandenbroucke had said: investments in roads, schools and in the debate on career-end arrangements.

Leterme also agrees with Vandenbroucke on a third point: the Flemish Government must keep a hand on the purse strings. No little gifts. ‘We remain within our budgetary straitjacket and that should pinch a bit in order thereby to enhance the fine silhouette of Flemish policy.’

On the liberal side of the table, the enthusiasm is rather more subdued. Budget Minister Dirk Van Meechelen warns that the extra revenues - estimated at EUR 242 million - are not certain. ‘Registration fees could account for EUR 161 million, gift tax for EUR 57 million and inheritance tax for EUR 24 million. But those are estimates. We should be prudent. One thing is certain: this proves that a government can record greater revenues by lowering prices’.

Are there differences of opinion? Indeed, there are. Deputy Minister-President Fientje Moerman (VLD) puts it in the starkest terms. ‘His measures are good, all of them, but they do not cover the whole picture. If we want to inject some oxygen into our economy, we must also talk about research and development, reductions in the tax and premium burden for companies, and so on. Let’s talk about this calmly when we must also talk about research and development’.

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Reductions in the tax and premium burden remain a key concept for the Liberals. There is also the lingering suspicion that Vandenbroucke’s ideas would mean the promised reduction in the tax and premium burden for working Flemings being forfeited. It is therefore important for the Flemish Government to give short shrift to its long-term budget. Vandenbroucke had insisted on this again yesterday. Leterme wants to cut political knots in the coming weeks.

WWW.YVESLETERME.BE
WWW.FRANKVANDENBROUCKE.BE

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WWW.LALIBRE.BE
Keulen is optimistic about integration courses

Barely 217 newcomers failed to report on time, whilst 4,013 immigrants registered despite not being obliged to follow the procedure.

The integration decree has been in effect since April 2004. Anyone coming to Flanders to live is expected to report to a reception centre, which forms the starting point for an integration procedure. For asylum seekers, this reporting process is obligatory. The reception office examines whether the newcomers speak enough Dutch and whether they have had any training (and if so, what). If this is not the case, they have to follow Dutch classes, social orientation and vocational training. The responsible minister Marino Keulen (VLD) made an evaluation of the system on 27 June. This was overwhelmingly positive, but a number of changes are nonetheless urgently required. For example, immigrants who have come here in the framework of a family reunification will be obliged to follow a course (at present that is not the case), and anyone voluntarily leaving the integration courses should be penalised. But overall, the minister is satisfied. The image of immigrants refusing to take part in integration is not correct, he said. Barely 217 newcomers failed to report on time, whilst 4,013 immigrants registered despite not being obliged to follow the procedure. 60% of all registrations were spontaneous (FF).

LIESBETH VAN IMPE • DE MORGEN • 28 JUNE

Since 1 April 2004 7,886 newcomers have arrived in Flanders, almost a third of them in the city of Antwerp. 40% of them are EU nationals, mainly from France, the Netherlands and Poland. Those from non-EU countries are mainly from Turkey, Morocco and Russia.

Almost two-thirds of the newcomers are second-generation immigrants, who come here in the context of family reunification and family formation. That is the first difficulty in the current decree: whilst recognised refugees declared as admissible have to follow an integration procedure, that obligation does not apply to second-generation immigrants. Keulen therefore wants to change the categories that are subject to the obligation. Second-generation immigrants, but also older immigrants with children and without work will have to follow a procedure, whilst refugees who are still in the asylum procedure will no longer be obliged to. ‘We are giving these people the impression that if they settle in successfully, they can stay,’ says Keulen. ‘In the end, however, seven out of ten are repatriated.’

In total 4,997 integration contracts were concluded, 60% of them on a voluntary basis. At the end of the process, 1,854 integration certificates were awarded.

‘There are still a number of problems with the issuing of the certificate,’ said Keulen, explaining the difference in numbers. ‘In order to be able to award a certificate, we have to be sure that someone has followed the course on a regular basis. But there have been some difficulties with the exchange of data on attendance, with the result that a lot of files are still pending.’

A lot of people will probably drop out during the course. ‘We do not expect it to be a large group, but we are working out a system to penalise those who drop out. This kind of course costs a lot of money and the places of people who drop out half way through the year cannot be refilled’.

Keulen also put a figure on the cost price of a integration course: around EUR 2,500 per person, excluding the costs of the Dutch classes. ‘That is a lot of money and we are presently carrying out an audit to see whether things can’t be rationalised here and there’. Irrespective of this, Keulen will need a lot more money. ‘More people will be obliged to follow a course and we also want to be able to offer better trained people a course in social orientation.’ The extra EUR 30 million, provided for in the Flemish coalition agreement, will not be enough, according to Keulen.
Trade unions reject government proposals for career-end arrangements

In September, when political activity resumes, the Verhulstgd government hopes not only to be able to present a balanced budget for 2006, but also to force a breakthrough in the debate on career-end arrangements. However, the trade unions are now putting at risk all chances of this debate resulting in an agreement. The Christian union ACV and the Socialist union ABVV have both announced, separately, that Employment Minister Freya Van den Bossche’s ‘Active ageing’ policy document, which forms the basis for the debate, is wasted on them. The ACV is even threatening a strike in September.

Limitations in the ‘time credit’ system, new wage scales that take account not only of years’ service, availability of older workers, a 40-year career requirement for early retirement - all this is unacceptable for the trade unions. The unions’ public dismissal of the proposals at the beginning of the negotiations makes the government negotiators pessimistic about the final outcome (FF).

Opinion

ERIC DONCKIER • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG • 29 JUNE

Strictly speaking the government does not need the social partners (i.e. the employers’ organisations and the trade unions) to take decisions. But it would be good if an agreement could be arrived at that government, employers and unions can identify with. That would make it easier subsequently to defend the measures in the face of public opinion.

Our population is ageing fast. That occasions substantial costs for the social security system in respect of pensions and healthcare. At the same time there is the decline in the numbers of young workers. Fewer and fewer young people are having to take responsibility for more and more older people. At some point there will be too few young people to do the work that there is. That is the reason why negotiations are now under way on the measures to be taken to keep people in work longer. Then there will be enough people to do the work that is, and then there will be enough people contributing to the social security system and thereby keeping pensions and healthcare affordable.

The average Belgian regards 58 as the ideal age for retirement. Few Belgians will be inclined to work longer voluntarily. They will have to be forced to. That means tightening or even abolishing the current propitious measures. The trade unions don’t like the sound of that. We can understand them warning the government now not to go too far. But, they must watch out. If they block the matter, no measures will be taken and in ten years’ time there will not be enough money for pensions and healthcare.

The unions and in particular their leaders Luc Cortebeeck and Xavier Verbelen, have a great responsibility resting on their shoulders in this matter. They must now assume that responsibility - not only for their members, but for the whole of society.

Table page 4
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www.acw.be

Fortis to axe 2,200 jobs

The job losses are necessary to bring down the annual increase in costs in support service

The Belgian-Dutch bank Fortis will be axing 2,200 jobs in the Benelux in the coming five years. The reorganisation mainly affects support services such as computing, logistics, and the legal and personnel departments. In addition a further 1,000 full-time jobs are to go in the Belgian branch network, which will be reduced from 1,212 to 1,000 branches. In this way Fortis wants to be able to save EUR 250 million by 2009. The cuts are part and parcel of the strategic reorientation espoused by new CEO Jean-Paul Votron. The former Citibank banker wants an average of 10% more profit every year. To achieve this he is counting on international expansion, in particular in Poland and Turkey, and an increase in sales (productivity) in the branch network per employee. This should rise from EUR 215,000 today to EUR 284,000 in 2009.

Consumer credit in particular (such as personal loans and car financing) still offers growth opportunities, in Votron’s view. Consumer satisfaction must also increase, from 60% to 70%. According to Herman Verwilgh, the group’s Flemish operations manager, the downsizing should be effected by means of natural gradual dismissal and without any compulsory redundancies. It will come as cold comfort that by 2009 Fortis will not only be earning more, but will also have more employees. The latter will merely not be the case in the Benelux (FF).

PASCAL DEN DOOVEN • DE STANDAARD • 25 JUNE

The number of full-time jobs in the branch network will fall from 9,515 at the end of 2004 to 8,568 in 2009. That means that some 1,000 full-time positions will be lost, amounting to 2.1% per year. The additional staff reductions in the branch network are needed to crank up productivity. This ought to rise annually by 5.5% between now and 2009.

Jos Clijsters, the member of the management committee responsible for retail banking, said that staff would also be recruited in the coming years. For example, in Turkey the number of branches is to increase from 170 to 300, which will create hundreds of jobs there. In Belgium Fortis is aiming more at pruning as many ‘administrative’ positions as possible, and selectively recruiting for commercial positions.

Ten percent of the full-time jobs are also to go in what Fortis calls ‘the office of the COO’, i.e., the support services overseen by Herman Verwilgh, Fortis’ number two. Verwilgh has a cost basis under him of EUR 2 billion (out of a total of EUR 7.2 billion). In concrete terms, 1,200 jobs in support positions will go in the coming years. These jobs currently still account for 12,200 full-time positions. The intended loss of full-time jobs therefore comes to 2,200 in total.

The job losses are necessary to bring down the annual increase in costs in support services from 4% per year to between 1.5% and 2%.
A task force for the Flemish car industry under the leadership of Flemish Economic Affairs Minister Fientje Moerman (VLD) is ready with its report after eight months’ work. The task force includes not only all the major managers in the sector, but also a number of trade union leaders, senior civil servants and staff members of the offices of Flemish ministers Leterme, Vandenbergroucke, Moerman, Peeters and Federal Minister Freya Vanden Bossche. The Task Force’s assignment was to outline an optimal policy for the entire sector, with the final report putting forward 12 policy measures to keep assembly plants here. The wage cost in the sector was of central importance. After all, Belgium risks losing its wage-cost advantage vis-à-vis Germany. An intervention such as Prime Minister Verhofstadt’s reduction in the tax and premium burden on shift work is an excellent measure to combat that risk. But the wage-cost handicap in relation to other countries such as Spain, France and the UK remains. According to task force chairman Eddy Geysen, former CEO of Opel Belgium, Flanders must offset that handicap with quality and know-how. The task force proposes a number of specific policy measures. A working group is to work out a more flexible way of combining work and holidays. Every assembly plant (Ford Genk, Volvo Cars and Volkswagen Europa Truck, GM Belgium, Volkswagen Vorst, VLD Jonckheere and Van Hool) will be given an account manager within the Flemish administration, who will support the companies in their contacts with the government. Finally the Employment Office VDAB and the education system should chart an optimal course between training and employment in the car sector. The Task Force is an initiative worth following, in the view of Minister-President Leterme (FF).

Opinion

BART HAECK • DE TIJD • 29 JUNE

An exercise that’s very messy. Those were the words that Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) used yesterday to assess the report on the car sector which the Flemish, Federal and Brussels Governments, as well as the unions and the management teams of the assembly plants have spent eight months working on. Leterme asked Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (VLD) also to carry out the exercise for other sectors, such as textiles and foodstuffs. The dialogue is indeed liable to be repeated. It shows that the governments in our country can still be in agreement on some things. After the clashes over BHV, the budget agreements and a handful of other matters, a signal such as this was welcome. Is this the seed of a new polder model, in which unions, employers and government consult with each other in order to arrive at an economic policy with a broad backing? Perhaps not. The reason why this report has been produced for the car sector differs little from the reason why a working group for Ford Genk was created: it is more than urgently needed. The fact of the matter is that car manufacturers such as Ford, Opel, VW and Volvo are already busy studying where they will build their new models in four or five years’ time. That could be in Asia, where demand for cars is expected to rise 23% in the next six years, or in Eastern Europe, where growth of 36% is forecast in the same period. Of course plants are still needed in Western Europe. The only question is, where in Western Europe? The most probable answer is: Germany. The head offices of Ford Genk, Opel Antwerp and Volkswagen Vorst are all established there. The German State is even still the principal shareholder in Volkswagen. And the German unions have consented to wages in the automobile sector not increasing in the coming years, and not even making any index leaps. In exchange they have been given solid job guarantees. Flemish wage costs in car plants must therefore urgently be cut to below the German level. That turbo is more than necessary.

JOB CREATION BY FOREIGN INVESTMENTS TOP-20

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WORKING SUBSIDIES FOR THE MOST IMPORTANT ARTS AND CENTERS

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Belgacom TV (half) starts up

On 28 June Belgacom launched its range of digital television services. Flemish subscribers can receive a package of 55 channels via the telecom operator's ADSL network. These include most of the channels that cable subscribers already receive at the moment. But a number of major channels, such as the Flemish commercial channels VTM, Kanaal 2, the regional channels, Jim TV, MTV, TMF and BBC1 and BBC2 are still missing. The negotiations for these are under way. On top of those the subscriber receives a number of theme channels that are only offered via the digital package: Animal Planet, Bloomberg Television, Action Channel, Reality TV, Turner Classic Movies and BBC Prime.

Major rival Telenet is starting up its digital television service on 3 September and is offering that on cable. After all, 64% of the Flemish cable network is owned by Telenet. But in order to be able to offer its digital range, the cable operator will have to free up bandwidth on the cable. Therefore eight channels will be scrapped in the analogue range. Those who do still want those channels will have to ask for a decoder. The total digital package with Telenet (iDTV) costs around EUR 240. The bulk of this goes on the set-top box (Digibox), the cheapest version of which costs EUR 199.

The price of the Belgacom package is a good deal cheaper for those who already have an ADSL connection. ADSL subscribers who sign up in July will only pay EUR 129, and a further EUR 63 on top of that for the rental of the telephone and ADSL line and the set-top box.

But as De Standaard (30 June) comments, comparing the ranges and promotions is a devil of a job for the consumer trying to pick out the most advantageous.

In addition, there are the technical deficiencies and teething troubles, which could spring surprises. The ADSL network undeniably has a few of those (FF).

Ronald Meeus • De Morgen • 29 June

Belgacom is supplying television via its ADSL connections, with which it offers consumers fast Internet access via a normal telephone line. Many experts in the field of network technology call that a very controversial strategy, since television signals require a huge amount of bandwidth or ‘space’ on the connection. With the maximum bandwidth that Belgacom’s ADSL connection offers at the moment (4.6 megabytes per second) an adequate television image can be broadcast, but the capacity is absolutely necessary in order to be able to receive the TV signal. What this means in real terms is that ADSL subscribers in rural areas, where they are sometimes on 3 megabytes per second or less, at the moment have no chance of watching television via the telephone line, and that the range of television offered is also limited to those who live in more urban areas. ‘At the moment 50% of our subscribers can receive Belgacom TV,’ says Kris Vervaet, market management director. ‘By the end of this year, that should be at least 60%.’

The Belgacom management yesterday implicitly conceded that television via ADSL was experiencing even more teething troubles at the moment. For example, for the time being it is not possible to watch two different television channels at the same time on a single ADSL connection. And someone using the Internet whilst another member of the household is watching television will see his surfing speed diminish considerably.

Belgacom is currently working on a number of solutions for all these shortcomings. In and around the major cities the company has been supplying VDSL, an extended version of ADSL, which offers a much higher surfing speed than ADSL and two subscribers within the same home do have the chance of simultaneously watching two different channels on television or surfing at an acceptable speed whilst someone else watches TV. Belgacom is currently expanding its network of fibre optic cables [which can convey huge amounts of data], so that in the end pretty much the whole country ought to be able to receive VDSL connections.

In the long run Belgacom sees other technologies appearing to solve the bandwidth problem: a relatively inexpensive improvement of the existing ADSL connections, for example, or a better decoder, which compresses the television signal even better. However, Belgacom remains very vague as to the actual introduction of these new technologies.

Anciaux raises hopes in the arts sector

Flemish Culture Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit) has landed a budget increase of 12% or EUR 16 million. EUR 100 million, in the framework of the ‘Arts Decree’, goes to 180 companies and organisations in the form of subsidies running until 2007 or 2009. EUR 4 million goes to project subsidies and individual fairs. There is a conspicuously marked increase in the budget for plastic arts. The arts centres, the three major city theatres and the major orchestras (Flemish Opera, the Philharmonic and the Flemish Radio Orchestra) also receive a higher subsidy. For that matter, the planned merger of the three orchestras will not be going ahead.

Table page 6
Diary

**MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE**

- **29 June to 10 July:** *Il barbiere di Seviglia*, opera by Rossini, directed by Guy Joosten, Flanders Opera House, Antwerp; info: www.vlaamsopera.be
- **1 to 9 July:** *The Brussels European Film Festival*, young European film directors, Flagey, Brussels; info: www.flagey.be
- **6 to 9 July:** *Klinkende Munt*, Nieuwe Graammarkt, Brussels; info: www.beurschouwburg.be
- **6 July:** *Joe Lovano*, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
- **9 July:** *Aimee Mann*, Ancienne Belgique, Brussels; info: www.abconcerts.be
- **9 July:** *Véronique Genis* (soprano) with Haendel and Mozart; Concertgebouw, Bruges; Summertime Festival; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- **8 to 10 July:** *Cactus Festival* with Fun Lovin’ Criminals, Presidents of the USA, Lovin’ Criminals, Presidents of the USA, Brussels; info: www.cactusfestival.be
- **9 and 10 July:** *Brosella Folk & Jazz*, Ossegempark, Laken; info: www.brosella.be
- **14 July:** *Mc Coy Tyner All Stars*, Opening concert of Blue Note Festival, Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be
- **15 to 17 July:** *Belgium Rhythm & Blues Festival* with Daniel Lanois, Ian Siegel Band and many others; info: www.brbf.be
- **14 to 24 July:** *Blue Note Festival* with Ben Sluys Quartet, Bert Joris Quartet, Charlie Haden, Jeff Neve Trio, Philip Catherine, Solomon Burke, Tony Joe White, Buena Vista Social Club, Les Banquets Nomades, Dave Holland Big Band, Mc Coy Tyner All Stars and many others; info: www.blnotefestival.be
- **Until 11 September:** *The summer of Poetry*, Watou, *Nous le passage*, Watou (near French border); info: www.poeciezerswatou.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 Vlaamse Kunstcollectie, an overview of the collections of the art museums of Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp; Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- **Until 11 September:** *Christian Duttremont*, Museum of Elnene (Ixelles), info: 02/515.62.44
- **Until 2 October:** *The most beautiful paintings by Spilliaert*, KMSKA, Antwerp, info: 03/204.78.09
- **Until 23 December:** *The art nouveau front as a complete work of art*, Museum for Architecture, Brussels, info: 02/642.24.75
- **Until 18 September:** *Los o/ Franziska Weinberger*, SMARK, Ghent; info: www.smak.be
- **Until 10 July:** *Gillis Mostaert*, Museum Mayer vanden Bergh, Lange Gasthuisstraat, Antwerp; info: 03/232.42.37

**EXPO**

- **From 5 February onwards:** *The memory of Congo*, the colonial period, exhibition, Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren); info: www.175-25.be
- **Until spring 2005:** *Loam Mosques in Djennie* (Mali), Photo exhibition, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- **Until 4 September:** *Hidden worlds*, art from artists with various backgrounds, Museum Dr. Guislain, Ghent; info: www.museumdrguislain.be (09) 216 35 95
- **Until 9 October:** *Congo: Nature and Culture*, exhibition, KMMA, Tervuren, +32 (0) 769 52 11 www.afriicamuseum.be
- **Until 14 August:** *Beyond Desire/ Desire, attitude and styling in African and Western culture*, MoMu, Antwerp +32 (0) 3 470 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 Ballestro*, 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 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

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- **Advisory panel:** Luc Demeester (Lannooy), Rik Van Cauwelaert, Biduaye, Wim Coensens (Managing director, De Morgen), Frans Crols (Director, Trends), Jan Demaeyer (Information Officer, Flemish Community), Mark Deweerdt (Journalist, Trends), Jan Denaeyer (Information Officer, De Standaard), Frans Crols (Director, De Standaard)

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